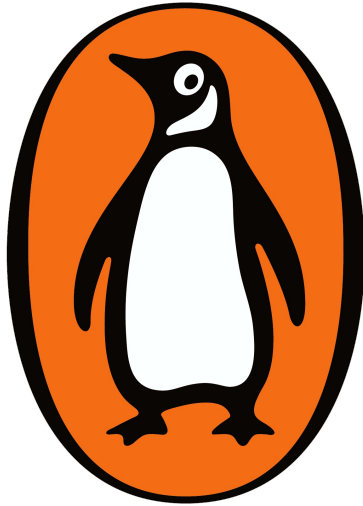




SABLE PEAK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEVNEY PERRY



About the Author

Devney Perry is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author of over forty romance novels. After working in the technology industry for a decade, she abandoned conference calls and project schedules to pursue her passion for writing. She was born and raised in Montana and now lives in Washington with her husband and two sons.

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Rifts and Refrains
A Little Too Wild

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Contents

PART I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

PART II

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Epilogue

Bonus Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Epilogue

Bonus Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Part I
BEFORE.

Part I
BEFORE.

CHAPTER ONE

VERA

DECEMBER

I was surrounded by Edens.

“Can I get you something to drink, Vera?” *Anne*. The mother. Her name was Anne, right?

“Um ... sure. Water, please.”

“You got it.” *Anne*—I was ninety percent sure that was her name—filled a glass from the sink. She delivered it to my seat at the kitchen island with a smile, then returned to the stove to stir the spaghetti sauce.

A large pot of water was boiling for the pasta. Steam coiled up into the overhead fan. The scents of garlic, tomatoes and herbs infused the room mingling with the voices.

There was so much talking in this kitchen. So many people. So many Edens.

I used to love being in the middle of a crowd.

Before.

Now? I wasn't sure yet. Maybe I hated them. Maybe I liked them. Considering this evening was my first foray into a social life, it was too hard to tell.

“You okay?” Uncle Vance leaned in close to speak quietly in my ear.

“There's a lot of them,” I whispered.

He put his hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Just breathe.”

Lyla, his girlfriend, scooted her stool a little closer to mine.

Vance and Lyla were the only people I knew here tonight. This was my childhood home and her parents had invited us out for a family dinner.

She'd warned me on the drive that it would be loud. An understatement. There were at least five different conversations overlapping each other. Pockets of laughter bubbled up from every corner of the room. This was loud.

This was chaos.

Did I like it? Sort of.

I drew in a long breath, holding it in my lungs until it burned, then blew it out. Then I sipped my water, letting it clear the scratch in my throat while I listened.

"What does Drake want for Christmas?" Lyla asked a blond woman. "What was her name? Madison? No, Memphis.

Memphis. Memphis. Memphis.

Her husband was Knox, the tattooed, bearded one. Or was she married to the cowboy? What was his name again? Garth? No, Griffin.

er There were too many Edens.

"Anything dinosaur," Memphis told Lyla just as a string of kids rushed into the kitchen.

quickly They blew in like a wild breeze, sweeping in, then out, disappearing
island into whatever room they were playing in. Not a chance I'd figure out the
kids' names tonight. My goal was to get their parents sorted first.

the "Did you enjoy your time at the hotel, Vera?" Eloise asked.

n, "Yes, it was lovely." I was one hundred percent certain her name was
Eloise because it was written on the hotel where I'd spent the past week.

y But who was her husband? Jasper or Foster? Both men were sitting at
table in the adjoining dining room. One had a beard, and I was pretty sure
that he was Foster.

Foster was the UFC fighter and he was married to Talia. Talia was my
twin. So that meant that Jasper was Eloise's husband, right? Maybe?

o soon Oh, God. I had a headache.

r. This dinner was a bad idea. It was too much, too soon. But I hadn't had
heart to tell Lyla no. She'd been so excited for me to meet her family,
something she'd told me no less than five times as we'd moved my things
out of The Eloise Inn.

Lyla's I'd spent the past week sequestered in my hotel room, enjoying the silence
and endless hours of TV. If I could have stayed for a month, I would have
except the hotel was booked for the holidays. From now until January,
my room was taken, including mine.

ent. Besides, I'd spent enough of Uncle Vance's money. He didn't need
wasting anything extra on a hotel charge. So this morning, with a heav
asn't heart, I'd packed my suitcases and checked out.

For the time being, the upstairs guest bedroom at Lyla's farmhouse
be mine. It was a lovely room, and her house was the epitome of cozy.
privacy. Down pillows. A mattress. Hot water. Flushing toilets. Electri

lew it There was nothing for me to complain about.

ile I But at the moment, I really wanted to be in the mountains, in a cold,
shelter where the only person around was Dad. Where I didn't have to
about the noise or the names or being that awkward outsider at a famil
dinner.

I really missed my dad. I missed him so much it hurt to breathe.

ed to Maybe I shouldn't have left him. Here I was, surrounded by Edens,
was out there alone.

Was he okay? Was he still in Montana? Was he angry at me for leav
ied felt like a lifetime ago, not seven weeks, since we'd said goodbye.

My gaze drifted to the window over the sink and the darkness beyor
back White snowflakes tickled the glass. Every morning this week I'd woke
he find two or three more inches of fluffy white covering Quincy, Montar
mountains were buried beneath the snow and ice.

Had Dad found a safe, warm place to stay this winter? Maybe he'd h
is south to Arizona or Nevada to spend a few months in the desert. Mayb
k. trekked north to Canada, where it would be easier to avoid the FBI. W
at the me along, slowing his pace, how far could he have traveled on foot in :
ure weeks?

"Are you heading back to Idaho before Christmas?" Harrison asked

yla's Harrison was Lyla's father. There was a kid, a small one, named Ha
too. Because why make it easy for newcomers.

"I'm not sure when we'll head back." Vance looked to me with a sil
had the reminder that it was my choice.

Sooner or later, we needed to return to his house in Coeur d'Alene. I
ngs outbelongings to pack. He had a life to finish relocating to Montana. Exce
hated Coeur d'Alene. I hated that it was my hometown.

solitude But as much as I wanted to pretend it didn't exist, we had to go back
ave, last time.

every "Before Christmas." When the new year began, I wanted to start fre
Here, in Quincy.

to be Vance nodded. "Before Christmas."

y He'd given me as much freedom and choice as possible over the pas weeks. Not that I'd wanted much freedom. I'd stuck to him like glue, would especially in the early days right after leaving Dad.

I had This past week at The Eloise had been the most time I'd spent alone city. years. It was weird not to have Dad. When was it going to stop being v

But as much as I missed him, as weird as it was, I sort of liked being drafty too. In high school, I'd loathed being by myself with nothing to do. Da worry always called me his bouncy ball, in perpetual motion. But that was be

y The quiet and stillness weren't so bad.

I liked late nights, when the stars were bright. I liked early mornings the world was asleep. I liked TV. I liked hot coffee. I liked shaving my and he every day so that when I slept, my skin was smooth.

I was rediscovering what I liked. And what I didn't.

ring? It "Veggies?" Lyla slid the tray of veggies and ranch dip closer.

id. "Um, sure." There were toothpicks on the counter. Were those for th veggies? Or just the cheese cubes and black olives and mini pickles?

n up to No one had touched the veggies. Everyone had used toothpicks.

ia. And I snagged one from the glass dish, hovering the tip over the vegetable didn't like celery or broccoli, so I skipped over those and opted for a b liked carrot.

e he'd The toothpick wouldn't pierce it. Stab. Stab. Stab. It kept rolling aw ithout stabbed harder.

seven My toothpick broke.

I was surrounded by Edens. And everyone was staring at me.

Vance. Winslow—Winn—snagged a carrot from the tray, using her fingers. rrisson dunked it in the ranch and popped it in her mouth.

Everyone descended on the tray. With their fingers.

ent I tucked mine in my lap.

"So Vance," Winn said. "I know you're not settled yet. But if you're He had interested in a job, I'd love a visit. Come down to the station anytime."

pt I His eyebrows lifted. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Winn was married to either the cowboy or the chef. And sh c. One Quincy's chief of police.

"Thanks, Winn," Vance said, sharing a look with Lyla. "I'd like that

sh. For his sake, I hoped Winn could find a place for him in her departn would be strange to see him work construction or in an office. He was

to carry a badge. He was a great cop, like Dad had been once. *Before.*
it seven “What can I help with, Anne?” Harrison moved to stand behind his
the stove, placing his hands on her shoulders as he bent and kissed her
temple. “Put me to work, darlin’.”

in four Anne. Her name was Anne.

veird? *Anne. Anne. Anne.*

g alone She smiled up at him. “Would you call your son and find out if he’s
id had way?”

fore. Wait. There was another one?

I scanned the room. Lyla’s brothers and sisters all had rich, brown h
s, when sapphire-blue eyes.

r legs *One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

There were six siblings. We were missing an Eden. Damn it. Who?
name was I going to forget next?

Harrison had just dug his phone from a pocket of his Wrangler jeans
ie the front door closed and boots stomped down the hallway. “There he

*He strode into the room wearing a pair of faded jeans and a black pl
shirt with its sleeves rolled up his forearms. It hung open, revealing a v
les. I T-shirt underneath that pulled tight across his broad chest. A silver anc
aby belt buckle gleamed beneath a flat stomach. His brown cowboy boots v
scuffed and faded. Like the other Edens, he had dark hair and sapphire*

ay. I It was the playful grin that set him apart. The mischievous smirk on
soft lips. The sharp corners of his stubbled jaw and the twinkle in his b
gaze.

This kitchen was full of beautiful people.

. She He put them all to shame.

My heart pounded. My face flushed. I was staring like a fool but cou
stop. I couldn’t blink. My body was having a whole reaction with or w
my brain’s permission.

e “Finally,” Eloise groaned. “I’m starving.”

’ “Sorry I’m late.”

God, his voice was incredible. Deep and rugged and smooth. A shiv
e was raced down my spine.

Everyone drew closer to him, like he was a magnet and they were m
t.” That pull was so tempting but I kept my seat, clutching the stool’s edg
ment. It wouldn’t topple over.

meant

He shook his brothers' hands. They talked and laughed. When Lyla
wife at closer, he pulled her into a sideways hug, his tall frame towering over

A flutter stirred in my belly, whirling and falling and lifting and spiraling
like the snowflakes blowing outside.

He was ...

I couldn't think of the right word. Perfect? Handsome? Mesmerizing
on his Yes. Mesmerizing.

"Come meet Vera." Lyla tugged him over, smiling as they shuffled
the island.

air and "Hey." He dipped his chin, like he was tipping an invisible hat. "I'm
Mateo."

That name locked into place for all time.

Whose *Mateo*.

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He shook his brothers' hands. They talked and laughed. When Lyla moved closer, he pulled her into a sideways hug, his tall frame towering over hers.

A flutter stirred in my belly, whirling and falling and lifting and spinning, like the snowflakes blowing outside.

He was ...

I couldn't think of the right word. Perfect? Handsome? Mesmerizing?

Yes. Mesmerizing.

"Come meet Vera." Lyla tugged him over, smiling as they shuffled toward the island.

"Hey." He dipped his chin, like he was tipping an invisible hat. "I'm Mateo."

That name locked into place for all time.

Mateo.

CHAPTER TWO

JANUARY

I liked carrot cake muffins with cream cheese frosting. I liked turkey sandwiches more than ham. And I loved Eden Coffee.

Lyla's cafe had become my favorite spot in Quincy. It made working here feel like a treat. For the past week, she'd taught me how to make espressos and lattes. I'd learned how to use the sales system to ring up customers and which switches controlled each light. I'd washed dishes, mopped floors and bussed tables.

Was it my dream job? No. But it was a good job and it accommodated my study schedule. If I wanted a dream job someday, I was going to need a GED first.

Since we'd moved to Quincy—since I'd left Dad—I'd been set on taking everything in stride. In making small, deliberate steps. I'd set out to do the things I liked. Things I didn't. Small steps to building a normal life.

Were small steps enough? Was it time to take a leap?

Maybe. But not today.

"What can I help with next?" I asked Lyla. We'd just finished restocking the counter with her latest batch of pastries.

"Want to do a sweep of the tables?"

"Sure." I smiled and snagged a damp rag, taking it with me to clean the recently vacated chairs.

The lunch rush was over, and like the previous days this week, we were in an afternoon lull. It gave us time to catch up on dishes and cleaning. The people in the cafe were the teenage girls who'd come inside ten minutes before

School in Quincy ended around three, and each afternoon, students would pop in for food and coffee.

I went to the table beside theirs, picking up an empty mug and plate wadded-up napkin.

“My acceptance letter came today from MSU,” one of the girls said.

“Yay,” another girl cheered as a third clapped. “Oh my God, it’s going to be so fun. I’m glad we’re all going to Bozeman together.”

“Me too.”

“What dorm do you think we’ll be in?”

My heart twisted, just a little.

A lifetime ago, I’d been a seventeen-year-old girl excited about college acceptance letters. A girl who’d been ready to leave home on a new adventure. A girl who’d just assumed *home* would be there when she was ready to return.

But that girl hadn’t graduated high school. She hadn’t needed to worry about roommates or professors or what party to hit on a Saturday night.

That girl was gone.

Maybe, if I put my life together, if I found some semblance of normal, I could find that girl again. The girl from *before*.

It didn’t bother me like it used to that I’d missed so much. There were always better things to mourn. But it still pinched sometimes. So I gave myself a few seconds of self-pity, then I put it away.

That pity, along with anger and resentment and grief, was tucked away in a box. A box that lived down deep, where it stayed shut. Where it *had* been locked up tight.

If I let its lid so much as crack, the emotions in that box would swallow me whole.

One of the girls glanced my direction. I smiled when her eyes met mine, then whisked the dirty dishes away.

Lyla was standing beside the stainless steel prep table, smiling at her phone, when I walked into the kitchen. It was a beaming smile, one she reserved for Vance.

“Flirting with Uncle Vance?” I teased.

“Always.” She giggled. “He’s on his way over from the station to hang out with us until we close.”

“You know, I could close up the shop tonight. You guys could go hang out with us. Though Vance would have to come back to town to get me later. Dr. practice was going ... not great. Yesterday, I’d nearly decimated a mailman with Vance’s truck.”

with a It wasn't the mechanics of driving. I could steer and hit the gas and
pedals. It was just ... hard.

ng to Driving reminded me of Dad. He'd been the one to teach me when I
fifteen. And while I loved Vance, I wanted Dad in the passenger seat.

I missed my dad. Was he okay?

"Vera?"

My gaze whipped to Lyla. "Huh?"

"I asked if you were sure. About tonight."

ege "Of course," I said, too brightly. "Maybe you guys could go out on a
Celebrate Vance's new job."

vas "Maybe. I'll ask him." Lyla studied me for a long moment, probably
make sure I was okay.

rry Was I okay? Sort of.

is Day by day, I was inching toward okay.

al, I'd "You guys, um, didn't tell Winn anything. Right?" I asked, my voice
"About Dad?"

"No. We trust her. But ..."

re The fewer people who knew my real story, the better. Everyone here
f a few including the Edens, could go on believing what they read in the news.

"Thanks."

ay into "No thanks needed. I'm going to do a quick inventory of the walk-in
to stay said.

"All right. I've got the counter."

low me The high school girls were still at their table, gossiping and talking,
returned to the front of the shop. I went to work, making myself a hazel
ine, latte. Did I like it more than caramel?

r "Nope." I sighed after the first sip. Caramel was still the front-runner
the hazelnut wasn't awful.

e The bell above the coffee shop's door jingled. I almost dropped my
as Mateo strode inside carrying a box. Would my heart ever not do
cartwheels when he was around?

ang out His broad shoulders were covered in a thick, tan canvas coat with the
Ranch brand embroidered in white beneath the corduroy collar. The lining
ome." was a soft sherpa.

iving Anne and Harrison had gifted everyone in their family those coats at
lbox Christmas.

Me included.

brake I'd almost cried when I'd had a package under their tree. The last time
had a real Christmas was *before*.

was Mateo's dark hair was trapped beneath a black beanie. His stubble was
nearly a beard these days, and every time I thought he'd let it grow, he
came into the shop freshly shaven. I wasn't sure which version I liked.
But in every way, he was beautiful.

Mateo's broad, six-three frame was corded with muscle and strength
moved effortlessly, his strides fluid and sure. Maybe it was the confidence
that radiated off his body that unnerved me so wholly.

Don't stare. The effort it took to force my gaze away made me break
into a sweat. My cheeks were on fire. When he was around, blushing was
involuntary.

"Hey, Vera." Mateo set the box down on the counter.

"Hi." My voice was soft and weak. It was so freaking hard to breathe
when he was around.

"Did you get a haircut?"

My hand flew to the end of my ponytail. Oh my God, he'd noticed. I
even Lyla had noticed. Granted, I'd only cut an inch off the ends, but I
noticed. "Just a trim. I did it myself in the bathroom. It's probably choo-
Why was I still talking?

"Looks nice."

Nice as in pretty? Or nice as in I should pay a professional from now
on? "This is for Lyla." He splayed his hand on top of the box. "Is she here
when I'm around?" "Um, yeah." I nodded so wildly that a lock of my red hair escaped the
hairnet. "I'll go get her."

I turned and almost slammed my face into the espresso machine. But
I righted my feet and hurried into the kitchen.

Ugh. Freaking get it together, Vera.

coffee The last time I'd had a crush on a guy had been four years ago. May
was just out of practice, but this crush had only seemed to double in the
month. What would happen in two or three?

Eden Mateo was too perfect. That was the problem. It had taken me a month
to nail it down in my head. He was a dream personified. It was like he'd been
plucked from my mind and crafted just for me. And apparently finding the
dream guy meant turning into a bumbling idiot whenever he looked in my
direction.

ne I'd I was almost to the kitchen when Lyla came through the door, the tv
us nearly colliding.

vas "Sorry," we said in unison, then both laughed.

'd "Mateo is here for you." I pointed down the hallway. "He brought a

best. "Yay." Her face lit up. "My Christmas present."

1. He She hurried to the counter, sharing a smile with Mateo as she went s
nce for the gift.

I lingered a few feet away, not wanting to intrude while Lyla openec
box's lid and pulled out a ceramic, mint-green mixing bowl.

< out "I love it." She skimmed her fingertips across the flower details on t

vas then set it down to stretch across the counter and haul him in for a hug

He wrapped her up, grinning. "Sorry it's late."

e when something to eat or drink?" "Oh, I don't care." She let him go and motioned to the display case.

Before he could answer, the group of high school girls giggled so lo
we all looked to their table. The second they realized Mateo was watch
they huddled closer together, attempting to hide their flushed cheeks.

Not He groaned. "And that's my cue to leave."

ie'd "They're just harmless girls," Lyla said. "Ignore them."

ppy." But the giggling only got louder. One girl pressed a hand to her hear
Another batted her eyelashes.

v on? "I'll see you later," Mateo said.

re?" "Okay. Bye, Matty." She swept up the bowl, heading to the kitchen
ie tie. it away. "Thanks for my present."

t I "Welcome." He smiled as she disappeared, then winked at me. "Bye
Vera."

He winked. At. Me. The girls at the table didn't get winks. Lyla did
a wink. Just me. What did that mean? Did he wink at everyone? Or jus
with *nice* home haircuts?

be I One of the girls blew a kiss at Mateo's back.

e past I scrunched up my nose.

nth to Something flickered in Mateo's expression. But before I could figur
been out, he turned and headed for the door.

; my Every pair of eyes at the girls' table was glued to his ass as he walke
my across the room.

It was a perfect ass. I knew, because I'd ogled it plenty of times mys

vo of I'd fit in with those high school girls, wouldn't I? We weren't all that different. I didn't have a diploma yet. I was working part-time and living rent-free with Vance and Lyla. I blushed and babbled when Mateo Ede box." came around.

I was twenty-one years old, not seventeen. Twenty-one.
traight But I'd fit right in at that table.
A sour taste spread across my mouth.

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I'd fit in with those high school girls, wouldn't I? We weren't all that different. I didn't have a diploma yet. I was working part-time and living rent-free with Vance and Lyla. I blushed and babbled when Mateo Eden came around.

I was twenty-one years old, not seventeen. Twenty-one.

But I'd fit right in at that table.

A sour taste spread across my mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

FEBRUARY

With the car parked beside the barn on the Eden ranch, I unleashed the breath I'd been holding for miles. Driving on icy Montana roads had frayed my nerves, but at least I hadn't been alone.

"Thanks, Mr. Eden." I smiled at my passenger.

"How many driving lessons do you think we'll need until you call me Harrison?"

I smiled and turned off the engine. "At least one more."

"Then how about we cross that off the list tomorrow?"

"Okay."

"It's a date." He grinned. "Pop the trunk. I'll help you carry up your groceries."

"Oh, that's okay. I can get them." I pointed to the vase that rested behind his feet. "You'd better take those flowers in to your valentine before they freeze."

"Good thinking." He bent to pick up the two dozen red roses he'd bought for Anne. "See you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. Bye."

A rush of frigid air blew inside as he opened his door, chasing away warmth. We'd had the heat cranked the entire drive from town because high today was two below.

My nostrils stung with that first icy inhale as I stepped out of my door. Bitter cold seeped through my jeans and bit into my skin as I hurried to the trunk. At least the ice cream I'd bought wouldn't melt.

With four bags looped over my forearms, I tucked my chin into the collar of my Eden Ranch coat and hurried for the barn.

It wasn't much warmer as I stepped inside but at least the wind didn't straight to my bones. I flipped on the overhead light and climbed the stairs to my loft.

The scents of hay and dirt were replaced with crisp green apple from the candle I'd burned this morning after my shower. I plopped the groceries on the kitchen's small counter, then jogged downstairs again, bracing for the cold.

Winter had started off relatively mild, but it was finishing with a bang. Three days ago, a massive storm had covered the area. There were two inches of fresh snow and counting. An icy snowflake cut across my cheek as I pushed through the exterior door, pausing only long enough to glance at the mountains. The peaks were obscured by thick clouds, all dumping snow.

Was he up there? Did he have a shelter? Was he huddled close to a fire? Was he warm enough? Did he have food?

My heart squeezed. It would be *cold* tonight. But it wasn't the first winter Dad had spent in Montana. And this cold snap was only supposed to last a week. By next Sunday, it was forecast to be well above freezing.

Even if the cold lingered, Dad had always made sure I had a fire to keep me warm. He'd do the same for himself, right? He wouldn't do anything stupid, would he? Was his mind okay?

Yes. He was fine. There was no other option I'd consider. He'd stay here. *He is alive.*

The assurances didn't do much to quiet the turmoil in my heart. The fear for my father was a constant these days, as automatic as breathing. Sometimes, the fear screamed so loud that it took everything I had not to rush to the mountains to track him down. But that would be reckless and stupid. I was worried instead.

My boots crunched on the snow as I hustled to the trunk. The bag with the cooking spray and an array of spices clinked as I grabbed it with one hand and hauled out a gallon of milk with the other. I was about to snag the toilet paper to tuck under my arm when a deep voice startled me.

"I'll help."

I stood and turned so fast I banged my head on the trunk's lid. "Ow."

"Sorry." Mateo held up a hand clad in a tan leather glove. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's fine." Heat crept into my cheeks just like it did every time he was around. Every. Freaking. Time.

't cut Hopefully today he'd think the pink was from the cold.

airwell "Um, what's up?" God, that sounded stupid. My voice was too breathless that was actually the dumbest question of all time. What's up? *The sky is the limit. Your hopes. Your delusions.*

es on "Had some work to do for Griffin today. One of the hired hands quit, so there's no point finding someone new when I can do the work, so I came down to feed the cows."

ing. "Oh. That's nice of you."

feet of "Yeah, I guess." A crease formed between his eyebrows.

ushed "Do you not like it? Working on the ranch?"

"It's great."

w. It didn't sound great, but it didn't sound bad either. He sounded ... like a kid I'd never heard of before.

ire? "I've been thinking about maybe going back to Alaska," he said. "I'd like to fly planes up there. The people I used to work for asked if I'd come back in the winter, but I might not."

st a "What? My heart landed with a muffled thud in the snow. No. He couldn't move."

keep "I don't know." He sighed, moving for the trunk to lift out two grocery bags. "Do me a favor and don't mention it to Lyla? I haven't decided yet if I'm alive. I don't want to stress my sisters out. Mom and Dad know, in case they need me. It's pretty unlikely I'll go, but it's something I've been thinking about."

worry I managed a nod.

ne "Anyway, after I was done with the cows, I stopped by to say hi and see how Mom and Dad were. Dad said you guys hit the store, so I brought you into the store, so I thought I'd come help you carry stuff up."

ith "You got your mom Valentine's chocolates?" That was the most adorable thing in the entire world.

and "Tradition. Keep her on my good side so she'll bake my favorite cookies for me."

case of "Yep, he was perfect. Funny. Charming. Sexy. This crush was going to be a crush that was nowhere fast."

"He couldn't move to Alaska. Not when I had to stay in Montana to finish my senior year. Dad and make sure he was okay. Who would buy Anne chocolates if he moved? He really, *really* couldn't move."

"That's, um—"

was "Before I could finish my thought, Mateo grabbed my package of toilet paper."

Oh, hell. This wasn't happening. The man I was completely infatuated with was *not* carrying my toilet paper. Except he so was. The heat in my cheeks melted the next snowflake that tried to attack.

Mateo made a move for another bag but I snagged it first, a certain box showing through the thin white plastic. The toilet paper was bad enough. I didn't need him scoping out my tampons too.

"You can head on in." He jerked his chin for the door. "I'll grab the

"Okay. Thanks." I backed away, taking one second to appreciate the stubble on his jaw before I scurried inside and out of the cold.

I piled the bags on the counter once I made it upstairs and stripped off my coat. Then I smoothed down the front of my green turtleneck as Miah's footsteps echoed in the stairwell. Between the stress of winter driving practice and the cold wind blowing everything into disarray, my hair was used to mess.

He had my toilet paper under one arm and paper towels under the other with three bags in each hand. "Stocking up?"

"Yeah." I tucked a lock of hair behind an ear and untucked it just as quickly. What was wrong with me? I hated having my hair tucked behind my ears. Why couldn't I just relax around Mateo? *Gah!*

"Where do you want these?"

"The counter is great. Thanks."

He deposited everything on the space. "So you and Dad have been doing driving lessons?"

"Yep." I started putting groceries away to hide my face. For once, the red of my cheeks wasn't only from this crush. Mortification crept through my veins, turning my face from pink to red.

I was twenty-one years old and needed driving lessons like a teenager. Harrison had volunteered to help. Just like Anne was going to give me cooking lessons. And while I was so grateful to the Edens, my incompete wasn't exactly something I'd wanted to broadcast, especially to Mateo. Though of course he'd know. This family was as close-knit as the three of us in my sweater.

"It's kind of embarrassing," I admitted.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Vera." Even the sound of my name in his deep voice couldn't chase the humiliation away. "So you're doing practice driving. Who cares? Dad said you're doing great. Just need to knock the rust off."

ed “I guess.” I shrugged and put the milk in the fridge.

ly Part of me had wanted to avoid driving forever. Except now that I was living on the ranch, it was much too far to walk to Quincy, so I’d had no choice but to start learning again.

blue choice but to start learning again.
nough. Vance and Lyla had offered to buy me a car but I’d insisted on buying myself—or paying them back. Without savings or credit, I’d borrowed
rest.” Uncle Vance to buy my older-model Honda Civic with its dented bumper
thick nearly one hundred thousand miles.

But at least it was mine. And as of this week, I was living on my own.
out of I was taking leaps. Not many, but leaps, nonetheless.

ateo’s “You doing okay out here?” Mateo asked.

“Yes.” Sort of. “I love the loft.”

was a “It’s a great place.”

The footprint of my new home was only a third of the actual barn, and
her was still more space than I needed. The stairs led to the back of the
apartment, where my bedroom shared a wall with the kitchen and bathroom.
Then the rest of the space was open living space.

ind my The walls were covered in varying shades of gray and brown barnwood.
The furniture was plush and comfortable in charcoal and cream and wood
was welcoming. Simple, yet fancy.

Not that I needed fancy. I was ecstatic to sleep on a pillow each night
loing to shower with hot water in the morning.

My favorite place to relax was on the enormous U-shaped sectional
ie flush took up the bulk of the living room. I’d camped out every night this winter
my buried under thick blankets to watch movie after movie when I couldn’t
sleep.

er. New home, new sounds and that ever-present anxiety for my dad to
ne me awake.

etence He was alive. He’d survive this winter just like all the rest.

I was stubborn enough to will it into reality.

ads of “Whack your head yet?” Mateo asked, pointing to the slanted ceiling.
They were tall enough that I only had to duck at the very edges of each
“A couple times getting into bed I banged it.”

f my The words registered, and I cringed. Getting into bed I banged it? Was
e out hell was wrong with me? What did that even mean? Why couldn’t I speak
ed to correctly around this man?

Mateo rubbed the back of his neck, looking anywhere but at me. Great now I'd made him uncomfortable. As if the toilet paper weren't bad enough.
"Did you, uh, get everything moved out of Lyla's farmhouse?" he asked.
"Yeah. I didn't have much." Thank God the loft had come furnished.
"We all know you're going through a lot of change. We're here to help from His gaze met mine and my tummy fluttered. Gah, those eyes. "Whatever and need."

It wasn't the first time a member of the Eden family had said as much. Though unlike the rest, there was no pity on Mateo's handsome face. I was just stating the truth. Making a sincere offer.

"Thank you."

He dipped his chin. "Welcome."

All of the Edens, Mateo included, knew that I'd spent the past four years living in the wilderness with Dad. They knew he was guilty of murder and hiding from the authorities. They knew that for years, the world had as much room as I'd been dead. That I'd been one of Dad's victims.

They knew the story.

Not the truth.

It was better that way. Secrets only stayed secrets through silence.

My dad might not be with me, but I'd do anything in my power to keep him safe.

"Did you know I used to live here?" Mateo took a step deeper into the loft, surveying the space.

"Lyla told me."

Whenever anyone mentioned Mateo's name, whatever tidbit they shared was instantly committed to memory. I would have liked this loft had he lived here, but knowing this had been his home too made me love it that much more.

When I'd declared last month that it was time to find a place of my own to live, Lyla and Vance had balked, insisting I stay in the guest bedroom for a while longer. Except I'd refused to budge.

Maybe I needed driving and cooking lessons, but I could take them myself. I was living on my own. My idea had been to find a place in Quincy, but I'd found that the apparently rentals weren't exactly easy to find.

The loft had been empty since Lyla's uncle Briggs had moved into an assisted living facility in town for help with his dementia, and since the house was empty, Anne and Harrison had offered it to me.

eat, Vance was happy that I had the Edens nearby, and being out here or
ough. ranch meant the mountains were just beyond my door.

sked. It had been impossible to do much hiking with the winter weather, b
l. soon, the season would change. Out here, I'd have a better chance at sc
elp." freedom. Once this snow stopped and melted a bit, I'd head out to the
er you mountains and see what I could find.

Who I could find.

th. Mateo's boots thudded on the wooden floor as he walked past the se
he was to the windows. Beyond Anne and Harrison's house, the world was wh
Snow blanketed the meadows and dusted every tree.

As he stared at the landscape, I stared at him. Faded jeans molded to
thighs. Scuffed boots and his heavy Carhartt coat. A beanie with the Ed
years Ranch brand embroidered on the rim. Dark hair that escaped that hat, c
and at his nape.

sumed He fit perfectly in this loft, rugged but beautiful.

"This is a great place to find your footing," Mateo said.

I cocked my head to the side. "That's exactly what Lyla said. Word
word."

"Hazard of hanging out with your siblings too often. We start to sou
eep alike." He turned, the corner of his mouth turning up. Wow, he was cu
gaze shifted to the coffee table, taking in the books and laptop strewn o
he loft, surface. "Did you finish your tests?"

"Yeah." If I wasn't working at Eden Coffee, I'd been studying for m
GED.

ared, "And?"

e not A smile spread across my mouth. "Passed all five."

at "Nice." He grinned. "Not at all surprised."

"Thanks." I dropped my gaze to my boots as my smile widened und
own to praise.

for a "What's next?"

"I don't know. Keep working at the coffee shop. Maybe enroll in so
while I college courses? I like school."

t I'd always liked school. Even *before*.

Studying for my GED had been refreshing. It was the mental challer
m hadn't even known I'd needed. I wasn't ready to enroll full-time at a
e place university, but a couple of classes would be nice to keep my mind occu
And with spring coming, two or three classes wouldn't be all-consumi

I'd need a flexible schedule. I'd need free days to head into the mountains. I'd need to get out of your hair." Mateo crossed the loft for the door. As he passed, his spicy scent caught my nose. Leather and spice. Wind and earth. It was perfectly male and delicious and ... Mateo.

"Thanks for helping with the groceries."

"Anytime." He winked.

A wink, and my heart did a handspring.

That wink didn't mean anything. He didn't—couldn't—like me. No way. Right?

I squashed that budding hope before it could bloom. "See ya."

He disappeared, closing up behind him, and marched down the stairs. I waited until the door downstairs closed with a thud, then I rushed to the loft's front windows.

Mateo's long legs made short work of the distance to his truck. It was parked around the side of the house where I hadn't noticed it earlier, probably because I'd been too busy death-gripping the steering wheel.

The snow around him stopped blowing. A sunbeam tore through the clouds to touch his shoulders.

He was the light. My light. The shining star that chased away the darkness. *Please don't move to Alaska.* I pressed my palm to the glass.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Mateo."

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Please don't move to Alaska. I pressed my palm to the glass.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Mateo."

CHAPTER FOUR

MARCH

I was surrounded by Edens. Again.

It was fun. Sort of. Definitely overwhelming. But ... fun. There was so much happiness in Anne and Harrison's kitchen it was hard not to be swept up by the smiles and laughter.

It reminded me of the barbeques we'd had growing up. When Dad would flip burgers and kids would chase around and we'd go out on the—

I dropped a mental guillotine on that memory, chopping off its head. Nothing good came from revisiting the past, so I shoved it away. I tucked those happy moments from *before* back into their box and secured the lid.

Tonight was not the night to replay old times. Tonight, we were celebrating. Lyla and Vance had just announced their engagement.

I was so happy for them, especially Uncle Vance. The way he looked at Lyla made my heart melt. He deserved her. He'd gone through hard times recently, but now that he had Lyla, the bad was in the rearview mirror. He'd move mountains to make her dreams come true.

Someday, I wanted a man to see me the way Vance saw Lyla. To love me with his whole heart.

I'd made a thousand wishes on a million stars for that man to be Mateo. I didn't put a lot of faith into wishing, not anymore. But there was always hope.

"Where's Mateo?" Eloise asked, popping a carrot from the veggie tray into her mouth.

Just the mention of his name made my heart skip.

Since I'd moved into the loft, our paths had crossed at least twice a week. So far, I'd seen him three times since Sunday. And all of those times, he would talk to me about school or driving or the loft. Not once had he

mentioned returning to Alaska. Thank God. Then before he left to go to work, he'd give me a wink.

Winks meant something. Harrison winked at Anne, and every time, like there was an underlying meaning. He winked to say *I love you. I'd without you in my life. You're the reason I breathe.*

Mateo winked at me. I wanted it to mean something. Desperately. It probably didn't. My crush overshadowed all reasonable thought.

"I don't know." Anne checked her phone. "He said he was coming."

"Well, I'm getting hungry." Harrison patted his stomach. "I'll start the grill. We can cook his burger when he gets here."

Griffin and Knox followed their dad outside to the deck. Foster and I followed closely behind. Uncle Vance gave me a soft smile, then slipped out of the kitchen too.

"So where do you want the wedding?" Anne asked Lyla as she took out the burger patties she'd prepped earlier from the fridge.

I'd helped make those patties. Anne had been teaching me how to cook and tonight, I'd been her sous chef, taking orders and following instructions on how to season the meat and make homemade potato salad.

"I was thinking the barn," Lyla said. "If that's okay with you guys."

"Of course." Anne clapped, giddy with excitement. "What about the ceremony?"

"The weather is always a risk, but maybe we could have it outside."

"We could set up tents just in case of rain," Winn said.

The women all clustered around the island while the kids played in the other room. It had taken a while, but I'd finally learned everyone's names. The children included. And I knew which kids belonged to which adult.

The framed photos in the living room had been hugely helpful. That's how often Anne and Harrison talked about their grandchildren.

Since moving to the ranch, I'd been a regular in this kitchen. Anne and Harrison were generous with their dinner invitations, either because they missed having their own kids around or because they pitied me and didn't want me to be alone.

I was determined to learn how to cook, but between the meals eaten at home and the others I had with Vance and Lyla, I fended for myself only once a week.

Breakfast was on my own at least, and I was perfecting my omelets. Dad would be proud. He loved breakfast.

ome or Maybe, when I found him, when I made sure he was okay, we could omelet together.

I felt As the discussion at the island revolved around wedding planning, I l die glanced to the window. It was dark outside, but that never stopped me looking. Searching. Wondering if I might catch the distant flicker of a campfire.

Dad would never come this close to civilization. I knew that down to bones. But hope was a funny thing. It chased away all logic. So I looked he those tiny campfires, even though I knew I would only find a black nig beyond the glass.

Jasper The weather had shifted in the past month. February's storm had been ed out short-lived and the snow had melted off the roads shortly after Valenti Day. It had cleared enough that I'd risked a few hikes.

the On the days when I wasn't working at the coffee shop or taking my ok classes, I'd venture into the foothills. The snow was still too deep to go tions where Dad had once set snares or hunted for deer.

There'd been no sign of him. Yet.

"How are your classes going, Vera?" Talia's question snapped me o my thoughts.

"I really like them," I told her. "I still have no idea what I want to do for right now, I like having options."

I was currently enrolled in a psychology course and a nutrition class he They'd seemed like good choices. Maybe with psychology, I'd learn n nes, about the human mind. How it worked. How it broke.

s. And if that failed, then I'd have nutrition as a fallback. In the four ye , and we'd lived off the wilderness, Dad had taught me a lot about food. How forage. How to hunt. It was interesting blending that knowledge with n ind conventional teaching.

ey He wouldn't stop eating, would he? He wouldn't just give up and st: ln't himself?

No. He was alive. He was fine. Soon enough, I'd find him and see fo here myself.

The door to the deck opened and the men returned to the kitchen. Va e or immediately went to Lyla and pulled her close.

kills. They started talking about the local sheriff and his pending retireme Vance had been working for Winn and had told me at lunch the other c

I eat and how much he was enjoying it. While they talked, I checked the clock on the microwave, then glanced toward the hallway.

Where was Mateo? Yeah, he was normally the last to arrive. He seemed perpetually five minutes late for most gatherings. But he was never this late.

Like my thoughts had conjured him from thin air, the front door opened and footsteps thudded down the hall.

The moment he appeared in the kitchen, my stomach dropped. Something was wrong. The color was gone from his face. His dark brown hair was sticking up at odd angles, like he'd been raking his fingers through it over and over.

"There you—" Anne's eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

The room went quiet.

"I, um ..." Mateo blinked. Then he shook his head, disbelief plain in his features. "I have to go to Alaska. Tonight."

No one noticed my quiet gasp, probably because there were plenty of other things to drown it out. Alaska. What? Why? Already?

"Tonight?" Harrison asked. "Why? What's going on?"

Mateo swallowed hard. If his face had been pale before, it was ghastly now. "I think ... I think I have a daughter?"

Wait. *What did he say?*

The room erupted in questions. All of them went unanswered because Mateo was already gone, having dropped the bomb.

He had a daughter? With who?

Was that the reason he was considering Alaska?

Because he was in love with someone else?

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CHAPTER FIVE

A *laina.*
Her name was Alaina.
The day Mateo brought her to Montana I knew I'd never wi
heart. Because he'd given it to Alaina.
With silky dark hair and eyes the color of sapphires, he called her A
Alaina.
His daughter.

CHAPTER FIVE

A *laina.*
Her name was Alaina.
The day Mateo brought her to Montana I knew I'd never win his heart. Because he'd given it to Alaina.
With silky dark hair and eyes the color of sapphires, he called her Allie.
Alaina.
His daughter.

CHAPTER SIX

MAY

“**A**nne?” I called into her house from the front door.
“Come on in!”
I toed off my shoes and padded down the hallway, finding Anne in the kitchen.

Nothing was on the stove or in the oven. She had her hands braced on the island as the sound of a wailing baby girl echoed from the living room.

“Um, everything okay?”

“It’s been a day.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, then forced a smile. “How are you?”

“Good.” That tiny scream got louder. It was so startling and heartbreaking that I forgot for a moment why I was here. “I brought you those strawberries.”

“Thanks. I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

“Not at all.”

Lyla had ordered an extra flat from her distributor so that Anne could eat strawberry jam.

“Where do you want me to put them?”

“I’ll get them.” She rounded the island and pulled me into a quick hug. “You’ve been working since four. I’ll take care of the strawberries. Anne needs just a minute out of the house.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely.” She steered me toward a stool at the island. “Sit.”

“All right. The flat is in my backseat. Doors are unlocked.”

She patted my shoulder, then disappeared outside.

Alaina’s cries seemed to get louder every second.

What was happening? I pressed a hand to my heart and slipped out of the kitchen, toward two male voices attempting to battle a baby’s scream.

Mateo was lapping the living room with his red-faced daughter in the crook of his arm. With every step, he bounced and swayed, trying to get to settle down.

Harrison sat on a leather couch, his elbows on his knees as he gave a sad smile. "Want me to take her?"

"No, I've got her." Mateo blew out a long, exasperated breath, then squished her bottom. "Her diaper is dry. I tried to feed her but she's not hungry. I'm walking her around, which is the only way to get her to sleep but she's not sleeping. I just ... I don't know what's wrong with her."

"There's nothing wrong with her," Harrison said. "Babies cry."

"It's constant, Dad. Day and night." Mateo's voice cracked. "With it, my heart. I feel like I'm losing my fucking mind."

"Talia said there was nothing to worry about. Colic is normal. Griffithing her it something fierce when he was that age."

Mateo made another three laps. "Or maybe it's me."

on the "What do you mean?"

"Maybe what she really needs is a mother."

"Oh, son. You're doing fine. It'll get easier."

smile. There was nothing but exhaustion, desperation, on Mateo's face. He looked like a man who had a newborn baby, and who'd been caring for a baby on his own since the day he'd brought her home from Alaska.

making, I'd only heard bits and pieces of the story. Anne or Harrison would tell me if I asked. So would Lyla or Vance. But for some reason, it felt like a betrayal. It was Mateo's story to tell and it was something I wanted to see directly from him.

But I hadn't asked.

ug. All I knew was that Alaina's mother had died in childbirth. A friend had called Mateo the night of that dinner in March when he'd announced his daughter.

So he'd flown to Alaska. And he'd brought Allie home two weeks later.

"This is so messed up, Dad." Mateo swallowed hard. "What am I doing?"

Harrison stood and walked to his side, putting a hand on Mateo's shoulder.

"Being a father."

Mateo nodded and blew out a long breath. "I'm just tired."

of the "Why don't you plan to stay here tonight? Your mom and I will take the midnight shift so you can get some rest."

Relief flooded Mateo's features. "You don't mind?"

le “Not a bit.”
et her Was that the first time he’d let them help? No wonder he was exhausted. He’d been trying to do it all himself.
his son Harrison clapped him on the shoulder, then walked out of the living room finding me waiting. He came right into my space and hauled me in for a hug, whispering, “Hi.”
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He lifted a shoulder and stopped walking.
The minute his feet halted, so did Alaina’s crying.
The silence was deafening. I held my breath, not wanting to startle her again. But her eyelids fluttered, her lips pursed, and then she fell asleep. As quickly as I could snap my fingers, she was out.
r that Mateo’s eyes widened, but otherwise, he didn’t so much as breathe. I stood statue still for a full minute before finally risking a step. He shuffled over to the couch, slowly and deliberately bending until he was seated. Then he moved over his daughter’s face, tracing over the little eyelashes that framed her crescents against her smooth cheeks.
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But his hold on that baby never faltered, even as he slept.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JULY

I loved fireworks.

But raucous, crowded fairgrounds? Not so much.

Sixteen-year-old me would have come alive at the Quincy Fourth July Rodeo. Sixteen-year-old me would have been all toothy smiles and unending laughs. Sixteen-year-old me had lived for events like this. *Be*

The fireworks were tempting. I loved them so much that it was almost enough for me to endure the noise. To put up with the jostling and nud people milled around the fairgrounds. But I'd been at the rodeo for hours already, and I couldn't stop yawning.

"Tired?" Harrison asked.

I nodded. "It's been a long day."

Starting at four o'clock in the morning, when I'd met Lyla at the coffee shop to open and prepare for the onslaught of parade customers. It was the busiest workday in my time at Eden Coffee. Even Anne and Talia had come in to help.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Edens had been at The Eloise Inn, either assisting Eloise with the hotel or Knox at his restaurant, Knuckles. Everyone had pitched in, working tirelessly, to help make sure the day had gone smoothly for every Eden-owned business on Main.

But once six o'clock had rolled around, the coffee shop and restaurant closed, so the Eden family had all congregated for the rodeo. There were a few noticeable absences.

Uncle Vance and Winn were here at the fairgrounds, but working. The entire staff at the police department was on duty through the night.

Eloise and Jasper had decided to skip the festivities and spend the night at home with their one-month-old daughter, Ophelia.

And Mateo was gone.

He'd brought Alaina to the rodeo for an hour but had left shortly after inhaling a cheeseburger for dinner. Allie had gotten fussy—she'd had a bad day being strapped to Mateo's chest while he'd helped at the hotel to keep the guests happy.

Quincy was brimming with tourists and visitors. Lyla had warned me that the summers were hectic. At the moment, squished on a bleacher in a grandstand with hundreds and hundreds of people, hectic was an understatement.

How had I not noticed just how many people flocked to Quincy each summer? It wasn't like I'd never come to town during the summers.

Dad and I had lived in these mountains for two years. We'd spent most of that time close to the shelter he'd built out of small trees and saplings. Once a month, I'd ventured to town for supplies.

h of Batteries for our flashlights. Tampons for my period. First-aid items
d bandages and antibiotic ointment because one or both of us usually had
before. or scrape.

st Two summers, and the sheer volume of people in Quincy had escaped
ging as notice. Maybe because those visits had always been such a torrent of stress
irs and worry.

It had always felt like I was holding my breath during those trips to town. I'd do everything in my power to go unnoticed as I stopped by the grocery store and hardware stores. Then as quickly as I came, I left, hiking to our mountain rendezvous point.

I wasn't hiding anymore. I wasn't walking with my chin tucked to avoid eye contact. I wasn't the girl everyone had assumed was dead.

This summer, from my spot behind the counter at Eden Coffee, I had a front-row seat to the madness that was a Quincy summer.

It was exhilarating and exhausting.

With the back of my hand, I covered another yawn, glancing to the side. The evening light was fading. The jagged mountain horizon in the distance glowed yellow and orange, but overhead, there wasn't a star in sight.

Nightfall was a wait.

“What time do the fireworks start?”

he Harrison checked his watch. “Oh, probably in another hour and a half.” I groaned. Ninety minutes? I'd never make it.

ight at “It's a clear night.” He cast his blue eyes heavenward. “The mayor was bragging to me the other day that they've gone all out this year. I bet, i

er hurry home, you'll be able to see them from the ranch. Your windows
a long loft have a great view. Can't promise it, but there's a chance."

leep I perked up. "Really?"

 He chuckled. "Drive safely. Watch out for other drivers. People are
drinking tonight."

 "Okay." I scrambled to get my purse from beneath my feet, slinging
e that a shoulder. Then I spun, about to shuffle past knees and dodge beer cup
dstand stopped and turned back, bending to drop a kiss to Harrison's cheek. "I
1 night."

 His eyes crinkled at the sides as he smiled up at me. "Night, Vera."

ost of After more goodbye hugs and waves, I made it to the stairs and jogged
But the walkway at the bottom of the stands. Then I took the nearest exit and
hurried through the dirt and grass parking lot to my Honda.

like The drive out was quiet except for the blast of air that rushed through
l a cut open windows—the Civic's air conditioning had gone out last week,
 something I hadn't mentioned to Vance because if I decided to get it fixed
ed my wanted to pay for it on my own.

tress By the time I pulled off the highway and drove beneath the log arch
 that marked the entrance to the ranch, the stars were beginning to pop
town. that yellow glow on the horizon had faded to pinks and purples.

ery Beside the gravel lane were twin barbed-wire fences. Beyond them were
ountain meadows, evergreens and cows. The scents of grass and cattle filled the
 air and I breathed it in deep.

void Over the past five months, that smell had started to mean *home*.

 Anne and Harrison's house was dark, other than the porch light. During
d a day, there was always activity at the ranch, hired hands coming and going
from the shop or stables or barn. Griffin stopped by at least once a day
though according to Lyla, he was running more and more ranch business
sky. from his own house these days.

ance Tonight, it was peaceful and still. Only a lone white truck was parked
outside. The Eden Ranch brand—an *E* with a curve beneath—was paired
with its door.

 Mateo's truck.

lf." My heart skipped. He must be spending the night. Maybe I'd get to see
him in the morning.

vas I parked in my usual spot beside the barn and climbed out, about to head
f you upstairs to camp beside the window and hopefully spy the fireworks. E

in the crunch of gravel startled me, and I whirled as Mateo walked my direction.
“Hey.”

“H-hi.” I pressed a hand to my racing heart.

out “Sorry to scare you.”

Not the reason my heart was trying to beat out of my chest. It was his presence that was always him. “That’s all right. What are you guys doing?”

ps, but Mateo glanced to Alaina in his arms.

Good She stared up at him with bright eyes as she sucked on a pacifier.

“We had a long day.” He sighed. “The cabin was too hot tonight so we snuck down to crash at Mom and Dad’s. But since her nap schedule was messed up today, she’s wide awake. You just missed an epic screaming match.”

nd “Sorry.” I winced. “She looks happy now.”

h my “Some nights, she wants to sit. Others, she wants to walk around.” I shook his head, staring down at his daughter. “We’re still trying to figure each other out, aren’t we, Allie?”

xed, I She didn’t look confused at all.

Alaina Eden knew exactly who was wrapped around her tiny fingers.

way “Skipped out early tonight?” he asked.

and “Yeah, I was over the crowd.”

“Same.” He jerked his chin toward the open gravel lot. “We’re walking laps. Knox suggested I give it a try on the nights when she won’t sleep in the cab. Drake’s a night owl, and I guess Knox used to spend night after night walking around with him until he’d finally conk out. You’re welcome to join us.”

ring the “Okay.” As we fell in step, our shoes crunching on gravel, I ducked my chin. A curtain of my hair hid the smile that stretched across my mouth.

, “Did you have fun tonight? Despite the crowd?”

ss “I did.” I nodded. “I’ve never been to a rodeo before. Your dad took me upon himself to teach me all about the events and scoring.”

nd Mateo chuckled. “He’s a good teacher.”

ted on “He is.” Almost as good as my own dad, who would have loved the rodeo and the crowd and never would have let me leave before seeing the fireworks.

see Allie squirmed, nestling deeper into Mateo’s chest.

“I like her name.”

head Alaina Anne Eden.

but the

ion. “I don’t think I ever told you that.” For a reason I couldn’t explain, it was important that he knew I liked Allie’s name. “Did you pick it out?” Or Alaina’s mother?

im. It “Yeah.” Mateo stared into the distance as he nodded. “In the hospital she was born, I was struggling to wrap my head around everything. I think the staff knew that and took pity on me. They let Allie stay an extra day because normally they would have sent us home. One of the nurses told me I should give her a name. That maybe it would help with the grief. They all thought she was together with ...”

we as all Alaina’s mother.

g fit.” He didn’t say her name.

I didn’t say the names of those I’d loved and lost either.

ie “Anyway, I needed a name for her birth certificate so I pulled up Google on my phone and thought the best place to start was with A. Scrolled until I found one I liked.”

“You made a good choice.”

s. “Thanks.”

We turned a corner, walking the width of the parking area, then turned again, this time heading back toward the house and barn.

ing “Have you thought any more about moving back to Alaska?”

He shook his head. “No. Not with Allie. We belong here.”

. The relief was staggering. “I was born in Alaska.” Another random thought wasn’t sure why I was sharing but did anyway.

“You were?”

my I nodded. “Before my parents moved to Idaho.”

1. Mateo hummed.

He didn’t ask questions. Maybe because he knew I’d share about my life but it had to be on my terms. And right now, my terms were limited. Random facts. Harmless details.

Anything more and that was where the sharing stopped.

rodeo We walked five more laps—until Alaina was sound asleep in his arms.

Mateo ran a thumb over his daughter’s cheek. Maybe they were still figuring each other out, but he was so in love with his baby girl. “I’d better take her inside.”

“Okay. Good night, Mateo.”

“Good night, Vera.” He winked, and I learned in that very moment that I was to swoon.

it felt I waited until he disappeared into Anne and Harrison's house before
had heading to the barn and climbing the stairs.

When I made it to my loft, I looked out the window just in time to see
the final stream of sparks in the distance. Smoke disguised as clouds floated
up into the sky.

by when I'd missed the fireworks.

it would be *Worth it.*

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I waited until he disappeared into Anne and Harrison's house before heading to the barn and climbing the stairs.

When I made it to my loft, I looked out the window just in time to see a final stream of sparks in the distance. Smoke disguised as clouds floated into the sky.

I'd missed the fireworks.

Worth it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AUGUST

Uncle Vance was happier than I'd ever seen him. He spun Lyla in a slow circle as they danced together as husband and wife. The hem of her strapless lace gown skimmed the ten-foot floor Griffin and Mateo had installed in the barn.

True love. That was the name of the smile they shared.

He'd earned this happiness and more.

Vance had done everything in his power to help me in the past year. He'd handled all of the logistics to bring me back from the presumed dead. I'd helped me get a reinstated social security card and a driver's license. When I'd needed a checking account and credit card, he'd taken me to the bank. And when I'd asked him to leave Idaho for Montana, he'd agreed with hesitation. Granted, that was mostly because of Lyla, but partly for me.

He'd lied for me.

He'd lied to the police and to the media. He'd invented a story that I could have a life and Dad could remain free.

It had been Vance's idea to tell the authorities that I'd left Dad. That had been my choice to escape. And when I'd broken free from my father's clutches, I'd run to our family's closest friend.

Uncle Vance.

He hated lying, but he'd done it for me. For that, I'd be forever grateful.

Almost everything else we'd told the FBI and police was true. Or a part of the truth.

Dad *had* taken me that night. The night they'd died. He'd killed my mother. And for four years, we'd lived off the grid. Did I know where I was now? No.

I wished that last truth was a lie. I wished I had my father. That he c here to see Vance on his happiest of days. That we could dance and be family again.

Sometimes, it stung to be so happy when I was surrounded by Edens. They'd pulled me into their fold, embraced me into their family, and I grateful for their love.

And felt guilty for it, all at the same time.

Because while I was living with this large, chaotic, happy family, D alone.

Yes, he'd insisted I go with Uncle Vance. He hadn't wanted me to li the run forever. But maybe that decision had been too hasty. Maybe w should have talked through it more. Maybe I should have stuck it out f few more years until we'd come up with a plan to meet from time to ti sband Instead, I'd just left. He had no one to talk to. No one to care for. No nporary make sure he was all right.

I'd left him.

The guilt gnawed, but even as it crawled through my veins, I wouldn He'd have wanted to miss this wedding.

He'd It was magical.

When The barn had been transformed over the past two weeks. Lighted str nk. hung from the rafters and beams. Tables and chairs covered with crisp out linens filled most of the space. The dance floor at the far end of the bui too. was positioned in front of a stage where a live band was playing a slow country song.

neant I The Edens had gone all out. Somehow, they'd even managed to eras t it had smell of animals and hay. Roses and lilies and draping greenery hung f the posts. Along with the luscious bouquets on each table, they filled tl with a sweet scent.

Smiling guests sipped champagne. Laughter and conversation mingl eful. with the music. A group of kids clustered in the center of the dance flo adults skirted around them.

version I watched from my seat at the Edens' table. I'd told Uncle Vance it v fine to put me anywhere, but he'd insisted I sit with family. Not even V sisters and parents had been gifted this table. Instead, they'd gotten the Dad a couple rows over.

"Want to dance?" Foster stood from his chair across from mine.

ould be I waited for Talia to stand from her seat beside his, but then he exte
a his hand my direction.

“Me?” I pointed to my chest.

s. He grinned. “Yeah. What do you say? Fair warning, Talia says I’m a
was hopeless dancer.”

“It’s true.” She smiled up at her husband. “Though last night we we
dancing in the kitchen and he only stepped on my foot once.”

ad was “Not exactly selling me on this dance,” I teased and stood.

Foster chuckled and bent to brush a kiss to Talia’s forehead. Then h
ive on waited for me to round the table and held out an elbow to escort me to
e the stage. “Having fun?”

or a “I am.” I nodded, searching the crowd on the dance floor.

me. Vance and Lyla were still together, locked in a quiet conversation as
one to moved. The world beyond their bubble didn’t exist. Mateo was close,
dancing with Anne.

As one of the groomsmen, he was in a tux tonight. So was Foster. A
r’t was dressed in a black satin gown and strappy heeled sandals, just like
rest of Lyla’s bridesmaids.

My hair had been curled and pinned into an elaborate updo at the Qu
ings salon this morning. I hadn’t worn this much makeup since my last high
white school prom. But I felt pretty.

ilding It had been a long time since I’d felt pretty.

✓ Foster spun me into his arms and began to sway. It was on the fourth
that his foot landed on my toes. “Damn it. Sorry.”

se the “You did warn me.” I giggled. “Don’t worry. I have tough feet.”

from “That, and you’re a brave soul, Vera.”

ne barn He’d told me the same when I’d offered to let his eight-year-old dau
Kadence, paint my nails last weekend at the coffee shop. Kaddie was a
led but not exactly the steadiest hand with the nail polish brush. It had take
or as solid soak in acetone to remove the rainbow shades from my cuticles.

Foster and Talia were regulars at Eden Coffee. I saw them nearly as
was as Anne and Harrison. Probably because Talia and Lyla were close as
Vance’s My sisters had been that way too. *Before.*

ir own Talia took Fridays off from working as a doctor at the hospital to sp
them with their eight-month-old son, Jude, and she’d bring him in for a
lunchtime visit. Foster would bring Kaddie in after school some days f

ided daddy-daughter date. And at least once a month, he would come in to l Talia's favorite cookie to take to her while she was at work.

a All of the men in the Eden family adored their wives, but there was something special about the way Foster looked at Talia. Like she was t very reason he breathed.

re Dad used to look at *her* that way.

“Ooof.” I let out a grunt as Foster's foot crunched mine again. The I pedicure I'd gotten this morning wasn't going to survive this dance.

e “Shit. I'm sorry, Vera.”

ward “It's o—”

“I think you'd better let me cut in.” Anne appeared at our sides, poi her closed-toe pumps.

s they “I think maybe that's a good idea.” Foster gave me an apologetic fro “Sorry.”

nd I “It's okay. Really.” But before I could leave the dance floor and retr my chair, a large hand appeared in front of me. A hand belonging to th I'd been stealing chaste glances of all night.

“May I?” Mateo asked.

aincy “Sure.” My voice was as wobbly as my knees. This dance was going a disaster, but I took Mateo's hand, his palm warm and calloused and t enough to envelop mine.

It was the first time we'd touched.

1 count He probably had no idea. Why would he keep track?

But I remembered. We'd never hugged. We'd never shaken hands. N never so much as accidentally bumped into each other.

I drew in a shaky breath as he stepped close, his hand coming to my ighter, was a stretch to put my hand on his shoulder. God, he was tall. I tilted i doll chin to keep his gaze as his spicy cologne filled my nose. Leather and : en a Wind and earth.

This was just a dance. Just. A. Dance. *Breathe.*

much “Having a good time?” he asked as we moved with the music.

twins. “Yep,” I squeaked.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he spoke. How had I never really notic end before? Maybe because I'd been so fixed on his face and arms and legs: a ass. But damn that Adam's apple. It was just so ... manly. So different or a the boys I'd crushed on in high school who'd barely crested puberty.

“Are you? Having fun?” I asked.

boy “I like weddings.” He nodded. “But I love wedding cake. I’ve already had four pieces.”

 “Four?”

he “There’s a chance I’ll go into a sugar coma soon.”

 “I promise to bring Alaina to visit your body in the hospital.”

French A low, deep chuckle escaped his chest. Again, that Adam’s apple moving. Never in my life had I wanted to lick a man’s throat. Until now.

 Heat crept into my face so I dropped my chin, staring at a pearl button on his shirt. “Where is Allie?”

 “At the house with the babysitters. Hopefully asleep, but I’m not hoping to get to my breath.”

 Anne had wanted all of her children to enjoy the wedding, so she’d hired two babysitters to come to the ranch and watch the little ones so their parents could have a night off.

eat to “You look pretty tonight.”

e man This was the best wedding of my life. “Thanks.”

 He didn’t mean it as an advance. It wasn’t a pickup line or attempt to get me into his bed. Mateo’s compliment sounded a lot like those I’d gotten from Griffin and Knox and Jasper.

ig Still, it was impossible to hide my smile. I tried anyway, ducking my head so low that I had the perfect view of my stiletto heel landing on Mateo’s leg.

 He grunted.

 I gasped. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry.”

We’d “It’s all good.”

 “Sorry.”

hip. It What the hell was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I just relax around me? I was a confident woman. I was coordinated. But when Mateo touched me, I became this clumsy, shy girl.

 She was pissing me off.

 Dad and I used to dance. We didn’t have music but there would be a rhythm when he’d spin me around our campfire, humming a tune to the stars. I’d never once had I stepped on his foot. Not once.

ed that Foster’s hopeless dancing skills had rubbed off.

s and I squeezed my eyes shut. “Sorry.”

from “Vera, it’s fine. Stop apologizing.” His grip on my waist tightened. “Doesn’t even hurt.”

ly had He might be uninjured but my pride was running through a meat gri
Before I recovered, the song was over. Time to sneak upstairs to the lo
my face in a pillow and cry.

“Would you dance with me again?” he asked.

“Oh.” My. God. Yes. A thousand times yes.

oved. Except before I could say one of those yesses, Vance’s voice was at
back. “My turn.”

on on No. Damn it.

Mateo let me go and took a step away. Then he held up his hands in
lding surrender so Vance could step in. “Thanks for the dance, Vera.”

I sighed. “Sure.”

hired He tapped me on the shoulder, then weaved through the crowd towa
parents cake table.

My skin tingled from where he’d touched me.

No, not touched. Patted. He’d patted my shoulder.

Like he’d do to a friend. Or a sister.

o woo He saw me as a sister, didn’t he? The Edens had embraced me fully,
n from was an honorary member of the family.

Would Mateo ever touch me the way I wanted to be touched? Would
y chin ever kiss me?

’s foot. Not if he saw me as a sister. As just a friend.

My heart sank to my scuffed toenails as Vance pulled me close. And
that night, when I disappeared into the loft after the wedding, instead o
crying into my pillow, I screamed.

was

nights

Not

He might be uninjured but my pride was running through a meat grinder. Before I recovered, the song was over. Time to sneak upstairs to the loft, bury my face in a pillow and cry.

“Would you dance with me again?” he asked.

“Oh.” My. God. Yes. A thousand times yes.

Except before I could say one of those yesses, Vance’s voice was at my back. “My turn.”

No. Damn it.

Mateo let me go and took a step away. Then he held up his hands in surrender so Vance could step in. “Thanks for the dance, Vera.”

I sighed. “Sure.”

He tapped me on the shoulder, then weaved through the crowd toward the cake table.

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No, not touched. Patted. He’d patted my shoulder.

Like he’d do to a friend. Or a sister.

He saw me as a sister, didn’t he? The Edens had embraced me fully, and I was an honorary member of the family.

Would Mateo ever touch me the way I wanted to be touched? Would he ever kiss me?

Not if he saw me as a sister. As just a friend.

My heart sank to my scuffed toenails as Vance pulled me close. And later that night, when I disappeared into the loft after the wedding, instead of crying into my pillow, I screamed.

CHAPTER NINE

NOVEMBER

Thanksgiving. Dad's favorite holiday.

Was he eating turkey tonight? Last year, he'd killed one to cook over the fire. Did he even know it was Thanksgiving?

The days and months and years tended to blend together when you lived without phones or calendars or jobs or schedules. But Dad had always kept track of the date by his automatic watch. What if it had stopped working? What if he'd decided tracking time was pointless? Did he know how long he had been since I'd left?

It had been over a year since I'd seen my father.

The day I'd left, he'd told me he loved me. *Never forget how much I love you.* When I asked if I'd see him again, he'd said, "Of course."

That was a promise, right? Dad kept his promises.

Where was he? I'd spent the spring, summer and fall in the mountains outside Quincy. I'd searched and searched and searched for any sign.

Either there wasn't one to be found. Or ...

He was alive. *He's alive.*

"Vera?" Lyla's fingers touched my wrist.

I jerked, startled, and my fork clattered to my plate.

"Are you okay?" Her eyebrows knitted together.

"Great." I forced a smile and picked up my fork. "Just really full. Dinner was delicious."

She didn't buy the act. Neither did Vance.

He stretched an arm past the back of her chair toward mine to put his hand on my shoulder.

I stabbed the last bite of turkey on my plate and popped it in my mouth, smiling as I chewed.

Vance and Lyla shared a look—they knew my smile was a fake—but didn't push it, not with so many people crammed around the Edens' dining room table.

It wasn't fair that I was here, sharing a feast with this lovely family, Dad was alone. Because I'd left him alone.

And I was surrounded by Edens.

There were so many overlapping conversations happening at once, I couldn't keep up. Or maybe I just wasn't in the mood to try.

The only voice I never missed was Mateo's.

He sat directly across the table, though his chair was angled so he could feed Alaina.

ook I wished I had been seated beside him. He'd pulled out a chair for me earlier, offering it up. But then Vance had told me to come around the table and sit beside Lyla.

ived I should have taken the chair beside Mateo anyway. If I was sitting beside him, I would have been so worried about saying the right thing, doing the right thing, that I wouldn't have even started thinking about Dad. I would have been too busy trying to not sound ridiculous when I offered to take tomatoes from Mateo's salad.

kept I liked tomatoes. Cooked was fine. Ketchup was his favorite condiment, and he loved marinara sauce. But his lip curled at the cherry tomatoes Anne had cut up for the green salad.

ing? I liked tomatoes, in any size, shape or form.

ng it But I didn't offer to take them. I was sitting too far away.

t love We never sat by each other. Why was that? Because of the high chairs. Even though Anne had offered to feed Alaina tonight, he'd insisted on feeding it himself.

ns He wasn't a good dad, he was a great dad. He loved that girl with his heart.

inner It was hard to stop crushing on Mateo Eden. Impossible, actually.

Over the past three months, I'd done everything in my power to forget about that wedding dance. To banish these feelings and forget about him, even gone on one—and only one—date.

s hand The guy had been a regular at the coffee shop. He'd shown up thirty minutes later than the time we'd arranged to meet at Knuckles, and after the meal, he'd told me he'd forgotten his wallet, so I'd had to pay.

uth,

it they Wasn't crushing on a good man, a great father, better? Even if he di
ning know I existed? Sure. Sort of.

Maybe Mateo would only ever see me as a sister slash friend. Mayb
while okay with that.

If I was being honest with myself, I was in no place for a relationshi
had more small steps to take. More leaps. I was still discovering what I
and what I didn't.

So while I worked on me, I'd hold him in my heart. He'd be my ray
sunshine to chase away the rain.

ould "Bzzzz." He made an airplane noise as he flew a spoon of sweet pot
over Allie's tray.

ie It was addicting, watching them together. Watching that bond grow
table stronger and stronger. Every day, he seemed to fall deeper and deeper
with his daughter. And the affection was returned.

beside Alaina's blue eyes sparkled as she opened wide for that airplane spo
the I smiled, the first real smile of the meal.

uld Allie kicked her chubby legs as she pinched a green bean with her li
e the fingers and shoved it into her mouth. Her *Gobble Gobble* bib was sme
with mashed potatoes. There were even some in her hair.

Mateo used the spoon to clean up her chin. "You're a mess, Sprout."

y He'd started calling her Sprout not long after Vance and Lyla's wed
The first time I'd heard him, at a family dinner at this very table, I'd ha
excuse myself to the bathroom to hide the tears.

Vance had snuck away to check on me two minutes later.

ir? Dad had called Elsie Sprout. And he'd called Hadley Jellybean.

doing Vance had offered to talk to Mateo, ask him to pick a different nickn
But I'd told him to leave it alone. My sister would have loved sharing
s entire nickname with Alaina.

And because I wouldn't want Hadley to be left out, I'd started callin
Jellybean.

get Sometimes it hurt less. Sometimes it hurt more.

m. I'd Tonight ... tonight was a bad night.

I missed my sisters.

I missed my dad.

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CHAPTER TEN

MARCH

“Happy Birthday, Jellybean.” I scooped Alaina into my arms and smooched her cheek. She giggled when I tickled her side, then gave me a strababble as she showed me the toy car in her fist.

“Car,” I said.

“Ca.”

“Close enough.” I kissed her cheek again. “Look how cute you are today. Her hair was in two short pigtails, each clipped with a white bow. Orange was printed on her lavender hoodie.

Chatter drifted from deeper inside the house, and given the line of vehicles parked out front, I was likely the last to arrive at the birthday party. But I worked most of the day at the coffee shop so Lyla could take the week off.

On Talia’s orders, she was supposed to be slowing down during her last month of pregnancy. Though instead of resting, I was guessing that Lyla spent her Saturday putting the finishing touches on the nursery. It would be long now until there was another Sutter. A baby boy that Uncle Var and Lyla were naming Trey.

I loved him already.

“Let’s go find everyone,” I told Allie, carrying her down the hall.

The kitchen was empty but the island was crowded with glasses. The birthday cake was beneath a glass dome on the counter. It was decorated with colorful rainbow swirls—Lyla’s creation, no doubt. More evidence of her taking it easy.

The gifts were all on the dining room table, including the stuffed unicorn I’d brought over from the loft. I’d added it to the pile two minutes ago,

slipped back outside to the porch to ring the doorbell.

No one used the doorbell at Anne and Harrison's place. Visitors on the ranch knew to just knock, poke your head inside and holler. Especially most visitors were their children.

But Allie loved the doorbell. Pushing it. Answering it. Any time I knew she was here, I'd ring the doorbell, wait for her little pitter-patter of hands and knees, then ease the door open and find her crawling toward the entryway.

"You're here." Anne poked her head out from the living room and started waving me toward the noise. "We're in here, sweetie."

The entire family had crowded into the room. All eyes were locked on the television and a basketball game playing. Jasper had organized a family bracket pool for March Madness and the first round of games was in full swing. Considering I'd chosen my teams based on school colors, I was holding my breath that I'd win.

Mateo was seated on the couch beside Harrison and Vance. All three were on the edge of their seats as the game clock wound down to less than a minute.

"Shoot it," Harrison yelled.

"Where's the foul call?" Knox huffed, dragging a hand over his beard.

"Come on, Timmy." Mateo sighed. "Make those."

I leaned in closer to Anne. "They do realize that the players can't hear them, right?"

She laughed and put her arm around my shoulders. "How was work?"

"Good. Where's Lyla?" She trusted me to run the shop, but I also knew Lyla had well enough to know she liked a full report on the day.

"She was tired so I sent her to lie down. Though I doubt she'll get a chance to sleep with these guys shouting at the television." Anne rolled her eyes.

"Shushing them is pointless. Trust me, I've tried."

I laughed. "What about dinner? Can I help with anything?"

Nearly a year of cooking lessons from Anne and I was no longer helping in the kitchen.

"You can help me with the salad later. But I just put the lasagnas in the oven. We'll eat in about an hour."

"Perfect." I shifted Allie on my hip, surprised she hadn't squirmed to put down yet. But she just rested her head on my shoulder, her attention on the toy car's wheels.

the “She didn’t get a nap today,” Anne said. “Mateo said she just would
asleep.”

since “Early bedtime.” I kissed her forehead and swayed with her in my a

There were days when it felt like a minute ago that Mateo had walke
new that family dinner and announced he had a daughter. And other days, I
nds today, I couldn’t remember what life was like before Allie.

Before the Edens.

The memories of years spent with Dad in the mountains seemed to g
miled, fuzzier with each passing day. It scared me, the thought of losing him.
forgetting.

on the But spring was coming, and with the warm weather, my search wou
y resume. It had been a long, cold winter of worry. This year, I’d find hi

ill This year, I’d make sure he was okay and he wouldn’t be alone.

n’t Alaina yawned a big, gaping yawn that stretched her tiny mouth.

Mateo caught it, stood from the couch and crossed the living room. ‘
e men me to take her?’”

han a “No.” I shook my head. “I’ve got her.”

His eyes softened as he ran a knuckle over her cheek. “She’s tired.”

“It’s hard to be the birthday girl.”

rd. He hummed. “How was work today?”

“Good, thanks. How was—”

ar Something happened in the game and the room erupted in a mix of c
and curses, stealing Mateo’s focus as he whirled to the TV.

?” Alaina straightened at the noise, holding up her car as she squealed.

new her the bigger kids came darting into the living room and she kicked her le
wanting to be put down.

1y “Okay, fine.” I sighed. Allie rarely cuddled with me, not with so ma
aunts and uncles vying for attention. “Go play.”

She crawled faster than most toddlers walked, disappearing with her
cousins into the adjoining playroom.

peless Anne and Harrison had converted a bedroom into an office and mad
former office kid central before Christmas.

the Mateo stood in front of me, eyes glued to the TV for the final secon
the game.

o be With him standing there, I had no choice but to stare at those broad
n fixed shoulders. At his dark hair trapped beneath a baseball hat, the ends cur

n't fall his nape. Every time he wore a hat, it made the corners of his jaw seem stronger. Sharper.

ms. He put his hands on his narrow hips, and the movement lifted the hem and into his T-shirt an inch. His jeans were frayed at the hems, the strings tickled like thick soles of his cowboy boots. One of his rear pockets had a slight tear through the thinning denim, I could make out the black cotton of his underwear.

get That man had the most perfect ass I'd seen in my life. My hands itched
Of slide into those pockets and *squeeze*.

My cheeks flushed and I tore my gaze away.

ld And found Anne's eyes, waiting.

m. *Shit*. Definitely did not need her knowing I was obsessed with her scum ... I'm going to grab something to drink."

Without another word, I slipped out of the room, drawing in a shaky "Need inhale when I reached the kitchen. My reprieve was short-lived. The gas ended, and like always, the crowd shifted to the kitchen to snack on the present veggie tray and visit while the scents of tomatoes and garlic and filled the house.

"So what time tomorrow night?" Winn asked Mateo.

"Can I drop her off at five?"

"Sure."

cheers "Should be back around nine or ten to pick her up."

Then "Or," Griffin drawled, "bring stuff so she can spend the night. Just in it goes well."

gs, "In case what goes well?" Eloise asked, taking a stool beside mine and island.

ny Mateo grinned. "I'm going on a date tomorrow night. Griff and Winn babysitting."

Oohs and *aahs* filled the room along with questions about the woman where he was taking her. The noise masked the sound of my whimper.

e the A date.

He was going on a date.

ds of It hurt. It hurt more than it should, considering he'd never once give that sort of attention. Still, it hurt.

The world felt like it was spinning the wrong way, but I forced a smile and ling at made the salad for dinner. I visited over our meal. And I clapped when Alaina shoved a handful of birthday cake in her mouth.

1 It was just one date, right? He wasn't going to fall in love with her. I
allowed to date.

m of So was I. If I wanted to, which I didn't. But maybe I'd change my m

ng the It just wasn't the time for Mateo and me. I had to wait a little longer
ar and good at waiting.

 I breathed through the ache in my chest. I locked away the hurt in th
down deep. Compared to the rest of the pain I kept in that box, this pal
ied to comparison.

I just had to wait.

In the meantime, I'd keep working on me. I'd find Dad. And I'd wai

A month. Six months. Twelve. Maybe in a year, he'd see me. Event
n. "I, he'd see me.

I just had to wait.

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It was just one date, right? He wasn't going to fall in love with her. He was allowed to date.

So was I. If I wanted to, which I didn't. But maybe I'd change my mind.

It just wasn't the time for Mateo and me. I had to wait a little longer. I was good at waiting.

I breathed through the ache in my chest. I locked away the hurt in that box down deep. Compared to the rest of the pain I kept in that box, this paled in comparison.

I just had to wait.

In the meantime, I'd keep working on me. I'd find Dad. And I'd wait.

A month. Six months. Twelve. Maybe in a year, he'd see me. Eventually he'd see me.

I just had to wait.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARCH

One year later ...

“Jellybean!” I opened my arms wide as Alaina raced toward the front door at Anne and Harrison’s. She launched herself into my chest, so I swept her off her bare feet, spinning her in a circle as I peppered her cheeks with kisses. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Are you having a birthday party today?”

Her birthday hoodie this year was violet with *TWO* in rainbow lettering on the face. “Boon.”

“Boon?” That was a new word in her exploding vocabulary.

She pointed down the hallway. “Go.”

“Are you being bossy today?” I tickled her ribs and closed the door, kicked off my shoes, then headed for the noisy kitchen.

A chorus of hellos greeted me as I walked into the Eden fray with Alaina perched on my hip.

“Did you find Vera?” Mateo asked his daughter.

“Yep.” Like always, whenever I rang the doorbell, Alaina came running. And I was still the only person to ring.

“Boon.” Alaina pointed to the bouquet of balloons on the island.

“Ah.” Boon. “Bal-loon,” I enunciated, stressing each syllable.

“Boon.”

I giggled. “Close enough.”

“Dow.” *Down.* Alaina squirmed but I held her tighter.

“Not without a smooch.” I puckered up and made a kissing noise.

She took my cheeks in her little hands and squeezed, then her sloppy mouth landed on mine.

“Okay, go have fun.” I pushed a small dark curl off her forehead, then nudged her on her feet so she could run to the playroom, already filled with the kids’ laughter.

“What can I help with?” I snatched a carrot from the veggie tray on the island.

“Nothing.” Anne dried her hands with a towel beside the sink. “I think we’re all set.”

“Sorry I’m late.”

She waved it off. “You’re right on time.”

My feet were killing me, so I slid into the last empty stool at the island beside Lyla, nudging my elbow with hers. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She smiled, glancing down at a sleeping Trey in her arms.

How that baby could sleep through the noise was beyond me, but that wasn’t the first family gathering he’d snoozed through. His first birthday would be the next we celebrated, probably right here in this kitchen. Maybe he’d stay awake for that party.

“Hey, kiddo.” Uncle Vance tossed an arm around my shoulders for a sideways hug. He must have caught the scent of wind and pine in my hair, and though he tried to hide it, a small frown tugged at his mouth. “You’re going hiking?”

“You went hiking?” Mateo asked from the opposite side of the island.
“Where?”

“Sable Peak.”

“That’s my favorite trail.”

“I know.”

He chuckled. “I’ve told you that before, haven’t I?”

“Once or twice.” I smiled as a blush crept into my cheeks.

The flush wasn’t as fierce or fiery as it had been a year ago. Time and familiarity had made it easier to hide my crush on Mateo. That, or maybe my love for him didn’t come roaring to the surface anymore whenever he entered the room—because it had seeped deep into my bones.

He snagged a snap pea from the veggie tray and dipped it in the ranch dressing before popping it into his mouth. “Maybe I’ll go up with you the next time you head out.”

He’d told me that too. Once or twice.

“Sure. I’ll let you know the next time I head that direction,” I lied.

en set No matter how much I loved the idea of Mateo and me spending time
e other alone together, he'd never get invited on my hikes. No one would. And
hadn't gone to Sable Peak today.

the I'd been on the opposite end of the valley, traversing woods where the
closest hiking trail was at least a mile away. March had been unseasonably
nk warm this year, making it easier for me to get into the mountains.

Vance stiffened at my side, his arm falling away. His jaw flexed.

nd That flex meant I'd be getting a lecture the next time we were alone.
gotten to know that look well over the past year. The lectures too. But
concern stemmed from a good place.

is "Are we still going to Willie's tonight?" Lyla asked, probably because
ay husband's rising tension was clouding the room and soon, people would
maybe be asking questions.

ay "We're in." Eloise leaned into Jasper's side. "Mom, you're still good
laybe babysit?"

"Yes. I've been looking forward to it all week."

a "Me too," Lyla said, meeting my gaze.

air, "Thank you," I mouthed.

nt went Lyla had come to my rescue more often than not when it came to the
hiking subject.

d. She knew, just like Vance, that I was searching for Dad. And she knew
just like Vance, that I wasn't going to stop.

Maybe he was still angry that Dad had attacked Lyla. I couldn't blame
for that.

Two years ago, Dad had gotten spooked when she'd stumbled upon
hunting and he'd ... snapped. He'd choked her until she'd almost passed
then let her go.

nd Vance had every right to be angry. So was I. Dad shouldn't have touched
'be my her. Why hadn't he just run away? What had been going on in his head
was in he'd do such a horrible thing?

ch If I hadn't left him so abruptly, I could have asked. I could have made
time he wasn't on the edge of a mental break.

But I had left him. Now I had to find him.

Lyla had accepted my hikes. Vance wanted me to move on.

He didn't give me enough credit for how far I'd already come. I was
getting back to the person I'd been *before*. Living a normal life.

I had a job I loved at Eden Coffee. It paid my bills and allowed me a flexible schedule so that I had plenty of time to take my classes and study. I was doing what many twenty-three-year-old women were doing.

I drove my car. I spent too much time on my phone. I ate too much junk food and had a healthy obsession with Netflix.

In the past year, I liked to think I'd found constant.

I was chasing constant, at least.

But I wasn't giving up on Dad.

Maybe letting him go was the smartest decision. It would likely be the best choice that saved myself heartache. In a way, the same could be said for my unending crush on Mateo. Was it reckless to love him even though he would never drop a crumb of interest in my direction? Sort of.

Yet here I was, acting the fool.

Chances were, Mateo would never notice me. Chances were, I'd always feel damaged and broken. Maybe the past would always be something insurmountable for me to overcome.

Maybe no amount of waiting for Mateo would ever make a difference.

Deep in my heart, I knew it was time to let these feelings go. But for Dad?

No. Never.

Dad was my family. He needed me. I was all he had left, and I'd abandoned him. Somehow, I'd fix that mistake. I'd figure out a way to save his life. To keep him in mine.

Even if the only place we could see each other was hidden beneath the trees and a cloudless blue sky. Even if it took me ten years to find him. I would find him.

He was alive.

I wasn't giving up.

Even if down deep, I wondered if it was time to let both Mateo Eder and Cormac Gallagher go.

I was sure

“VERA—”

“I heard you, Uncle Vance.” I'd heard every word of the lecture he'd been giving me for the past five minutes outside of the ladies' bathroom at Willie's.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his bearded jaw. “I’m worried about you.”

“You don’t need to worry.” I gave him a sad smile. “I’m careful. I have a bear spray. I stay aware of my surroundings. I make noise when I’m in sketchy areas. I’m careful.”

“It’s not—” Another sigh. “I know you’re careful. That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Then what?”

“I’m worried ...” He blew out a long breath. “I’m worried you won’t find him.”

We shared that worry. Not that I’d ever admit it out loud. To Vance I said, “I’ll find him.”

“You might not.”

“But I will.”

“Kiddo—”

“He promised.” My voice wobbled. “He said we’d see each other again. He promised.”

I would find my father. I would be in his life. He needed me in his.

“I shouldn’t have left him like that.”

Vance blinked. “What? Do you want to go back?”

“No. Not to live out there. But it all happened so fast. You found me. I found Dad. And the next day, I left. It was hasty.”

“Hasty. He wanted you to go, Vera.”

“I know. And I’m not saying I regret it. But I just ...” I sighed. “I’ll find him.”

Vance’s eyes softened.

I hated the tender pity in his gaze. I hated his doubts. I hated that he might be right.

“I’ll find him.” My chin jutted as I spoke.

The expression on Vance’s face didn’t change. I couldn’t stare at it for another minute, so I slid past him and stormed down the hallway, rejoining our group.

There were two bars on Main Street, Big Sam’s Saloon and Old Mill. They bookended the touristy section of Quincy and catered to visitors who wanted the “authentic” Montana experience.

Big Sam’s was decked out in over-the-top Western décor. Old Mill had a sports bar vibe. Willie’s was a dive, and according to the locals, it was

out authentic Montana bar.

The building itself was old, dark and dingy. The walls were crammed with neon lights and beer signs. Every table had an array of nicks and dings more than two chairs or stools matched, and the mirrored wall with shelves of liquor bottles probably hadn't been cleaned in a decade.

'm When I used the bathroom, despite years of peeing in the woods, I hopped over the toilet seat. Yet even with the stale scent of old beer, I liked the nights when the Edens would come into town for a night out.

't find I recognized nearly every face here tonight. Since the bar wasn't on the main street, it didn't get the influx of tourists like the polished establishments.

or Which seemed to suit Willie himself just fine. He stood behind the bar, looking about as pleased to have customers as he would to have a colonoscopy.

I walked to the bar and lifted a hand, signaling Willie from the end. I learned my first time here that smiles were wasted on the grumpy bartender, so I didn't bother as he came my direction.

gain. His white eyebrows seemed even bushier than they had been the last time we'd all come in for drinks, but his scraggly beard had gotten a slight tinge. "Coke, please."

Willie didn't nod or speak. He just filled a glass with ice and squirted the drink into it as I surveyed the room.

2. We Griff and Winn always chose this as the hangout spot on these occasional outings. This was where they'd met years ago, and though he looked like a gruff cowboy, Griffin Eden was sentimental at heart.

find At the moment, they were at the shuffleboard against the far wall, pretending to play when they were actually flirting between frequent kisses.

could Memphis sat beside Knox, their chairs as close as possible so he could have one hand around her shoulders and his other hand splayed on her belly. She was pregnant with their third, a girl this time.

for Memphis was one of our designated drivers tonight.

ning Eloise was the other. She was sitting on Jasper's lap, his body cradling hers so naturally it was like they'd molded to each other.

l. They Talia and Foster were holding hands, their fingers interlaced.

wanted When Vance joined Lyla, they shared a silent conversation, his disappointment with me ripe from across the room. But when she put her hand on his thigh, he relaxed and kissed her temple.

had a the The empty chairs at the table, Mateo's and mine, looked ... lonely. 9

Where was he?

d with I scanned the room, finding him at the opposite end of the bar. He w
. No alone.

elves of A blond woman was on the stool beside his. She was pressed so close
their shoulders nearly touched. A flirty smile toyed on her red lips.

covered My heart lurched.

ese Mateo swirled his whiskey on the rocks with a plastic straw before t
sip from the tumbler.

Main, The woman's gaze followed the movement and she licked her lips a
drank.

ar, Oh, God. My stomach roiled just as Willie set my pop on the bar and
up one finger—the price.
“And rum,” I blurted.

I'd Willie's mouth pursed into a thin line, but he made me the cocktail v
ender watched Mateo.

Who was that woman? Did he know her? She hadn't been here when
t time come in. Besides our group, there were only a few other patrons tonight
rim. few older couples and three men with beer bellies sitting at the bar. I
recognized all of them from the coffee shop.

d my But the blond. She was new. And she was beautiful.

Was he going to pick her up? Tonight?

sional When Willie held up three fingers this time, I dug a five-dollar bill f
ke a my jeans pocket, barely sparing him a glance as I slapped it on the stic
“Keep the change.”

isses. My hand trembled as I took a long drink from my own glass, cringing
at the burn of the alcohol. I took another sip. I stole another glance at the
old woman. Both hurt.

round On shaking legs, I retreated to the table, sipping my drink as everyone
talked and laughed. My silence went unnoticed. It was overshadowed by
country music playing through the bar's speakers.

ng hers Mateo's empty chair was on the other side of the table. We still never
beside each other, either at Anne and Harrison's or at Willie's. Someone
always landed beside Vance or Lyla. I wish I had taken that chair.

ier Mine was aimed directly at the bar where Mateo and the blond were
talking. It was impossible not to watch them together.

Sad. She laughed. He grinned.
I fought a gag.

How many women had he picked up here? How many times had he
asn't woman home from Willie's?

Mateo had dated on and off for the past year. I only knew about it be-
se that Anne was usually Alaina's babysitter. But it was all easier to ignore be-
cause none of his dates ever came to the ranch. To my knowledge, he hadn't
introduced any woman to his daughter.

aking a That had to mean something, right? That Allie knew *me*. That Allie
me.

s he The woman leaned in close to say something into his ear.

I slammed the last of my drink, gulping it down until all that remain-
d held ice. Then I shot out of my chair and went to the bar, flagging down Wi-
a refill.

The rum didn't burn as much this time. My head felt lighter, my lim-
while I looser, and when I sat in my seat, I tilted a bit too far to the side.

"Whoa." Vance steadied me with a hand on my shoulder.

n we'd "I'm fine." I batted him away.

it, a Was this drunk? I'd never been drunk before.

I didn't like it.

What the hell was I doing? I didn't like drinking. If I went to a bar v-
Edens or the friends I'd made this past year, I was a designated driver.
Always.

rom But before I could shove my glass away and ignore it for the rest of
ky bar. night, the blond put her hand on Mateo's thigh beneath the bar. Her na-
dragged along the denim of his jeans.

ig at There was a scream inside my chest. I clamped my lips together to k-
from escaping. When I was sure I'd swallowed it down, I lifted the gla-
chugged the rest of my drink. The ice cubes clattered as I set it on the t-
ne else with too much force.

oy the "Vera." Vance put his hand on my wrist. "Enough."

Enough.

er sat He was right, wasn't he? This was enough. This had to be enough.

ow, I Mateo was never going to think of me as anything other than an hon-
member of the Eden family. He was never going to see me. He was ne-
going to love me.

It wasn't fair.

I'd worked so hard these past two years. On the dark days, when I'd
given up hope, I'd kept going. I'd come so far.

taken a I'd waited for him.
I'd waited and waited and waited.

because Why had I waited? Why had I convinced myself there was even a chance
because he'd be mine?
Dad would be so disappointed. He'd hate that I'd waited just to be e
... overlooked.

loved *Enough.*
Yes. Yes, it was enough.
I was out of my chair before I knew what I was doing.

ed was "Vera."

llie for I ignored Vance and stalked to the bar. My head was fuzzy but my s
were surprisingly steady as I marched to that bombshell blond with rec
bs and matching nails.
Mateo noticed me first. He sat straighter, easing back from the wom
She twisted on her stool, her smile dropping as she looked me over.
"Hey, Vera." Mateo's eyebrows came together. "You okay?"
"Don't say 'Hey.' And no. I'm not okay." I squared my shoulders. "
not your sister."

with the "My sister?" His forehead furrowed. "What are you talking about? A
drunk?"
"I think so." I hated that I'd let myself get drunk. Hated that I'd don
the something like *her*. Hated that I'd lost him.

ils Mateo hadn't even been mine to start with, but I'd lost him anyway.
I'd lost all of them.

keep it God, it hurt. When was it going to stop hurting?
ss and "He's allergic to shellfish," I told the blond.
able Her eyebrows came together. "Huh?"
"His favorite color is blue. He loves snap peas but only if there is ra
dip them in. Almost everything he buys for his daughter is purple."
The woman glanced to Mateo. "You have a daughter?"
He ignored her, his stare fixed on me.

orary So I stared right back, holding his sapphire eyes as my own flooded.
ver a pilot but he doesn't fly anymore. I don't know why. He'll drop anyth
help his sisters or brothers. He wears brown boots with a black belt eve
though they don't match."

almost Mateo's throat bobbed and something flashed across his gaze, but I
too drunk to figure it out. Maybe he thought his brown boots and black

did match.

“He’s a morning person. He drinks black coffee. He’s really good at
ance and can add numbers in his head faster than anyone I’ve ever met. He
magical when he’s riding a horse. And light follows him. It’s always so
ntirely when he’s around.”

Something wet dripped down my cheek. A tear. I let it splatter on the
bar floor and shifted my focus to the woman again.

The hardness and annoyance in her face was gone, replaced with the
tender pity Uncle Vance had given me earlier. It was excruciating to be
by this woman. This stranger who’d likely share Mateo’s bed tonight.

steps “He won’t treat you like you’re broken, even when you are,” I whisp
l lips as the tears streamed.

an. “Vera.” Mateo’s voice had a rasp, like he needed a drink of water.
He could have one when I was finished.

I rounded the woman’s stool, sliding in between them. The blond tri
nudge me out of the way with her knee, but I ignored her, standing str
I’m And before Mateo could say another word, I pressed my lips to his, ho
that soft mouth for two aching heartbeats before I pulled away.

Are you He stared at me, his face unreadable.

“I’m done waiting for you to see me.”

e I flew from the bar. I ran. And as I raced down Quincy’s sidewalks,
my love for Mateo away.

I shoved it in that locked box.

And buried it down deep.

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“He’s a morning person. He drinks black coffee. He’s really good at math and can add numbers in his head faster than anyone I’ve ever met. He looks magical when he’s riding a horse. And light follows him. It’s always sunny when he’s around.”

Something wet dripped down my cheek. A tear. I let it splatter on the dirty bar floor and shifted my focus to the woman again.

The hardness and annoyance in her face was gone, replaced with that same tender pity Uncle Vance had given me earlier. It was excruciating to be pitied by this woman. This stranger who’d likely share Mateo’s bed tonight.

“He won’t treat you like you’re broken, even when you are,” I whispered as the tears streamed.

“Vera.” Mateo’s voice had a rasp, like he needed a drink of water.

He could have one when I was finished.

I rounded the woman’s stool, sliding in between them. The blond tried to nudge me out of the way with her knee, but I ignored her, standing strong. And before Mateo could say another word, I pressed my lips to his, holding that soft mouth for two aching heartbeats before I pulled away.

He stared at me, his face unreadable.

“I’m done waiting for you to see me.”

I flew from the bar. I ran. And as I raced down Quincy’s sidewalks, I put my love for Mateo away.

I shoved it in that locked box.

And buried it down deep.

Part II
AFTER.

Part II
AFTER.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MATEO

I *'m done waiting for you to see me.*

That sentence was Vera's gut punch. Every time I replayed last night it hit the hardest. Or maybe it had been the kiss that had nearly knocked me off my stool.

My fingers lifted, about to touch my mouth, before I pinned my arm to my side. How was it that I could still feel her lips, soft and sweet, on mine? Vera. *Damn it.*

How long had she had these feelings for me? Where the hell did we come from here?

"Morning."

I jumped, the scalding black coffee in my mug sloshing over the rim onto my hand.

"Sorry." Mom stepped out of the house as I wiped my skin dry. "Thank you heard me."

I couldn't hear a damn thing with Vera's voice so loud in my head.

His favorite color is blue.

He loves snap peas but only if there is ranch to dip them in.

Almost everything he buys for his daughter is purple.

"You're up early," Mom said, joining me at the railing on the porch.

"Yeah." I hadn't slept a minute and had finally given up lying in bed around three.

This morning was extreme, but I was usually up early. Like Vera had last night, I was a morning person who drank black coffee and wore black boots with a black belt, which apparently didn't match.

I leaned my forearms on the top rail, staring into the distance as I sipped more coffee. This was my third cup. Or maybe it was my fourth.

The trees and meadows were covered in silver frost. A layer of clouds obscured the mountains in the distance but the sun was rising. Another hour, it would be up to burn off the chill.

I'd been staring at the mountains since dawn, spinning over everything Vera had said last night.

I'm not your sister.

No, she wasn't my sister. I'd never seen her as a sister. She was ...

"How was Willie's?" Mom asked.

Awful. Absolutely fucking awful.

Mom had been awake when we'd gotten home last night, but in the collect sleeping kids, bundle them up and load them into car seats, she asked for details about the bar. Even if she had, I wouldn't have known to say.

So I'd kissed her cheek good night and headed to the guest bedroom Allie had been asleep in her portable crib. Since it was her birthday, we planned to crash at Mom and Dad's so they could spend time with her special day.

Not that I was in any mood to celebrate.

I'm done waiting for you to see me.

I saw Vera. I'd always seen Vera.

She was sweet. Strong. Her hair went wild sometimes and she'd get annoyed she'd rake it into a ponytail with a huff that always made me chuckle. She loved cherry tomatoes. I hated them but always thought it be weird to offer her food from my plate because that was something I did and we weren't a couple.

"Mateo?"

"Yeah?"

She raised her eyebrows.

Right. Her question. "Willie's was, uh ... Willie's. It was good."

Her eyes narrowed, no doubt smelling the lie—Mom was part blood when it came to dishonesty in her children. She'd find out the whole truth soon enough. Not a soul at Willie's had missed the moment Vera kissed

The blond who'd been flirting with me had been forgotten as I'd tried to chase Vera out of the bar, but Vance had stopped me with a lethal glare before I could make it outside. He'd been the one to chase after her.

Probably smart. I wouldn't have known what to say anyway.

ds The party had died a quick death at that point. Without Lyla's car, w
' coupleonly had one designated driver, so we'd crammed into Memphis's SU

one had spoken on the drive to the ranch. Not to each other. Not to me

ing The barn loft's windows were dark. Vera hadn't come home last nig
must have stayed at Vance and Lyla's place. Was she okay?

Vera. My temples throbbed. What a damn mess. Had everyone known tha
had feelings for me? Or had we all been clueless?

Mom looked past me to the barn. "Did Vera have a nice time?"

"Not really."

rush to She'd cried. I'd made her cry. And I couldn't stop seeing those tears
hadn't down her face.

1 what "What—oh." Understanding widened Mom's blue eyes. "It finally
happened, didn't it?"

1 where So not everyone had been clueless. "You knew?"

e'd "I've watched for years, wondering if and when you'd notice."

on her "Thanks for the warning." My voice sounded sharper than I'd intenc

"I'm sorry. I never knew what to say. I thought it would fade. Or tha
maybe you'd notice her too."

"I noticed her, Mom. It wasn't that I didn't notice her. But I didn't tl
I didn't know she felt that way." Vera had been right. "I didn't see it."

so Mom put her hand on my arm. "And now?"

I blew out a long exhale, my breath billowing in a white cloud. "Eye
t wouldopen."

ouples Maybe I'd missed it because of Alaina. My daughter had been my fo
and sure, I'd dated. But a relationship? I didn't want a relationship. No
I was still trying to figure out how to be a single dad. Definitely not wl
been sorting through everything that had happened with Madison.

Or maybe I hadn't caught on to Vera's feelings because she was ...

hound No one had ever warned me away. Vance had never told me to keep
distance. But there'd been subtleties. At the wedding, Vera had looked
uth beautiful, and dancing with her had been the best five minutes of the n
d me. I'd wanted to keep her in my arms—until Vance had cut in.

d to Every time I'd offered Vera a chair beside mine at family dinners, h
e asked her to sit beside him instead.

No warning. Not verbal, at least.

But I'd received the message, loud and clear.

Did he know how she felt?

re'd *Fuck.* What the hell was I supposed to do now?

V. No This wasn't just some woman I could walk away from if things fell .
 . Vera was a part of this family. It was hard to remember life before she
ght. She come into our lives.

She had a dry sense of humor and made quiet jokes no one apprecia
t she enough. She liked milk and sugar in her coffee. She ate mashed potato
plain.

She made the best latte at Eden Coffee, even better than Lyla. She'd
out a window at the mountains and it looked so much like she wanted t
; track anywhere but indoors.

She had the sweetest laugh, second only to Alaina's.

She'd do anything for my parents.

She loved my daughter.

And she thought she was broken.

He won't treat you like you're broken, even when you are.

led. She wasn't broken. Not once had I thought she was anything but stru
it warrior.

"I'm not sure what to think or what to do," I told Mom. The last thir
hink ... wanted was to hurt Vera.

"That girl has been through hell, Mateo."

"I know," I murmured.

es wide "I get the feeling we only know part of what all happened."

I nodded. "Same."

ocus, Mom stood straight, facing me as she raised her chin. "I love her lik
t while one of my own. She needs a mother, and I'm taking the job."

hile I'd The reason Vera needed a mother was because her father had strang
own after murdering her twin sisters. Then, Cormac Gallagher had kid
Vera. his oldest daughter into the wilderness and kept her there for four year
my she'd finally broken free.

so I was missing a lot of detail from the story, but after she'd left her fa
ight. she'd shown up on Vance's doorstep in Idaho. A woman brought back
Everyone had assumed she'd died with her sisters.

e'd The years she'd been through. The nightmare she'd endured. To say
gone through hell was an understatement.

"Does she ever talk about it?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. "Not a word. In the beginning, I asked questio
she didn't answer. Every time I brought it up, she shut down. And she

ever talk about her father.”

apart. That son of a bitch could suffer a slow death for all I cared.

’d Cormac had tried to kill Lyla a couple years ago. She’d gone out hiking and had stumbled across him beside a river. The motherfucker had nearly strangled her to death. It was nothing short of a miracle that he’d changed his mind about another murder and let her go.

We’d all searched for Cormac but he’d slipped away. Had Vera been staring at him then? Was the reason she’d left him because of what he’d done to her Vance probably knew. Lyla too. But they weren’t talking and neither was Vera.

Vera went hiking all the time. Why? Was she searching for her father? What would happen if she found him? Would she turn him in to the authorities?

“She’s beautiful,” Mom said, like she was letting me in on a secret.

“I might be oblivious, but I’m not blind.”

ong. A Vera was beautiful. I’d thought so from the very first time she’d brought a family dinner. Any other woman and I would have chased her shamelessly.

ig I Except she was Vera. When she’d moved to Quincy, the last thing she needed was a man drooling over her. So I’d just been there as a friend. A few times I’d flirted with her, she hadn’t flirted back. Unless ...

Vera knew I’d been flirting, right?

I rubbed my jaw, the stubble scraping my palm. “What a mess.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

e she’s “I wish I had your confidence,” I muttered.

“I love you, Mateo. And I love Vera. No matter what, just be gentle with her heart.” She turned and headed into the house, leaving me alone on the napped cold porch.

s until Be gentle with her heart.

“Shit. What am I doing?” I dragged a hand through my hair just as another voice echoed from the baby monitor in my jeans pocket.

to life. “Daddy. Wake.”

I dumped the rest of my coffee over the porch rail, splattering it onto the frozen gravel, then went inside to the guest bedroom. The moment I opened the door, a pair of little arms stretched in the air.

I picked Alaina up and settled her against my chest. “Happy Birthdays to you, Sprout.”

doesn’t Allie nuzzled her face in my neck.

“Did you sleep good?” I kissed her dark hair and bent to get her stuffed unicorn from the crib.

It was a gift from Vera that Allie was rarely without.

Allie loved Vera. Vera loved Allie. It was as obvious as a full moon on a cloudless night. That, I’d seen. So why the fuck hadn’t I noticed Vera’s feelings for me?

Mom had said she’d watched for years. Since the beginning, then.

If I hadn’t been so wrapped up in Alaina, would I have noticed too? Would I have done about it?

My stomach knotted, knowing exactly what I would have done. The way I’d been before my daughter was not the man I was today.

I would have wooed her into bed. I would have fucked it up at some point and in the end, I would have broken her heart.

Funny how having a daughter made you think differently about the way you were dating. About the kind of man I wanted for Alaina someday in that distant, distant future.

None of the women I’d met in the past two years had been good enough to even meet Allie. I hadn’t planned to do anything with that blond at the time, but share a drink and let her flirt with me for a while. I’d always planned to come home alone.

I’d been coming home alone for two years.

Vera had told that blond last night that I was good at math. Yeah, I was good at math. At the moment, I’d rather be good at understanding women. Especially Vera Gallagher.

“Go.” Allie pointed to the door. She didn’t give a damn about my in-laws’ crisis. She wanted to go.

The bed was a disheveled mess from my tossing and turning, but I ignored it to make later and headed for the kitchen.

“There’s my birthday girl.” Mom held out her arms, reaching for Allie. Allie only snuggled deeper into my neck, her hand fisting my thermal. “Daddy.”

In the mornings, she was my girl.

“Boo,” Mom pouted, pretending to be hurt. “What if I made pancakes for you. Would you want me more than Daddy then?”

Allie loved Mom’s pancakes.

“That should do the trick.” I forced a smile and slid onto a stool at the table.

fed Mom went to work on breakfast, and I strained my ears past the clatter of pans and the sizzle of bacon.

With any luck, Vera would be home soon and we could talk. Not that I had a fucking clue what to say.

Maybe after my fourth or fifth cup of coffee, I'd figure it out.

Dad joined us a few minutes later, patting me on the shoulder on his way to kiss Mom. He filled a coffee mug and refilled mine, then played peek-a-boo with Alaina.

I'd just put her in a high chair when the crunch of gravel sounded outside.

"Be back." I felt Mom's gaze on my back as I rushed out.

Lyla's car was parked beside the barn when I opened the door. She hadn't said anything to me last night. She'd just sat in the middle row of Mercedes SUV with a worry line between her eyebrows.

If Lyla had known about Vera's crush, would she have warned me about it? Mom might not have missed it, but the rest of us ...

Lyla would have told me, right? Talia or Eloise too. And I had to be careful not to let my brothers know. They would have given me a heads-up.

I jogged down the steps, hustling toward the barn as the passenger side door opened and Vera stepped out.

She said something to Lyla, then closed the door.

Lyla reversed away from the barn, pausing when she saw me, but I kept walking. So she kept on driving.

"Vera." I jogged a few steps as she walked toward the barn's side entrance. "Wait up."

The fresh air always cleared my head. It made me sharper. Maybe if I'd talked outside, I'd figure out what to say. How to fix this.

At my voice, Vera froze. Her hand hovered in midair above the door handle. It took three of my long strides before she finally turned to face me.

She looked like hell. There was no flush to her cheeks. No sparkle in her pretty, brown eyes. She looked as cold as the morning air.

That look was entirely my fault.

I stopped in front of her, chest heaving as she stared past my shoulder. The sound of Lyla's car faded in the distance.

The breeze caught a tendril of Vera's red hair, floating it across her face. The strand skimmed her soft, pink lips. Normally, her cheeks were the same pink shade, but her skin had a white pallor today. The purple circles beneath her eyes meant we'd probably gotten the same amount of sleep last night.

ter of She was dressed in a pair of black leggings that hugged her toned legs. Her Eden Coffee sweatshirt was one she'd likely borrowed from Lyla's closet and hung on her slender frame. She looked ... small. Too small. Like a part of me that had faded away.

My arms lifted slightly, the movement unconscious, like my limbs knew she needed a hug before it had even registered in my brain. But I dropped them to my sides, my muscles locking.

She wouldn't want me touching her, not after last night. Her eyes flicked to mine for a second before darting away, falling to the dirt. "Can we not do this today?"

Her voice. It was as cold and lifeless as her eyes. "You're not broken." That wasn't the right place to start. An apology, anything else would be better. "Everything you said last night was right except that. It's the one thing you got wrong."

Vera wrapped her arms around her waist, her shoulders curling forward. "You're the most courageous person I've ever met, Vera. You're not broken. When I think about your strength ... if Allie gets just a fraction of that when she's grown, I'll be grateful."

She squeezed her eyes shut as her chin quivered. "Please, Mateo." Normally, I liked how she said my name. But that empty voice. I'd kept on about anything to make it stop.

I opened my mouth to apologize but nothing came out. If I said *I'm sorry*, it would just sound like a rejection. I wasn't rejecting Vera.

I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew what I wasn't. She stood, eyes closed, as the wind played with that tendril of hair. The morning light brought out the sprinkling of freckles across her nose.

She was beautiful. Vera had a beauty not a soul would miss. "Will you give Allie a birthday kiss for me?" she asked. Sad. Tired. Embarrassed. But she'd still remembered Allie's birthday because Vera loved my daughter. My daughter loved Vera. That meant something. That meant everything.

I'm done waiting for you to see me. Something shifted beneath my feet like moving sand. Things in my mind around my brain, rearranged. It was like a deck of cards being shuffled the same way there was before. This was after.

There was before. This was after.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

VERA

My stomach pitched as I marched up the stairs to the loft. *Don't puke. Don't puke.* Hot, humiliating tears streamed down my face and no amount of blinking would make them stop. At least I hadn't cried in front of Mateo. Some miracle, I'd managed to hold myself together until I'd slipped into the barn.

The box. The lock was undone. The lid was opening.

The numbness from my sleepless night had worn off. Too many emotions were surging free. They tore up my throat, threatening to choke me to death. *Breathe.*

I gulped the air as a sob hurdled from my throat. Oh, God. I was going to puke.

With my hands wrapped around my stomach, I jogged faster, bursting through the loft's door and running straight to the toilet. There was nothing my stomach could do to retch, but the tears felt infinite.

Why was I so pathetic? How could I have been so stupid last night?

My head pounded and my muscles ached. Was this a hangover?

Never again. I was never drinking again.

I crawled from the toilet to the tub, twisting the knob until the water was on the hottest setting. Then I stripped out of the clothes I'd borrowed from Mateo.

The spray was still cold when I clambered to my feet and stepped into the shower. I gritted my teeth through the sting. It wasn't the first time I'd washed in ice-cold water. This was just another frigid stream.

I missed my dad. I could really use a hug today.

He'd give me one even though he'd be *pissed* I'd gotten drunk. I grabbed the shampoo and squirted it into my hair, scrubbing too hard and too fast. What the fuck had I been thinking last night?

I didn't drink. I didn't want to drink. I didn't want to turn into *her*.

The memory of her slurring voice, of her swayed movements and gr colorless face made my stomach lurch. The urge to vomit on my bare f was so overpowering I had to clamp my mouth and eyes shut, breathin through the nausea until the water was so hot it nearly burned.

Never again. I was never drinking again.

I rinsed the shampoo away, my hair sluicing down my spine. Over tl year, I'd let it grow nearly to my waist. Maybe I should cut it all off. G short.

Mateo's blond from last night had long hair. Did he prefer long hair' was I even curious?

't puke.

It was over. I'd made a fool of myself last night with my drunken rambling. Then I'd kissed him.

ount of

"Ugh." My groan echoed off the cream stone walls.

eo. By

Oh, God, that kiss. I'd lost my goddamn mind.

side the

I buried my face in my hands, wishing I could hide from the world, included, from now until the end of time. I needed to apologize. I shou apologized already. I needed to figure out a way to make this not awkv because facing him this morning had been excruciating.

otions
death.

How was I ever going to survive a family dinner again? I couldn't e make eye contact with Vance this morning.

ng to

He'd found me after I'd raced out of the bar. He'd caught me runnin down Main and ordered me to get in the car. But other than that, he ha said much else. Granted, I'd been too busy crying in the passenger seat chat about my fixation on his brother-in-law.

ig
hing in

Vance hadn't spoken a word to me this morning. He didn't seem ma least not at me. When I'd asked for a ride to the ranch, Lyla had volunt The ride had been quiet. Uncomfortable. Mostly, I think she wasn't su to say. How to fix this.

ran on

But the only person who could fix it was me. And right now, that fel impossible.

1 Lyla.
to the

One drunken night, and I'd ruined everything.

Maybe I was like her, after all.

Where was Dad? I needed him today. I needed to look at him and remember that I was *his* daughter. That I had *his* hair. *His* face. *His* eye

ibbed
ast.

Not hers.

I needed Dad.

The pace of my shower changed from misery to mechanics. I quickly scrubbed the scent of Willie's from my body, then wrapped a towel around my waist and went to the closet. Dressed in my warmest base layer, fleeced lined pants and a thick sweater, I combed out my wet hair and twisted it into a knot at my nape. Then I donned a wool hat and headed out of the bathroom.

My keys were beside my textbooks and laptop on the kitchen counter. I had planned to study for an upcoming test in my Personality Theory and Research class today. But I picked up my keys instead and swiped my coat from the hook. With my gloves in a pocket, my pack strapped to my shoulders, I stepped into my boots and jogged down the stairs.

The Honda's windshield had a thin sheen of ice, so I started the engine and scraped it enough to drive before sliding inside.

I gripped the wheel tight and refused to look at Anne and Harrison's truck—as I drove down the lane.

The highway was deserted, too early for traffic on a Sunday. I wound along three county roads to a parking area a few miles outside of Quinn. As soon as my car was parked, I walked away without a backward glance, disappearing into the trees.

There was no trail off that parking area, but I followed a familiar path through the woods.

This was the path I'd taken on my once-a-month supply run to Quinn. Dad would wait for me at our meeting spot, hidden about half a mile off the road. Ready to run if we had to make a break for it. His pack had always been loaded with everything essential, including our dwindling stack of cash.

The money he'd taken from the ATM when we'd left Idaho hadn't lasted long enough. When we'd run out, he'd robbed a country gas station in Oregon.

I suppose that made me his accessory, didn't it? I was a criminal by association.

We'd been camping out in the Cascades at the time, and one day, he told me he was going hunting. Alone. Up until that point, we'd always gone together.

Dad was smart about nutrition. He always made sure we had enough protein in our diet. Part of the reason I'd wanted to take a nutrition class last year was to compare notes with what he'd taught me.

But as hard as he tried to provide, it wasn't always easy. Having a can of beans came in handy when game was scarce and tummies were growling.

he'd give me a short list of necessities to snag whenever I snuck into a
The money from that night had dwindled too fast.

The day Dad had gone hunting in Oregon, he'd returned with pocket
cash. When I'd asked him how he got it, he'd confessed to robbing the
station.

My father was a good man. I loved my dad. But he wasn't perfect. A
crimes, most of them, had kept me alive.

Was he out of supplies? Had he robbed another gas station, this time
food instead of money? If I could just find him, I could bring him anything
needed. It would actually be easier now than ever before. He wouldn't
to hunt or forage.

If I could just find him. He'd be okay if I could find him.

I trudged my way past tree trunks and through the underbrush toward
old rendezvous point. The snow hadn't melted here yet and a trail of
footprints followed me as I hiked.

I breathed in the air, letting it chase away the hangover. When I reached
our meeting spot, I pulled off my gloves and cupped my hands over my
mouth. The piercing whistle that came from my lips ricocheted in every
direction off evergreens and rocks.

Then the forest stole it, leaving nothing but silence. Not a sound came
reply.

I whistled again. And again. And again.

Each time, I waited to hear a reply.

Was he out here somewhere? Was he watching me to make sure it was
safe?

"Dad," I called, my voice hoarse. So I cleared my throat and shouted
"Dad!"

The breeze rustled the branches above my head. Otherwise, nothing.

Of course there was nothing. How would he have known to be here?
I'd told stupid to think I'd come out here and he'd just be waiting. It was dumb to
think I'd find him today when I'd spent months searching without luck.

The shelter we'd built as our home was gone. He'd dismantled it
completely, from the walls to the ceiling to our beds and the table he'd
as a nightstand.

There wasn't a trace of where we'd lived.

It was just ... gone.

He was gone.

town. I needed him today. And he was gone.
Because I'd left him alone.

ts of "Dad!" I poured everything I had into my shout. I closed my eyes and
gas balled my fists. And screamed. "*Dad!*"

Nothing.

And his "You said we'd see each other again."

Silence.

e for He was out there. He had to be out there. He'd promised we'd see each
hing he other again, and my dad kept his promises. Always.

have He was alive. *He's alive.*

"Da-ad!" My voice broke as I yelled one last time, but there was no
hear it crack.

d our There was no one to watch as I dropped to my knees and broke.

By the time I made it back to my car, most of the day had passed. But
deep exhaustion had stolen whatever sadness lingered in my heart. After
le it to hours of hiking and crying, the tears had run dry. A familiar numbness
y beneath my skin as I drove home.

y My heart didn't give its normal trill when I spotted Mateo's truck still
parked outside Anne and Harrison's house. They must still be celebrating
ne in Allie.

Would I be invited to the party for her third birthday? Or was everything
so messed up now that they'd cut me out of their life?

as Should I find a new place to live? The idea of moving out of the loft
my insides twist.

It was never meant to be permanent. I'd always known that eventually
I'd have to leave. But I wasn't ready, not yet. That loft was the first place
like home, a real home, since *before*.

I had to fix this.

? It was Tomorrow, I'd face Anne and Harrison. I'd suffer the consequences
to loud, drunken mouth. I'd call Uncle Vance. I'd go to work at Eden Co:
c.

Tomorrow.

Tonight, I just wanted to be alone. I wanted to eat a peanut butter and
made sandwich, then curl up in a ball on the couch and watch TV.

Except the moment I parked and opened my car's door, a rugged man's
voice thwarted my plans.

"Vera." Mateo strode from the house, his hands in his coat pockets.
He looked gorgeous in the faded light. He hadn't shaved today. Mateo wit

of dark stubble was a favorite.

My heart trilled. *Damn it.*

id Why did I have to love him? Why couldn't I want anyone other than Mateo Eden? It would be so much easier that way.

I sighed as he stopped in front of me. "Please, Mateo. I don't have it to—"

ach "You left. I don't want you to leave your home because of what happened. No matter what, this is your place, Vera. You don't have to leave."

He was so good at saying the right thing. Even when he couldn't have known I'd needed to hear it.

one to "Where did you go?" he asked.

"On a hike."

one- A muscle feathered in his jaw as he frowned, the same frown Uncle er gave me after my hikes. Except Mateo didn't know why I was going on there.

settled He believed Dad was a murderer who'd kept me captive for years. I escaped my father's clutches. From his perspective, why would I ever ill for my father?

ing "You okay?" Mateo's forehead furrowed as he studied my face.

I shrugged and met his gaze.

hing He had the most amazing blue eyes. I was glad that Alaina had them.

made "Does Allie like her dragon?" For her birthday, I'd bought Allie a great plush rocking dragon. A musical tune played when you squeezed one of the ears.

ly, I'd He nodded. "She loves it. Been climbing on and off of it all day."

to feel "Good." I'd brought it over after the party last night, but we'd been in a rush to head to Willie's so I hadn't seen her try it. If I asked, he'd probably let me see her tonight, but I didn't have it in me to face his parents.

of my Tomorrow. Once this embarrassment had faded a bit.

ffee. I took a step backward, ready to retreat to the loft, but he stopped me with a question.

d jelly "Why'd you pick a dragon instead of a horse?"

ile "She'll have real horses to ride her entire life. I wanted her to have something magical instead." The magic of childhood faded too soon.

He Mateo rubbed a hand over his jaw. When it fell from his face, his shadow dropped too. "At the bar—"

h a day "Can we not talk about it? Please?"

“You said I was a pilot. That I don’t fly anymore and you didn’t know why.”

I pulled my lower lip between my teeth, wishing there was a hole somewhere in the driveway I could crawl into and hide. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t.” He held up a hand. “Don’t apologize.”

“For embarrassing you?”

“I’m not embarrassed, Vera.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” I muttered.

He blew out a long breath and took a step closer. Almost too close. I stood there and stared down at me with a look on his face I couldn’t quite discern. He didn’t look angry or upset. He just looked ... serious.

“What?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer. He just kept staring.

“I’m going to bed.” I took a step away, scurrying to safety.

“Vera,” he called.

Damn it. My frame sagged. My feet stopped. I’d waited a long time for Mateo to call to me. After months and months of pent-up desperation, powerless to resist.

“Yeah?”

“I love flying. I got my license while I was in college. Flew nearly the whole time I was there. I kept earning certificates until I became an instructor. I loved it so much that I almost dropped out of school just to be a pilot. But by that point, I’d spent a lot of Mom and Dad’s money on my education. Everyone else had their degrees. So I stuck with school, graduated, and came home. Didn’t really have a passion for anything specific, so I worked on the ranch and at the hotel to keep busy and make money. Figured I’d kill some time before I decided on my own career path.”

Why did it feel like no one knew this? Why was he telling *me*?

“I realized after a while that I needed to forge my own path,” he said. “Flying was the first thing that came to mind, so I started looking for jobs in Alaska. Got hired as a pilot to deliver supplies to remote areas of the state.”

“Did you like it?”

“Loved it. Enjoyed living in Alaska too.”

“Then why’d you leave?”

“I missed home.”

It sounded true. But only partially true. There was more to it, wasn’t it? Missing home, missing his family, wasn’t the whole reason he’d left a

ow he'd loved.

Was it Allie's mother? Was she the reason he'd returned to Montana?

"I went up there looking for something and came home when I realized I hadn't found it," he said.

"What were you looking for?"

He "I don't know." He shook his head. "That's the hell of it. I don't even know what I was looking for. Everyone here has their passion. For Gri it's the ranch. Knox has Knuckles. Talia has only ever wanted to be a c and Lyla has Eden Coffee. Eloise pours her heart and soul into the hotel. I guess I was just waiting for something to spark. For a time, flying was a spark. But it's different here. I don't have a reason to fly. And after I came back, I sort of fell into my old life."

A life where he supported everyone else in their dreams while forsaking his own.

"You don't have to be in Alaska to fly," I said. "Why did you stop?"

for "I don't want to work for a commercial airline. Always traveling. Sleeping in hotels instead of my own bed. Living in a city because it's a hub. That's not the lifestyle for me. But there's not much demand for pilots in Queen Creek. Crop-dusting. Working for the forest service during fire season. It's not impossible but ... flying is a hobby. It's easier that way."

he Because of Allie. Because if he worked on the ranch and at the hotel, he could be with his daughter every day. She could live surrounded by his grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

to be a He'd been considering moving back to Alaska a couple of years ago, but then Allie had been born. Mateo was a pilot. But first and foremost, he was a father.

"You should go fly," I said. "Even if it's just a hobby."

"Would you go with me?"

l. My jaw dropped. "W-what?"

jobs in "Go with me. Have you ever been in a small plane?"

late." "Um, no."

"Then we'll go tomorrow." He turned and walked away. Just declared he was going to fly, then walked away.

"Wait. I have to work tomorrow."

"Then Tuesday," he called over his shoulder, still walking.

: there? No. Definitely not Tuesday. Why was he asking? Was this a pity job way to make amends? For us to get past this, I needed some distance from

Mateo, not to be trapped beside him in an airplane.

“I don’t like flying.” Maybe I liked flying. I’d never flown before.

He spun in a slow circle. Still walking. “You’ll like this.”

“Mateo—”

“Tuesday. I’ll pick you up at eleven.”

“Mateo,” I called.

“Night, Vera.”

Seriously? I wanted to puke again.

Instead, I stood, watching as he disappeared inside Anne and Harris

house. Then I tilted my head to the stars. “Shit.”

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“Night, Vera.”

Seriously? I wanted to puke again.

Instead, I stood, watching as he disappeared inside Anne and Harrison’s house. Then I tilted my head to the stars. “Shit.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MATEO

The alarm chimed on my phone. Ten thirty. Time to go. I had just enough time to put my tools away and drive from the hotel to the ranch.

“Mateo?” Eloise called.

“In here,” I hollered back from room 309.

She found me in the bathroom, wiping down the mirror I’d just installed.

Over the past three months, I’d been replacing the bathroom mirrors in the guest rooms with larger, LED-lit pieces. We timed these updates during the slow winter months, when the hotel wasn’t packed. There were four rooms to go and then it was done.

“That looks so great.” Eloise smiled as I closed my toolbox. “I love mirrors.”

“They’re nice. It was a good call to swap them out. Give me until Friday then I should have the rest finished.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” I lifted my tools and followed her out to the elevators.

“I have this for you,” she said, holding up a piece of paper.

“What is it?”

“The direct deposit form. I know I’ve always just written you a check on your time, but since you’re the official maintenance man, I was thinking it would be easier.”

Wait. The *official* maintenance man? When had I become official?

Yeah, I did a lot of maintenance at the hotel. Before Allie was born, I used to cover the front desk whenever Eloise was short-staffed, but she’d hired good clerks in the past couple of years and hadn’t needed much help. 7 days a week, I mostly worked on building projects, like upgrading those mirrors.

was handy and didn't mind fixing the occasional broken dresser drawer or changing a florescent ballast bulb.

Dad helped too. Was he getting a direct deposit form and an *official* title?

"Just fill that out whenever you can," she said.

I nodded. "You got it."

Official maintenance man. I grimaced as the elevator doors slid open. Eloise left for the desk, and I went to put my tools in the utility room.

What was I doing?

I was twenty-eight-years old working a job that was only supposed to be temporary. It had started as a way to pitch in, reduce my sister's stress and make a few bucks along the way.

Allie and I didn't need much to live on, so between the money I earned from the Eloise and what Griffin paid me for work on the ranch, I had plenty of money to pay for groceries, gas and whatever expenses came up. I'd even started a college savings account.

The hired-hand gig was supposed to be temporary too, except I'd be doing it for years. How long was I going to be Eloise's maintenance man? How long was I going to be Griffin's hired hand?

Was this really my future? Was I really wasting my college degree and the hours upon hours I'd spent flying?

Both jobs gave me a lot of flexibility to be with Allie. I liked being close to her with her more often than not. The most important official title I had was father. And I wasn't just her dad. I was her mother too. I was filling both roles for that, I couldn't be strapped to a demanding career.

But what happened when she went to kindergarten? What happened when she moved and went to college? Would I still be doing maintenance at the hotel? Or fixing fence on the ranch?

"What am I doing?" I asked myself that question more often these days. Sure would be nice if I had an answer.

Griffin needed my help. Eloise did too. It seemed ridiculous to make me hire employees for jobs I had the skill set and time to do. Besides, it wasn't like I had anything else going on. I didn't want an eight-to-five job and a schedule that would take me away from Allie. I had no desire to work as a bank teller or become a realtor or manage the hardware store.

Official maintenance man.

r or I wanted to crumple the direct deposit form and toss it in the trash. I
I folded it in thirds, tucked it in my pocket and walked out of the eleva
job A lot of people didn't love their jobs. Not my siblings, but a lot of o
people in this world didn't love their jobs.
For now, until I figured out what I wanted to do, I'd be the official
maintenance man.

n. And if I never figured out what I wanted to do, well ...
The most important job I had was as Allie's father. That would be en
It would have to be enough.

o be Eloise was on the phone when I passed the reception desk. Jasper, s
and her side, lifted a hand as I strode through the lobby.
I jerked up my chin, about to leave, when the door opened.

ned at Vance strode inside, dressed for work with his badge and holstered
y to his belt.

l a *Hell*. Given the look on his face, I was going to be late picking up V
"Hey," I said.

en "Got a minute?"

an? "Just the one. I've got to get out to the ranch." As far as I was conce
he could assume I was picking up Allie.

und the I wasn't sure what was happening with Vera, not yet. And I didn't n
Vance in the middle.

ome "Then I'll be quick." He rubbed a hand over his beard. "I wanted to
as *Dad*. about what happened at Willie's."

s, and "Did you know she had feelings for me?"
"No, I would have said something."

when "What would you have said?"

the He sighed. "Probably to stay away."
That was why he'd interrupted our dance at his wedding, wasn't it?
ays. why he'd always made sure Vera was on his side of the table at family
dinners.

e them "It's not about you," he said. "It's her. I wouldn't want her with any
asn't right now. She's ... different. She's not who she used to be. What happ
l a set changed her. She's fragile."

as a Nothing about Vera was fragile. Surviving the horrors inflicted by h
father might have changed her. But she wasn't fragile. She wasn't brok
"She's not, Vance. She's not fragile. And maybe she'd believe that l
if you stopped treating her like she's made of glass."

nstead, His jaw clenched. “You don’t know everything she’s been through.”
tor. “No, I guess I don’t.” When it came to Vera, there was a lot I’d miss
ther It was time to catch up.

THE QUINCY AIRFIELD was fifteen miles from the ranch. For the p
nine of those fifteen, Vera had been huddled so close to the passenger
nough. that she looked like she was contemplating an emergency exit. Any mi
now, she’d pull the handle, tuck and roll.

eated at “How’s school?” It was my fifth attempt to drum up conversation.
“Good.”

gun on *Good.* The same answer she’d given when I’d asked her how work v
going and how she liked living in the loft. When I’d told her that Allie
loved the rocking dragon, she’d said, “Good.” And when I’d promised
era. enjoy flying today, another “Good.”

I was never saying *good* again.

“You’re taking three classes, right?”

rned, Vera nodded and shifted even closer to that door.

eed For fuck’s sake. Was she scared of me now? Maybe this was a bad i

talk But I just ... needed to spend time with her. Alone. Because Vera ha
kissed me, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I couldn’t stop thinkin
about her. It felt like someone had slipped glasses on my face. And tha
someone had given me permission to *see*.

Now I wanted to learn everything there was to learn about Vera. I w
to see it all.

“Clear and a million.”

Vera glanced over. “What?”

And I pointed to the sky. “You have to know a lot about weather to be a j
There are different classifications of clouds, like overcast or broken or
scattered. Then there’s days like this. Not a cloud in sight. Unlimited
visibility. Nothing but brilliant blue. Clear and a million. It’s the best t
one, fly.”

ened “Oh.”

er Even huddled against the door, she looked beautiful. Her hair fell in
cen. strands around her shoulders, cascading to her waist. With the sunlight
herself coming through the windshield, the freckles on her nose popped. I’d al
liked freckles.

Vera's face wasn't covered in them like some redheads. There was just a scattering across her nose, like they'd been drawn by an artist, dotted with precision.

"Here." I took an extra pair of sunglasses from the console compartment and handed them over. "You'll want these today."

She eyed the aviators.

Was she going to make everything hard today? "They're just sunglasses, Vera. They won't bite."

She was careful not to let our fingers brush as she took them from my hand. Then she unfolded the temples, slid them onto her face and hid them behind her pretty brown eyes.

A strange feeling stirred in my chest. What was it? Pride? Possession? Whatever it was, I liked seeing her wear my glasses.

This was about to get complicated, wasn't it?

Beyond my talk with Mom on Sunday morning, I hadn't spoken to my parents about Vera. My siblings hadn't asked about us either, not even when I'd gone to the hotel. Even Vance was giving me time to sort it out, but I was on the clock. This reprieve wouldn't last. They'd want to know

I was going to handle this.

Fly. Today, I was going to take Vera flying.

My parents, brothers and sisters had all noticed when my flying days dwindled. I came to the airfield less and less often. They'd noticed, but hadn't bothered them that I'd stopped. Maybe because I hadn't let on that it bothered me.

Not Vera. It upset her that I wasn't flying.

Today was a good excuse to get up in the air. And spend time with Vera.

Either she and I would find our way past this awkward bump, navigating our way to a friendship again. Or everything would change.

Maybe I already knew the answer. Maybe I suspected I knew exactly where this was going. But I wasn't ready to admit it yet, not even to myself.

There'd be time to evaluate. After this flight.

Vera's shoulders crept closer and closer to her ears as we passed the airport.

"Nervous?"

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth and gave me a slight nod.

"I came out yesterday to do a few takeoffs and landings. Knock them off. I promise we won't crash."

ust a “That’s not ...” Vera sighed. “Why am I here, Mateo? You don’t ne
vith pander to me. We can just forget about Willie’s, okay?”

 “What if I don’t want to forget about it?”

nent Her gaze whipped to mine.

 Finally. I had her attention.

 She sure as fuck held mine.

sses, “Let’s just fly today.” It was too soon to talk about anything else. “T
you can do that?”

iy “Yeah.” She dropped her gaze to her lap. And slightly, just slightly,
hose inched away from the door.

n? I slowed and took the turnout for the airfield. The truck bounced alo
patchy asphalt road. The hangars, with their white tin walls and silver r
roofs, reflected the bright morning sun. Ten buildings lined the runway
was the newest.

ny Mom and Dad had already given us kids a portion of our inheritance
Eloise always said it was stupid to wait until they were dead to share. They w
hrough, to be around to witness us use that money and chase our dreams.

ow how Everyone else had turned that money into a business or advanced
education. After I’d graduated college, I’d taken my money and bough
airplane and built a hangar.

s had Guilt and that hangar, my plane, went hand in hand these days. Had
t it pissed away my parents’ money? Should I have invested it in somethir

hat it Flying was an expensive hobby, especially when the plane’s wheels
leave the ground.

 At least it had appreciated in value.

vera. I parked outside the hangar and climbed out of the truck, waiting for
ate our to join me. Then I led her to the door, keyed in the lock’s combination
touchpad and stepped inside. The motion lights flickered on, glinting o
y royal blue and silver Cirrus SR22 turbo.

yself. “Vera, meet Four Zero Six Delta Whiskey.”

 “Wow,” she whispered.

sign It wasn’t a big plane. Depending on weight limits, I could fit four
passengers, and the inside wasn’t much bigger than that of a compact c
this plane had taken me across thousands and thousands of miles.

od. It was the plane I’d flown that night I’d received the call about Alain
rust About Madison. And when I’d taken my daughter from that hospital in
Alaska, this was the plane that had brought us home.

ed to Buckled in her car seat and strapped in the seat beside mine, Allie h through each leg of that trip. She'd only woken up when I'd stopped to refuel, feed her a bottle and change her diaper.

Only once had her ears bothered her enough to make a fuss, but I'd l low an altitude as possible to save her any pain. In hindsight, she'd be excellent traveler. Better than most adults.

hink But that flight had been the most harrowing, exhausting flight of my had taken me months to venture out to the airfield after that trip. And r she once had I wanted to take Allie flying again. I hadn't even brought her hangar.

ng the "This is nice," Vera said.

metal "Feel free to grab a water from the fridge." I pointed to the small 7. Mine kitchenette.

Beside it was a lounge area with two leather couches and a coffee ta e. They My office sat in the far corner. Beside it, a bathroom. Along with shelv anted storage, there was a utility room and a cleaning supply closet.

It was the nicest hangar around, and for the past two years, it had m been neglected. When I'd come yesterday to fly, I'd spent three hours t an cleaning the months of accumulated dust. Guilt had kept me company whole damn time.

I "I'm going to do a quick preflight inspection," I told Vera, nodding ig else? couches. "Give me fifteen, and we'll get ready to go."

didn't "Okay." She pushed those sunglasses into her hair and tore her gaze the plane to meet mine. Pink infused her cheeks, the same rosy shade a mouth.

Vera Vera always had pink cheeks. I'd assumed it was just a natural blush to the maybe, all this time, it had been for me.

ff the *Damn.*

It was gorgeous. *She* was gorgeous.

My blood stirred and rushed straight to my groin. Huh. That was ne not entirely unwelcome.

I was in trouble, wasn't I? A fucking heap.

ar. But *Focus, Mateo.* We were flying today. There was no time to think ab Vera's pink lips or cheeks or the way her jeans molded to her toned leg

na. She walked to a couch, taking a seat on the plush leather. And I turn my plane, waiting until I was on the opposite side before adjusting my

ad slept I stepped up onto the wing and popped the door open. From my seat
turned on the batteries, letting the screens power up, then went through
initial preflight checklist, inspecting everything from the wings to the
elevator to the fuel and oil to the propeller. When I deemed everything
to go, I walked to the button for the folding overhead door, letting it open
the air and sunshine could flood inside.

life. It Vera stood from the couch, tucking and untucking a lock of hair behind
ear, as I used the tug to roll the plane onto the taxiway outside. With it
to the position, I waved her over.

“Ready?”

She nodded, joining me on her side of the plane.

“Climb up.” I pointed to the footstep, then patted the wing, reaching
her to pull the door’s handle.

ble. “Okay.” Her voice was shaking as she moved past me.

res for The smell of her hair wafted to my nose. It was sweet but subtle, like
flowers and crisp apples. I leaned in closer, drawing it in.

ostly I’d forgotten just how much I liked her perfume. While we’d danced
Vance and Lyla’s wedding, I’d taken these deep inhales of that scent,
the wondering how I’d spent so much time with Vera but hadn’t noticed just
good she smelled.

to the What if Vance hadn’t cut in that night? What if I had had more time
lost in the flecks of gold and cinnamon in her chocolate eyes?

from What if I had snuck her away for a kiss?

is her Vance would have kicked my ass. Lyla would have probably been in
line.

1. But Mom might have been understanding this weekend, but back then, she
would have given me the tongue lashing of the decade.

w. And still been finding her footing.
Back then, Vera hadn’t lived in the loft for long. She’d only spent months
on the ranch and less than a year in Quincy. She’d been quieter then. She

out If I had kissed Vera, chances were, my family would have gone nuclear.
Maybe the reason I hadn’t noticed Vera’s crush was because I *could*
have noticed Vera’s crush. Not back then.

gs. “What?” she asked, that blush deepening.

ed for “Nothing. Whenever you’re ready.”

dick. She hoisted herself up on the wing, carefully stepping into the plane
she was in her seat, pulling on the harness, I rounded the tail and got in

own side to buckle up.
Vera's knuckles were nearly white as she clutched her hands in her
"Don't be nervous."
"Says the pilot," she muttered. "Were you nervous on your first flight?"
"Yes."
She slid the sunglasses onto her face. "Then I get to be nervous too."
"Fair point." I chuckled, then reached for her door to confirm the latch was
down tight. My arm brushed against hers and tingles spread like dancing
flames across my skin.
Her breath hitched.
"Just checking," I murmured, my gaze dropping to her mouth.
"Oh," she breathed, her lips a perfect O.
I'd never kissed anyone in this plane. Not even Madison.
Yeah, I was in trouble. So much trouble.
I tore my gaze away and plugged in Vera's headset, handing it to her so she
could situate it over her ears and adjust the mic to her mouth. I did the
same with my own headset, then I gave her a quick nod.
When she nodded back, I leaned my head outside, shouting, "Clear!"
I latched my door shut. Holding the key in the ignition, I started the engine.
Hum and vibration filled the cabin as the propeller kicked up speed.
Using the brakes to steer, I taxied to the runway, doing a quick runup
the engine as I monitored the gauges, stealing glances at Vera as I punched
buttons and turned knobs.
Her eyes were squeezed shut behind her sunglasses.
"We don't have to do this."
This was the most I'd looked forward to a flight in well ... years. I had
never been this excited to fly since before my trip home from Alaska with Al.
My heart was set on doing this today, but if Vera wanted to turn back, I
he'd abort this right now.
She'd love it. If I could just get us off the ground, she'd love it. I'd give
every penny to my name that she'd love to fly.
"I want to go," she said. "I'm just ... my stomach is in a knot. And I
don't want to puke in your plane."
I grinned. "I'd rather you not puke either. But if you get sick, there's
a bucket in the back."
"Okay."
Once
I on my

lap. “This plane has a parachute.” I pointed to the red handle above our lap. “See that?”

Vera cracked her eyes and glanced up. “Yeah.”

ht?” “If something happens to me, use both hands and pull that knob. It v
” shoot a rocket from a compartment in the back and deploy an airframe
parachute. Float us right back to the ground.”

ch was “Are you making that up?”

ng “Nope. In college, when I told Mom I wanted to become a pilot, she
into Google mode. Told me to do her a favor and fly in a Cirrus so she
sleep at night.”

Vera’s frame relaxed. “I’m still nervous.”

“Be nervous. Close your eyes. I’ll tell you when to open them.”

“Thanks,” she whispered.

r so I ran through the rest of the briefing, Vera nodding along as I detaile
the takeoff plan. And when we were ready, I rolled us to the runway and n
the initial radio call.

” then “Here we go.” I pushed the throttle to full power. *One. Two. Three.*
ine. Its sped down the runway, and once we were fast enough to rotate, I lifted
with a tilt of the yoke.

p of We soared, rising higher and higher. A grin stretched across my moi
ched never got old. That first lift, when the plane just ... flew. When it did v
was meant to do.

What I was meant to do.

After calling our departure, I climbed to a cruise altitude and leveled
When the mountains and meadows sprawled beneath us, I let the autop
radn’t us on a straight course so I could focus on Vera.

laina. Her eyes were finally open, her mouth agape in wonder.

I’d “Well?” I asked.

“Worth it.”

amble *Thank fuck.* “Where should we go? Pick a spot.”

Vera glanced around, peering out her window, then pointed to a sno
really capped peak in the distance.

“Sable Peak?” I asked.

s a bag “That’s your favorite, right?”

“It is.” I turned to the new heading, aiming us toward the peak.

“Why is it your favorite?”

reads. “The view. It’s not easy to hike up there, as you know. But you can’t see that view from the top.” I loved to be in the air, but that view was arguably better than even this.

will “There’s a lake tucked away about half a mile past the actual trail,” I continued. “Discovered it in college. I came home one weekend, went buzzing around and spotted it. The next day, I went hiking to find it. It’s my favorite spot ever since. It’s remote. I like to think I’m the only person in the world who’s ever touched its water.”

went could Vera hummed, her eyes focused outside.

I flew us around the peak a couple times, giving us enough distance that we didn’t need to climb higher. After a few circles, I followed the curve of the mountain ridgeline.

“Want to try?” I asked, disconnecting the autopilot.

ed the “Try what?”

made “Flying.”

“Um ... yes?”

We “Atta girl.” I’d put Vera in the left seat today. As an instructor, I could get us off from either seat, but the left side was where students started.

Vera gulped and gripped the yoke. “Now what?”

uth. It I held up both hands. “You’ve got the flight controls. Don’t crash us into what it the mountains.”

“That’s not funny, Mateo.” Her lips flattened into a thin line.

“Sort of funny.” I grinned. “I’ll back you up. Just go for it.”

l off. “Do I just ...” She tipped the yoke, the wing on her side lifting as my pilot fly dipped. And a startled, happy laugh escaped her pretty mouth. “Oh my God, I’m flying an airplane.”

“You’re flying an airplane, Peach.”

w- Peach? Where the hell had that come from? It had just ... slipped out of my mouth. I should have been calling her Peach for years. Like the way I’d started calling Alaina Sprout. One day she didn’t have a nickname. The next day she did. And Peach was Vera’s.

She was too caught up in the flying to notice. Her forehead was furrowed in concentration. Her gaze was locked ahead.

The light that streamed through the windows loved her face. It caressed her cheeks and kissed her lips. It teased the strands of pure gold in that copper hair.

Clear and a million.

t beat
ably

Today, I was seeing clear and a million.

“Will you teach me to fly?” she asked.

Spend hours and hours with her, alone and above the world? “Absol

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Today, I was seeing clear and a million.

“Will you teach me to fly?” she asked.

Spend hours and hours with her, alone and above the world? “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MATEO

“**N**a-na. Pa-pa.” Alaina pointed a finger over my shoulder to and Dad’s house.
“We’ll go visit Nana and Papa in a minute, Sprout. We to go see Vera first.”

“Oh.” Her favorite new word. “Ve-wa.”

Allie’s syllables were all divided with a slight pause. She was learning words and using new sounds each day. But her favorite names she’d say for months.

Daddy. Nana. Papa. And Vera.

Her legs kicked as we walked through the barn’s small door.

My heart beat a little faster as I climbed the stairs to the loft, the anticipation of seeing Vera doubling with every step.

It had been a week since I’d taken Vera on that flight. A week of self-mandated distance. These past seven days had been a test. I’d wanted to know how often she crossed my mind—so often that I’d stopped counting.

This morning, Allie and I had driven into town to get a package from the post office, and Vera’s private pilot materials had been waiting. I’d decided then and there that we’d had enough distance.

My stomach knotted as I knocked. The last time I’d been this nervous to see a woman had been in, well ... it had been a long time ago.

Footsteps sounded and then the door swung open. Vera’s eyes widened, her hands instantly tucking locks of damp hair behind her ears only to do so just as quickly. “Um, hi.”

“Hi.” *Damn.* I’d missed that pretty face. Her skin was fresh and clean, cheeks flushed and those freckles on full display.

“Ve-wa.” Allie careened forward, arms wide for Vera to catch her.

“Hey, Jellybean.” Vera beamed at my daughter, her eyes sparkling as she lifted Allie from my arms to kiss her cheek. “What are you doing today?”

“We just came from town. Hit the post office. Stopped by the coffee shop for some breakfast.”

“Muff-in,” Allie told her.

“Yummy.” Vera tickled her belly and shifted sideways. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.” I pulled the backpack off my shoulder and set it on the kitchen counter beside a pile of textbooks, Vera’s laptop and a collection of maps.

Sable Peak was circled in a yellow highlighter with a larger perimeter drawn around the area. “What’s this?”

Mom “Oh, nothing.” Vera folded the paper in half, pushing it aside. “Just making note of hiking trails. Since we flew that way, I thought it would be fun to hike that area more this summer.”

have “Ah. Well, if you give me a heads-up, I’ll go with you. I know you’ve done it by yourself before, but that area has been known to have bears. The terrain was steep and rough, so it didn’t get a lot of visitors. The cell reception was shit too, and if something happened, I didn’t want her stuck out there alone.”

ng new token Sure, she’d lived for years in the wilderness and had more survival skills than anyone in the greater Quincy area, but that didn’t mean I wanted her alone in the mountains.

f- “Okay.” She nodded, then pointed to the backpack. “What’s all this?” I unzipped the bag and started hauling out books. “Got your stuff in today?”

o see “Oh.”

n the Oh. There was a reason it was Allie’s new word. She’d picked it up Vera.

ided “That’s a lot of books.” Vera gave Allie an exaggerated frown.

is to There were six in total, each one thicker than the last. “There’s a lot. Don’t get overwhelmed. We’ll go through it all step by step.”

ned, “Where do I even start?”

untuck “This one.” I tapped the largest book with a plane on the cover. “It’s a good holistic resource of everything you’ll need to know. The others deal with certain topics. Read the first chapter. Then we’ll review it together.”

n, her She sighed and cast a glance toward the other books on the counter. “Okay.”

is she “There’s no rush. If you can tackle a chapter a week, great. If not, w
y?” stretch it out.”

: shop “All right. When do you want to meet?”

1.” “We’ll plan flying time around your schedule and the weather. But f
tchen ground school material, how about we get together on Friday evenings

aps. It was the one night a week when Lyla was guaranteed to close the c
er shop. My sister would work late, stocking up inventory so she could ta
weekends off and leave the shop to be run by Vera or Crystal, her othe
er barista.

“Fridays work for me.”

d be “Mind if we meet at the cabin? That way Allie will have her stuff ar
less of a distraction.”

ve Vera smiled down at Allie, bending until their foreheads touched. “/
a distraction?”

” Plus Allie giggled, a sound so pure it was a treasure.

ll Vera puffed out her cheeks so Allie could squish them flat.

randed God, they were good together. So good it gave me pause. If I fucked
up, it wouldn’t just be Vera who suffered. Allie would too.

skills Except I couldn’t stay away. I didn’t want to stay away.

ner I walked the length of the loft to the living room windows. Dad had
the horses to the pasture alongside the gravel drive. While the rest of th
?” were grazing, Saturn stood tall and proud in the distance, his sleek, bla
shiny in the morning light.

“Have you ever ridden a horse?” I asked, turning from the glass.

“No.”

from “Want to learn?”

“Someday.” Vera nodded. “Your dad offered to teach me this summ

here. Fuck that. I’d be the one to teach her to ride and to fly. I wanted to t
her anything and everything. I wanted time with Vera. We just needed
time.

Maybe if I’d given her that time a year ago, we’d be in a different pl

; a Well, I’d give it to her now. Starting with Fridays at the cabin.

rill into “Dow.” Allie squirmed, so Vera set her on her feet. My daughter rac
straight for the TV remote on the coffee table.

“Are you supposed to play with remotes?”

Allie ignored me completely.

“Sprout,” I warned.

e'll Vera let out a quiet laugh as she walked to the oversized leather couch curled in a corner. She was in a thick, maroon sweater today. The color of her eyes look like pools of melted chocolate and gold. Her hair was dry for the slowly, lightening into strands of amber silk.

?" Beautiful. So damn beautiful.

offee "Can I see that for a minute, Jellybean?" Vera held out her hand, palm

ke the Allie walked straight over and gave up the remote. "Dizzy."

r "Dizzy?" Vera looked my way.

"Disney." It was always streaming at our house.

id be "Ah." Vera navigated through the TV's menus until she found a show Allie to watch. Then she turned down the volume and took the batteries of the remote before giving it back.

Are you "Huh. Why didn't I ever think to take the batteries out? That's brilliant." Vera's cheeks flushed.

Goddamn, that blush. I'd missed it this week. Like I'd missed the sweet smell that infused the loft.

I this I stared, unabashedly, taking in the delicate details of her face. The adorable chin. The straight line of her nose. She had the prettiest eyelashes.

Vera caught me staring and gave me a sideways glance. "What?"

moved "Nothing." I tore my eyes away, shifting them to Allie, who was sucking into the cartoon. My attention stayed on her for about ten seconds before the clock swung back to Vera.

She was watching Alaina too, smiling as Allie danced to a song, until she caught me staring again. "Mateo." That pink color in her face brightened. "What?"

"Nothing."

er." "Not nothing. You're looking at me like you want to say something.

each I did want to say something. I wanted to tell her that she was beautiful more than that I liked when her face was clean so I could see all of her freckles. I'd always thought blue eyes were my favorite, but that her shade of rich walnut brown had taken the top spot.

lace. But she wasn't ready to hear any of that. And I wasn't ready to tell her. Not until I was sure how to do this. Sure I wouldn't mess it up.

So instead, I just said, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For pushing me to fly." We both knew that the only reason I'd gone because she'd instigated it. "I missed it. More than I realized."

ch and “I had a good time.”
r made “Do you really want to learn to be a pilot? Or are you just trying to c
ying me into flying more often?”
The corners of her mouth turned up. “Both.”
I chuckled. “Sneaky.”
lm up. Vera tucked a lock of damp hair behind her ear, then pulled it free.
“You do that a lot. With your hair. Tuck and untuck. I haven’t figure
what it means yet.” My hunch was shyness. But maybe she was just ne
around me.
w for She averted her gaze, staring at an invisible spot on the floor.
s out “You hate broccoli,” I said. “Whenever Mom makes it for dinner, yo
always dish a few pieces on your plate to be polite, but before each bit
ant.” lip curls or you scrunch up your nose.”
To my knowledge, I was the only one who’d picked up on it too. Mo
veet kept cooking broccoli.
“Your favorite color is green. Dark green. And you’re a fast runner.”
She seemed to prefer hiking for exercise, but I’d watched her go out
shes. run from time to time. Vera had a long, easy stride. She ran with grace
and speed.
oked “Why are you saying all of this, Mateo?” Her voice was barely a wh
re it I might not have let myself cross a line. I might not have noticed her
But that didn’t mean I hadn’t seen her. Learned about her. Paid attentio
il she her.
ed. “Sometimes you’ll laugh so hard you snort,” I said. “Instead of getti
embarrassed, you just laugh harder. And you don’t drink. That night at
Willie’s was the first time I’ve seen you order anything at a bar but Co
.” Vera wrapped her arms around her middle. “We don’t need to talk a
ful. Willie’s. Ever.”
That “We can.”
ch, “I don’t want to.”
“All right.”
ier. She blew out a long breath. “Why are you here, Mateo?”
We both knew it wasn’t just to give her those ground school materia
could have dropped them off already and been halfway home by now.
Before I could answer her question, before I could tell her that I’d ju
e was wanted to see her, a tiny person crashed into my shins.
“Daddy.” Allie raised her arms in the air. “Up.”

So much for the cartoons. I bent and picked her up, setting her on m
so she could look out the windows.

“Ho-sis. Wook it.” She pointed through the glass. “Ho-sis.”

“Those are the horses.”

Vera stood from the couch, smoothing down the front of her sweate
she cleared her throat and walked to the kitchen. “Thanks for bringing
stuff over. I’ll dive in after I finish studying today.”

I wasn’t ready to leave. But she was ready for us to leave.

That shifting, the shuffling, wasn’t just happening to me. It was hap
for Vera too. So I’d give her a chance to find a new balance.

I crossed the loft with Allie perched on my arm, pausing by the doo
give her a wink. “See you Friday.”

She tucked and untucked a lock of hair. “I’ll be there.”

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So much for the cartoons. I bent and picked her up, setting her on my side so she could look out the windows.

“Ho-sis. Wook it.” She pointed through the glass. “Ho-sis.”

“Those are the horses.”

Vera stood from the couch, smoothing down the front of her sweater. Then she cleared her throat and walked to the kitchen. “Thanks for bringing this stuff over. I’ll dive in after I finish studying today.”

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That shifting, the shuffling, wasn’t just happening to me. It was happening for Vera too. So I’d give her a chance to find a new balance.

I crossed the loft with Allie perched on my arm, pausing by the door to give her a wink. “See you Friday.”

She tucked and untucked a lock of hair. “I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

VERA

What was I doing here? I sat frozen behind the Honda's steering wheel, staring at Mateo's cabin.

How many times had I wished to be invited to his house? How many times had I fantasized about quiet nights alone in his home? Now here, and I couldn't bring myself to go inside.

What was happening? Things with Mateo were ... strange. This had to be pity, right? He was going above and beyond to be nice. To be my friend.

Except it didn't feel like friendship. Yes, my favorite color was dark blue, that wasn't a big discovery on Mateo's part. But none of the other Edens noticed my hatred of broccoli. None of the other Edens looked at me the way Mateo had looked at me in the loft on Wednesday.

It was nothing. My imagination was running rampant. Too many years of obsessing over him had led me down this road of delusion.

So what if he'd picked up on the broccoli thing? So what if he'd heard me snort when I laughed too hard?

It didn't mean anything.

It was time for me to move on from this crush.

Granted, that would be tricky now that he was my flight instructor. Seriously, what was I thinking? I was supposed to be avoiding Mateo, not coming to his house every Friday to study aerodynamic principles.

I'd done my assigned reading in preparation for tonight, and I didn't know a damn thing about a single word in any of the books he'd brought to the loft.

This wasn't really about learning to fly airplanes. This was about fixing Dad.

The day Mateo and I had gone flying, I'd spotted a plume of smoke coming from the forest. It had been small and nearly invisible, nothing more than a white mist floating from the trees. But that plume had sparked an idea. A new plan.

I could spend years hiking around the mountains, searching for my father. And I could be looking in all the wrong spots.

There were too many mountains. Too many trees. We could pass each other moving in opposite directions and be off by one hundred yards and not have a clue.

What I needed was a focus area. I needed to narrow down my options to a few places where he might make camp. Where Dad would risk a fire on cool spring mornings.

It was too hard to do that on foot. But by air? Maybe.

So here I was, pretending to be an interested student pilot, just in it for a chance to fly. Mateo would never know that it was a ruse to find Dad.

I'd already started exploring along Sable Peak in the area where I was fairly certain I'd seen that plume of smoke while flying. I hadn't found anything yet, but I was attacking the area in segments, working section by section on the maps I'd been studying.

It was a tactic Uncle Vance had mentioned. While he'd been searching for Dad years ago, he'd taken maps of an area and broken them into pieces. His hikes were systematic and deliberate.

So far, I'd covered three of my own segments. There were ten total segments for Sable Peak. With any luck, Mateo and I could fit in another flight. I'd find another clue the next time we went up in his plane.

But before any of that happened, I needed to get out of this car. Why couldn't I get out of this car?

"Get out of the car." I steeled my spine, grabbed my backpack, which had my riding shotgun, and opened the door.

That first inhale of outside air settled some of my nerves.

Pine and earth and wind.

Home.

There were nights, even in the winter, when I'd sleep with the loft's windows open just to breathe in that mountain scent.

This was the first time I'd been to Mateo's cabin. He'd texted me directions last night, saving me from having to ask Anne or Harrison.

I'd seen his parents since Willie's, and even though I was sure they'd heard about my drunken idiocy, they'd pretended to be none the wiser.

I really loved Anne and Harrison.

Maybe I was being a coward, but I hoped we never had to talk about it. The same went for Vance and Lyla, who'd avoided the you-kissed-Mateo thing.

father. topic spectacularly.

A breeze floated more of that incredible scent on the air, and though I managed to get out of the car, I still wasn't ready to go inside. So I spun around in a slow circle, taking it all in.

Mateo's directions had led me on a winding path across a handful of ranch's gravel roads. I'd passed the backside of Indigo Ridge along the old, a notorious landmark in Quincy because of a tragic murder that had happened there a few years ago. From there, I'd wound my way up the mountain foothills to a meadow bordered by groves of evergreens.

The log cabin stood proudly in the grass field. Mateo had mowed the stalks short and uniform. A stack of evenly chopped firewood lined the side of the wide front porch.

I loved the ranch. I loved the view from my loft. But this was exactly where I'd choose to live, right on the forest's edge. Where my backyard met the untamed wilderness.

This was the perfect balance of seclusion and convenience. It was only a short drive into town. Mateo had the luxuries of modern-day life, like plumbing and high-speed internet. But out here, away from neighbors, there was a charted peace. A sanctuary.

As a girl, I'd dreamed of living in a city. Maybe spending a year or two in New York or San Francisco after high school. Someday, I'd like to visit a city. But only as a vacation. The idea of being constantly surrounded by people and noise and traffic made my skin crawl.

"My uncle Briggs built this place." Mateo's voice had me whirling around to face the house. He stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the threshold. How long had he been watching me?

My cheeks flamed.

The corner of his mouth turned up as he leaned a shoulder against the door's frame. "Have you ever met Briggs?"

"Yes. At Lyla and Vance's wedding."

There was no mistaking Briggs as an Eden with his dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. Though there'd been so many Edens at the wedding, and uncles and cousins, I hadn't been sure exactly how Briggs had fit in the mix until Harrison had pulled me aside to make an introduction to his beloved brother.

Briggs was five years older than Harrison. Before his dementia had driven him to move, he'd lived on the ranch. In this cabin.

“Dad tries to bring him out to the ranch once a week or so,” Mateo said. “They’ll drive around or stop and have dinner with Mom. Some days it’s normal. Others, he’ll get Griffin and Dad confused. It’s hard to see him that, especially for my parents.”

“I’m sorry.” I unstuck my feet and walked toward the porch’s stairs. The way, when he didn’t move, I stopped, standing at the bottom stair as he gazed. I opened my head into the distance.

“Briggs was always there for me. He never had kids, but he treated us like we were his own. He never missed a single football game. When the head coach recently, school basketball coach retired and they needed a new assistant coach, I volunteered. He’d take us hunting and fishing. He taught me how to rope.”

Briggs sounded like Vance.

He’d been my uncle, my champion.

Mateo glanced over his shoulder, checking something inside, probably a file. “I relate to Briggs. He’s older than Dad and could have taken over the ranch or other businesses, but he didn’t want that life. He didn’t like the thought of being in charge. He was content to work here because he loved it. He was content with a simple life.”

“That sounds like a good life.”

“My brothers and sisters all have this ... ambition.”

“And you don’t?” After just two days of trying to sort through those manuals, I had a newfound respect for Mateo, getting his license *and* being a full-time college student.

Mateo shrugged. “It’s different.”

“Bad different?”

“Different, different,” he said. “There are times when I feel this pressure. Like everyone is waiting to see what I decide to be. That they’ll be disappointed if I don’t do something grand or bold. But I never thought of Briggs because he wasn’t in charge or running a business. I admired him for knowing his strengths. His weaknesses. Hell, most days, I feel more like I’m walking in Briggs’s footsteps than Dad’s. He did what he loved. He didn’t care about the expectations were his own.”

Was he saying that because he believed it? Or was he saying that because he wanted to make it true? “Sounds like you’ve got good footsteps to follow in either direction.”

“Yeah.” He gave me a small smile. “Hi.”

aid. "Hello."
ie's "Come on in." He shoved off the frame and jerked his chin for me to
n like follow him inside.
Climbing the stairs, I stepped beneath the porch's overhang and took
But last glance across the meadow.
ed over I'd had good footsteps to follow too. They'd led me here. If I never
Dad again, I would always be grateful he'd brought me to Montana.
is like When I faced the house, I hovered beyond the threshold, looking for
igh button.
my "What are you doing?" Mateo asked.
at me "You don't have a doorbell."
"Uh, no."
"Oh. Allie loves them."
His eyebrows came together. "Yes, she does. That's why you ring th
oly at Mom and Dad's?"
er the "Yeah." I eased the door closed behind me just as a squeal came fro
e idea living room.
e was "Ve-wa!" Allie ran so fast her legs couldn't keep up with her torso.
would have face planted onto the hardwood floor if Mateo hadn't swept
up, giving her a quick toss in the air before catching her.
"Slow down, Sprout." He set her down and patted her diapered butt
pilot rushed for me again.
eing a Her smile was contagious as she flew into my open arms.
"Hi, Jellybean." I tickled her ribs, earning a tickle in return, then kis
cheek. It was sticky.
There was a skillet on the stove top, and the cabin smelled like sage
sure. syrup.
"Did you have breakfast for dinner?"
t less "Pa-cake."
l him "Yummy."
e like "Did you eat?" Mateo asked.
is only "I grabbed a sandwich before I left the coffee shop." I put Allie dow
toddle off to a pile of toys in the living room.
cause "How was work today?"
ollow, "Hectic." School had been out for a teacher professional developme
and the shop had been swarmed with teenagers and parents. Lyla and I
both opened at four this morning, and it had felt like a dead sprint the e

day. Lunch had been skipped, and by the time I'd clocked out, I'd been starving. My ham and cheese had been scarfed on the drive to the ranch.

Lyla was still there, wrapping up for the day and baking for the week.

If I was tired, she'd be dead on her feet by the time she made it home.

"Want some water or anything before we get started?"

"Water, please."

"Make yourself at home." He jerked his chin at the dining room table. I walked to the kitchen and opened a cupboard.

The cabin was open and airy. The kitchen blended with the dining room which flowed to the living area. The doors along the far wall must lead to bedrooms and bathrooms. It wasn't a large house, but it was cozy and inviting.

I slid into a wooden chair at the table, taking out my book as Mateo set a glass of water beside me. Then he went to the coffee table, snagging the remote to turn on some cartoons for Allie.

"She missed her nap today. We were outside doing yard work, and I lost track of time. When we came in, I decided it was too late to try. Hopefully she'll make it another hour, but we might have to take a break so I can get her to bed."

"No problem."

The dragon I'd gotten her was staged to face the TV. Allie climbed on, rocking it wildly back and forth as she pointed to the screen. "Dizzy."

Her dark pigtailed curls curled at the ends, like the way Mateo's hair curled around her nape whenever he let it grow long enough.

Mateo slid into a seat, chair legs scraping on the floor.

The seat directly beside mine. Not the chair around the corner of the table. Not the chair across the table.

The chair so close to my own that the warmth from his arm seeped into mine.

He scooted closer. Another inch and our shoulders would touch. That intoxicating Mateo smell, leather and spice and wind and earth, filled my nose.

Concentrating was already going to be tough after a long day. But with him sitting so close, smelling so good, this study session was going to be brutal.

"How did the reading go?"

"Good?"

1 “Is that a question or a statement?”

h. I flipped open my book to the first chapter. “I guess we’re about to f
kend. out.”

 Bad. It was very, very bad. All of the time I’d spent reading had bee
wasted. Because fifteen minutes into the discussion about lift and drag
Mateo’s knee touched mine beneath the table and my brain shut off.

e, then “So lift is the opposing force to weight. What’s the opposing force to
drag?” Mateo twisted slightly to stare at my profile.

om, If I didn’t face directly forward, if I turned in the slightest to make e
l to the contact, his mouth would be eye level. Was this how he sat with other
students? Not that he had other students. Did he? Why couldn’t he hav
sat on the other side of the table? Or around a corner?

set a Wait. What was his question? “Uh ... no idea.”

ie “Thrust.”

 Of course the answer was thrust. A word that sounded like sex in his
lost rugged, deep voice.

ully “Right.” I gulped. “Thrust.”

put His hand stretched across the book to flip the page and our forearms
touched. Heat radiated off his large frame, enveloping me like that sce
A thud snapped me out of the haze.

on, Mateo’s gaze whipped to Allie, who’d fallen off her dragon. He rose
to rush to her rescue, but she just stood up, eyes glued to the TV, and g
l at his the handle of the toy to climb back on. He exhaled, sinking into his sea
I used the interruption to shift my chair over a few inches. Maybe w
some space, my brain would reengage and Mateo wouldn’t think I was
table. complete moron. Maybe words like *thrust* wouldn’t make me sweat.

nto Except the moment he was seated and refocused, he moved his chair
His beefy thigh pressed against mine. That heat returned.

 Desire coiled low in my belly. And my brain went blank.

at I swallowed a groan.

ny The next hour was excruciating. After getting three questions in a ro
wrong, he retrieved a small model airplane from a bookshelf against th
living room wall. He did his best to demonstrate a plane’s movement, l
with wrapping my mind around ailerons and elevator control, angles of atta
be wing stalls—which had nothing to do with an engine apparently—was
impossible. I couldn’t focus.

“I’m sorry.” I rubbed my temples. “I swear I’m not entirely helpless
it’s been a long day, and this material is a lot.”

“You’ll get it.”

I slumped in my chair, and my leg slid against Mateo’s. I’d gotten u
him being pressed close. But as the denim of our jeans scraped, awarer
rushed in again.

He was so, so close. Why was he so close?

I glanced up at his face, expecting his profile. But he was facing me,
eyes locked on my mouth. He looked like he wanted to kiss me.

My heart rocketed into my throat.

Did he want to kiss me? Did I want him to kiss me?

Yes. Despite the fool I’d made of myself at Willie’s, despite the pro
I’d made to myself to let Mateo Eden go, down deep in my heart, I wa
him to kiss me.

There were just some things I couldn’t keep locked in that box.

He leaned in closer. The blue of his eyes was darker. His tongue dar
to lick his lower lip and a throb bloomed in my core.

My pulse raced, booming in my ears.

Mateo raised a hand, his fingertips skimming the hair at my temple.
eyelids fluttered closed, his breath a whisper across my cheek.

I didn’t move. I didn’t breathe. If I blinked, I was certain I’d wake u
gripped in the loft, this entire night a dream.

“Daddy, melk,” Allie whined at Mateo’s side.

We broke apart in a flash.

He shot out of his chair, picking up Allie.

She rubbed fists into her tired eyes as he carried her to the kitchen.

“I should get going.” The book got shoved into my backpack before
ripped the zipper closed. Then I was on my feet, ready to make a run fr
I needed air. I needed space. I needed out of this house so I could th
God, what was happening?

He’d almost kissed me. He would have kissed me, right?

“Sorry.” Mateo opened the fridge and took out a sippy cup of milk.

The second she had it in her grip, Allie tipped it to her mouth and
collapsed against his shoulder as she chugged.

“I’d better get her into bed. Want to stick around? It shouldn’t take l

“That’s okay.” I slung my bag over my shoulder. “I’m pretty wiped.
can pick it up again Friday.”

. But “Want to fly this weekend?”
“I’m working.”
“All right. Next week?”

sed to God, the way he said it sounded like a date. Not that I’d been asked
ness many dates. But the promise in his tone made me shiver. “Sure.”
Normally, I’d kiss Allie’s cheek before leaving, but I was so confused
, his Mateo that I couldn’t risk getting close. At this point, even a friendly h
would scramble my brain. “Good night.”
“Vera.” He stopped me just as I’d opened the door.
The night air should have cooled my face, but Mateo’s stare was so
that sweat beaded at my temples. “Yeah?”

nise “I see you.”
nted My heart tumbled. My grip on the doorknob slipped loose.
This was a dream. This had to be a dream. Everything about this nig
been so ... off. It had to be a dream.

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He crossed the distance between us, Allie still snuggled against that
chest. “Always.”

His Mateo used his free hand to pull the door open wider. Then he tucke
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p alone When I lifted my gaze to his, I got lost in sapphire blue. Not a perso
this earth had eyes like Mateo Eden. Not his parents. Not his siblings. I
even his daughter.
“I see you, Vera.”
The emotions swelled so big in my chest I couldn’t breathe. How lo
I hoped for this? Dreamed of this? Years. I should have known what to
and what to do. Instead, I turned for the door.
I
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“Want to fly this weekend?”

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Normally, I’d kiss Allie’s cheek before leaving, but I was so confused by Mateo that I couldn’t risk getting close. At this point, even a friendly hug would scramble my brain. “Good night.”

“Vera.” He stopped me just as I’d opened the door.

The night air should have cooled my face, but Mateo’s stare was so intense that sweat beaded at my temples. “Yeah?”

“I see you.”

My heart tumbled. My grip on the doorknob slipped loose.

This was a dream. This had to be a dream. Everything about this night had been so ... off. It had to be a dream.

“Not always,” I said.

He crossed the distance between us, Allie still snuggled against that broad chest. “Always.”

Mateo used his free hand to pull the door open wider. Then he tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. And untucked it a moment later.

When I lifted my gaze to his, I got lost in sapphire blue. Not a person on this earth had eyes like Mateo Eden. Not his parents. Not his siblings. Not even his daughter.

“I see you, Vera.”

The emotions swelled so big in my chest I couldn’t breathe. How long had I hoped for this? Dreamed of this? Years. I should have known what to say and what to do. Instead, I turned for the door.

And bolted into the black night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MATEO

Vera wrinkled her nose as she stepped inside the cabin.

“I know.” I held up a hand. “It’s bad.”

Every window was open, along with the door. A breeze curdled through the house, but the acrid scent of dinner—completely fucking burnt—clung to the air.

“What were you trying to make?” Vera set her backpack on the counter, then came to the sink, peering over my shoulder to the pan soaking in the sink.

“Grilled ham and cheese.”

“Oh.” She pulled in her lips to hide a smile. “You burned grilled ham and cheese.”

“This might be a new low.” Though once, I’d turned a handful of chicken nuggets into hockey pucks because I’d microwaved them for three minutes instead of thirty seconds.

“What happened?”

“I had it perfect on one side.” That was the real sting here. It was good, that one side crisped and golden brown. “I flipped it, but Allie pooped and needed her diaper changed. So I shut off the burner to take care of her. Figured it would cook while we were in her bedroom. Came out and I turned the burner on full.”

Rest in peace, little sandwich.

“Oh.” A giggle escaped Vera’s lips. She slapped a hand over her mouth to cover it, but it was pointless. She burst into hysterics, laughing so hard she snorted.

That snort, that adorable snort, made my ruined dinner worth it.

“I’m not a great cook,” I told her.

“So I’ve heard. Your mom said she doesn’t have to worry about Elo anymore because Jasper cooks. But she’s mentioned on more than one

occasion that if not for peanut butter sandwiches and cold cereal, Allie starve.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I deadpanned. “That is cutthroat.”

“Is she wrong though?” Vera arched an eyebrow and looked to Allie chair, where my daughter was spooning cereal into her mouth, milk down her chin.

“Fair point. Are you hungry? I can make you cereal too. And I dare find anyone who can pour a better Rice Krispie to milk ratio.”

“I’m good. But thank you.” Vera laughed, her eyes sparkling.

Damn, she was something. I leaned in closer, that laugh drawing me My gaze dropped to her perfect mouth, and though I’d told myself to tonight, just keep the focus on studying, I wanted a kiss.

I wanted the kiss I’d almost taken last Friday.

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Vera’s smile faltered and she ducked her chin, like she knew exactly I was thinking and had thrown up a stop sign. She cleared her throat and darted around me, giving me a wide berth as she joined Allie at the dining room table.

We hadn’t spoken since last week. I’d been to Mom and Dad’s house times but Vera’s car had been missing from her regular parking space and the barn.

I’d missed her. It had only been a week, but tension seeped away from shoulders now that she was here.

Especially considering I’d been worried she wouldn’t show at all.

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her.
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After a week of replaying our first study session, I could admit that I’d come on a bit strong. In my defense, it was becoming nearly impossible to keep my distance from Vera. There’d been too many years of staying on the safe side of the boundary line.

That kiss she’d given me at Willie’s hadn’t just been an eye-opener. It had been permission.

There were no more lines.

uth to
she

Something here was worth exploring, and I wasn’t wasting my chance.

“How was your week?” I asked, carrying her backpack as I joined her at the table.

“Good. I worked. I’ve been studying a lot for a few upcoming tests.

ise

“Busy. Spent most of it helping Griffin reconfigure the corrals at his house. Allie had a doctor’s appointment with Talia. Went flying for a couple days yesterday.”

might “You did?”

“I did.”

“I’m glad.” Pride brightened her face. She should be proud. I’d flow
’s high myself, but I’d done it because of her.

ibbling “Ready?” I patted her backpack.

Vera stood behind the chair at the head of the table. It was one of tw
you to where I couldn’t squeeze in next to her.

Well, that wasn’t going to work for me. I liked sitting so close that c
thighs touched. I wanted the strands of her silky ponytail to brush my a
: in. from time to time. I’d much rather smell her sweet scent than my scorc
ack off dinner.

She pulled out the chair and sat down, sliding her bag over.

As she loosened the zipper, I grabbed my own chair. And plopped it
/ what beside hers.

id “What are you ...” She looked to the ceiling, like she was silently pr
ing for strength. “Mateo.”

“It’s easier this way.”

re a few “Studying is easier if you’re sitting on top of me?” She glanced dow
beside where our knees were just millimeters from knocking.

“I don’t like to read upside down.”

om my “You don’t need to read anything. You already know this.”

“I like to follow along.”

Her nostrils flared. “Have you always been this stubborn? Or did I j
maybe miss it?”

sible to “You missed it.”

on my “Fine.” She flung open her book with an eye roll.

Wherever she’d been hiding this snark for the past couple of years, I
It had glad to see it flourish.

It took less than five minutes for our knees to touch. Each time they
bumped, she’d shy away. Then a few minutes later, she’d relax and let
ce. guard down. We’d touch again. And the dance went round and round.

er at “Ahh done.” Allie finished her cereal and held up her hands.

“Good job, Sprout.” I gave Vera a reprieve and lifted Alaina from h
You?” chair, quickly wiping up her face before cleaning the mess on her tray.
; house. turned on a Disney show and let her play in the living room while I ret
hours to my chair.

The moment I was seated, Vera's spine stiffened. She looked as stiff as wood beneath her ass.

n for "Vera, relax."

"I can't." She huffed. "You're crowding me. I can't think with you so close."

o seats I moved closer.

"Mateo." She jabbed her elbow into mine, then buried her face in her hands. "You're confusing me."

arm "About carburetor ice?" I teased.

hed She dropped her hands and huffed. "Mateo."

"You're confused." I tucked and untucked a lock of her hair. "I thought you were pretty clear."

right "Not to me."

I forgot sometimes that she had spent so long away from the world. I'd missed her senior year in high school and college years—years versus the years I'd spent just as much time learning about women as I had agricultural business or piloting. What I considered fairly obvious might need to be repeated, reinforced, a few times for it to sink in deep.

"This is a date," I declared.

"But we're studying."

"It's a study date. And soon, I'd like to take you on a dinner date. A movie date. And a coffee date. I want to date you, Vera. I want to spend time with you."

And I wanted to kiss her.

She opened her mouth and closed it. Opened it again. Then her shoulders sagged. "I don't know how to navigate this. It's ... weird. I made it worse than Willie's."

"No, you didn't."

She gave me a flat look.

"You made it clear. And if it makes you feel better, I'm not exactly sure how to navigate this either."

My one and only real relationship had been with Madison. And it had never high ended in a fiery crash.

Then I "We'll find our way together," I promised, then tapped her textbook first, we get to learn about carburetor ice."

"Okay." She sighed.

f as the It went against every instinct, but for the next hour as we worked, I
my knee away from hers.

We'd take this slow. As slow as she needed.

so "Ve-wa." Allie came running over with a pink plastic hammer. "Wo
"Oh, I love your hammer." Vera fawned over the toy before letting
smack it on the table to prove it worked.

r While I'd been helping Griffin at the corrals this week, Allie had tag
along one day to play with her cousins. Mom had come over to help ou
Winn had been at work. She'd bought toy toolboxes for each of the kid
Allie had been hooked to this hammer ever since.

ght I She smacked it on the table again just as a yawn stretched her mouth
I glanced at the clock on the stove. Almost bedtime. This study date
over too soon.

That We could stretch bedtime a bit, but Allie was a better kid if we stuck
when routine. "I'd better get her in the tub. Would you wait?"

Vera touched a lock of Allie's hair that had escaped a pigtail. "Sure.

e "Come on, Sprout. Bath time."

"No baf!" The hammer was dropped as Allie tore off for the living r
trying to hide beside the couch.

"Alaina."

nd a "No baf."

id time I blew out a deep breath.

These days, this was the nightly battle. About four months ago, she'
started to fight me on bath time. Why, I had no clue. She'd squirm and
lders and cry. It had become such a challenge, that Mom had stopped even t
ird at to bathe Allie on the nights we stayed at my parents' place.

The idea of a bath just pissed my daughter off. But the bath itself? T
fine. When I finally got her in the water, she loved it. She'd splash and
like it was her favorite activity in the world.

sure Two-year-olds. They made no fucking sense.

id "She's going to scream," I warned Vera, then headed for the bathroc
getting the water going. I added extra bubbles in the hopes that it woul
lessen the fit we were about to endure.

. "But I returned to the living room, shoulders squared for the showdown, a
froze.

Vera was kneeling on the floor beside Allie, helping her out of her c
No screaming. No squirming. "Should we take your hammer into the b

kept “Yeah!” Dressed only in her diaper, she ran for the toy she’d abandoned then raced for the bathroom with it.

Who was that child? Because she wasn’t my daughter.

took it.” “You have to come over for bath time every night,” I told Vera.

Allie She giggled, collecting Allie’s clothes and standing from the floor. “Daddy!” Allie called. “Bubbies.”

gged “Be back.” I winked at Vera, then went to get Allie into the bubbles. it since Before I disappeared into the bathroom, I glanced over my shoulder.

ls. And caught Vera staring at my ass.

1. Man, did I like that. I liked the flirting and teasing. I liked the subtle touches and stolen looks. I liked the tension building between us.

was It was so different than my experience with any other woman. Sex had always been the goal. An easy fuck to release some stress. Jumping straight to a into bed meant I’d never taken the time to appreciate these understated moments.

” Just being in the same room with Vera had become a lesson in foreplay. For the first time in my life, I wanted to stretch this out. Savor it.

room, Allie was ripping off her diaper when I made it to the bathroom. I snatched it from her, then plopped her in the water, moving as quickly as possible to clean her up and wash her hair.

“Time to get out.”

“No!” she cried when I opened the drain. “More bubbies.”

d “All done.”

kick “No.” She kicked as I hefted her out of the tub, her skin slippery, but I held a firm hold on her torso, plopping her on the mat and wrapping her in a hooded unicorn towel.

totally The pout on her face was adorable. Someday, she’d wield that again. I play wouldn’t she? It was already getting harder and harder to tell her no.

“Go find Vera.”

om, The pout morphed into a toothy smile. Allie raced out of the room, her feet slapping on the hardwood floors. “Ve-wa!”

d “Jellybean.”

and I dried the floor and slipped into Allie’s room to get her pajamas from the dresser. With a clean diaper and purple onesie in hand, I found Allie on Vera’s lap, both cuddled together on the couch.

clothes. “Let’s get dressed, Sprout.”

hath?” Allie curled deeper into Vera’s shoulder.

ned, “Want me to help you?” Vera asked, reaching for the pajamas.
Alaina didn’t fight Vera. No, the person she loved to argue with most
me.

While they worked on the diaper and clothes, I got Allie’s sippy cup
milk from the fridge.

Normally, I’d take Allie to the rocking chair in her room and snuggle
her until she was asleep. Then I’d put her in her bed and sneak out. But
and Vera looked too perfect together to break up, so I turned off the main
lights, leaving one on in the kitchen, and joined them on the couch.

“What should we watch?” I snagged the remote from the coffee table.

“Dizzy?” Vera asked, the corner of her mouth turning up.

ad “Not Dizzy.”

aight Allie let out a whimper when I changed the channel from her cartoon
she was getting tired and as Vera toyed with her damp hair, her eyelids
to droop.

lay. I chose a random movie from Netflix that I’d seen before and knew
violent, then turned down the volume. My arm draped across the back
ragged couch, my fingers reaching for the ends of Vera’s ponytail.

le to She let me twist a lock around a finger. Another win.

Allie crawled onto my lap ten minutes into the movie and rested her
on my shoulder as she yawned.

My girl loved to argue and push my buttons, but I could count on my
fingers how many times she’d fallen asleep somewhere other than on my
t I kept chest.

a “Night, Sprout.” I kissed her hair as she gasped another yawn.

Minutes were all it took for her to crash.

st me, “I should go,” Vera whispered.

Except I wasn’t ready for her to go, not yet. So I took more of that pressure
in my fingers, tugging just enough that she didn’t move to stand. “Have
are seen this movie before?”

“No. But—”

“Study date. Movie date.” This time, I pulled her hair my direction until
m the she took the hint and shifted closer.

n She sighed as she sank into my side. “Just promise me the dinner date
be to a restaurant.”

I chuckled. “We’ll go to Knuckles.”

There was a smile on her mouth when I glanced down. A smile so p
st was wanted to kiss it.

“Vera.” I spoke low. Smooth. Drawing her attention away from the

of “What?”

“I want to kiss you.”

e with That chocolate gaze blew wide, those pink lips parting.

t she “Tell me yes. Tell me you want my mouth as much as I want yours.”

ain “I—” Her breath hitched. “Yes.”

e. Thank fuck. I bent, ready to take the kiss I’d been dreaming about fo
week.

Allie shifted, her knee colliding with my groin.

n, but “Ooof.” I winced, shifting her away. Son of a bitch. Brutal little kne

; began was broken. Not only was my dick throbbing—not the good throb—but the mor

wasn’t the table. “You should put her to bed.” She stood and collected her backpack t

of the *Damn.* So close.

With Allie in my arms, I moved around the house, closing windows
that the burnt smell had faded. Then I met Vera at the door.

cheek “Next week?” I lifted my hand to her cheek, my thumb skimming ac
freckles.

y She nodded and turned for the door. But she whirled back in a flash,
ny before I knew it was happening, she rose up on her toes and pressed a l
the corner of my mouth.

Then she ran.

She was always running.

But at least this time, she’d kissed me first.

onytail
e you

until

te will

There was a smile on her mouth when I glanced down. A smile so pretty I wanted to kiss it.

“Vera.” I spoke low. Smooth. Drawing her attention away from the screen.

“What?”

“I want to kiss you.”

That chocolate gaze blew wide, those pink lips parting.

“Tell me yes. Tell me you want my mouth as much as I want yours.”

“I—” Her breath hitched. “Yes.”

Thank fuck. I bent, ready to take the kiss I’d been dreaming about for a week.

Allie shifted, her knee colliding with my groin.

“Ooof.” I winced, shifting her away. Son of a bitch. Brutal little knees.

Not only was my dick throbbing—not the good throb—but the moment was broken.

“You should put her to bed.” She stood and collected her backpack from the table.

Damn. So close.

With Allie in my arms, I moved around the house, closing windows now that the burnt smell had faded. Then I met Vera at the door.

“Next week?” I lifted my hand to her cheek, my thumb skimming across freckles.

She nodded and turned for the door. But she whirled back in a flash, and before I knew it was happening, she rose up on her toes and pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

Then she ran.

She was always running.

But at least this time, she’d kissed me first.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

VERA

Rain drizzled through the gaps in the trees. Mist cloaked the mountains and water dripped from the brim of my hat. My coat and clothes soaked.

I'd been hiking around Sable Peak for hours, searching for any sign of my father. But there was nothing to find. No animal snares. No charred remains of a campfire. No footprints in the mud.

No Dad.

But I kept going, kept pushing. He had to be out here somewhere.

The steady rain drowned out any sound. If he was nearby, he'd find shelter. A place to stay dry. That had always been one of his most important rules. Stay dry. Stay warm. Stay hydrated. A person could go on an empty stomach for a day or two. But as long as we were dry, warm and had water, we'd survive.

He'd survive.

He was alive.

This far up into the mountains, there had to be a cave or something. I doubted Dad would have built a shelter. The hut he'd built years ago had been more for me than himself, so I wouldn't have to sleep on the dirt that night.

I pulled up the sleeve of my coat, checking my watch. "Damn it."

If I was going to make it to my car with enough time to get to Mateo for our Friday study date, I had to start back now.

"Gah." A surge of anger welled. I bent and picked up a pinecone, thumping it against a nearby tree.

He was out here. I knew it down deep in my bones. He was out here and I couldn't find him? Why couldn't he find me?

He had to know I was searching. That I'd want to see him again.

Every hike, I left traces behind. There was no reason for me to mask presence, so I didn't bother. Footprints. A circle of rocks. My name sp out in sticks with the date. Every hike, for two years, I'd left a marker.

Yes, the mountains were vast. Our chances were so, so small. But if searching for him, and he was searching for me, it had to happen. Ever it had to happen, right?

Dad would be watching trailheads. It was the logical place for me to So for our paths to clash, it was just a matter of timing. And persistenc

I'd spent countless hours poring over maps of the area. I was workir section by section, tackling the landscape in pieces. I'd been up and do each local trail at least three times.

mountains
as were

If I just kept going, if I kept pushing, I'd find him.

I had to find him.

Unless ...

of my
nains

What if he'd found me already? What if he'd watched me leave those messages? What if he'd kept his distance intentionally?

My breath caught.

Was he hiding from me?

No. I refused to believe it. He wouldn't ignore me. Would he?

important
empty
water,

"Dad!" My voice bounced off the trees before it was swallowed up by a steady drizzle of rain.

I shouted for him on every hike. I yelled and yelled, willing my voice to carry. Maybe if I screamed loud enough, he'd come running.

"Cormac Gallagher!"

A crow cawed in the distance, but otherwise, there was no sound. No one yelled back.

I
had
each

"If you can see me, you'd better come out here." I fought the urge to yell at my foot like a child. "Dad!"

Nothing but the sound of my sinking heart.

years for
rowing

I turned, chin tucked to watch my steps, and hiked the miles to my camp. My arms and legs were shaking as I slid behind the wheel, exhaustion weighing heavy in every muscle. I stripped out of my coat, tossing it in the back of the truck along with my hat. My hair was soaking wet. So were my jeans. My toes were almost numb as they squished in my socks and boots.

. Why

Was this search pointless? Was I wearing myself thin for nothing?

I'd been doing this with the assumption that Dad wanted to be found. What if I'd been wrong? What if he'd never intended to see me again?

My nose stung with the threat of tears as I turned on the car, cranking the heat. The windshield wipers flew across the glass, scattering and smearing drops.

I hated storms, but at least this was just rain.

It was already five thirty, and there wasn't time to go home for a hot shower before I'd agreed to be at Mateo's, so when I pulled out of the parking area, I drove straight for the cabin. The backpack with my groceries and school books was in the trunk.

Other than a few texts to confirm we were meeting tonight, I hadn't written to Mateo this week. We leapt from Friday to Friday.

The days in between gave me time to think. After all this time, after waiting and crushing, it was surprisingly hard to believe he was interested.

Why had I kissed him last week? I should have waited. I should have asked him to kiss me. But I'd acted on impulse because ...

I wasn't sure why. Maybe it wasn't all that complicated. I'd just wanted to kiss him, so I'd kissed him. Then I sprinted out of his house.

Without a doubt, I was doing everything wrong. How did normal women pursue men? What would it even feel like to be normal?

Normal felt as impossible to find as my dad.

The drive to the cabin was on muddy roads. Even with the heater on blast, my clothes were too soaked to dry.

The last thing I wanted was to study, yet the temptation of Mateo was too much to resist. So I parked my car beside his truck, retrieved my backpack, and made my way to the door.

It opened before I could knock.

Mateo looked as gorgeous as ever in a long-sleeved black T-shirt. He pushed the sleeves up his sinewed forearms. His jeans were faded and the denim soft from years of washes and wear. And his feet were bare. His feet were becoming my favorite part about these visits. Last week, he'd had his feet too, and it added an intimacy to these visits. I was coming into his room where he walked around barefoot.

"Hey." Mateo's gaze narrowed as he looked me up and down, taking in my clothes.

"I was hiking." I shrugged. "It's wet outside."

"You don't say." He studied my face for a moment too long. "What's the weather like?"

"Uh, raining?"

g the ring “In here.” He reached out and tapped my temple. “What’s the weath
in here? You look upset.”

 “Oh.” I’d hoped he wouldn’t notice. What were my options again?
Overcast. Broken. Scattered. Clear and a million. Definitely not the lat
t guess ... a little overcast.”

 He hummed. “What’s going on?”

und “Nothing.” Everything. I couldn’t even articulate it right now.
 “You can talk to me.”

spoken Not about this. “It was just a long day. I lost track of time.”
 “Where did you hike?”

all the Oh, he wasn’t going to like this. “Sable Peak.”
sted. “Alone? You were supposed to call me.”

e let “I’m fine. Soaked but in one piece. There’s nothing to worry about.”
 His expression hardened, but instead of delivering a lecture like Unc
nted to Vance would have, he jerked his chin for me to come inside.
 It smelled like wood polish and glass cleaner.

omen “Get those boots off.” Mateo closed the door. “Then come with me.”
 I bent to untie my soggy laces. “Where’s Allie?”
 Her toys were stowed in baskets and tubs instead of strewn across th
full floor.

 “Sprout,” Mateo called. “Vera’s here.”

as too “Ve-wa!” That squeal was music to my ears. She came racing out of
ack bedroom wearing a pink superhero cape. Allie didn’t care that I was w
launched herself into my arms with a giggle.

 “Hey, Jellybean.” I kissed her cheek, then set her down so she woul
e’d rainwater on her clothes. “What are you doing?”

frayed, “Doss.”

That “Doss?” I glanced up to Mateo for an interpretation.

bare “Dolls.”

home, “Ah. Dolls are fun.”

 “Go.” She took my hand, pulling me through the house to her room.

g in my When Mateo joined us, he brought along a pair of folded gray sweat
white T-shirt. “You can wear these.”

 “I’m sure I’ll dry soon.”

’s the “You’re leaving puddles on the floor.”

 “No, I’m—” *Shit*. There was a tiny puddle beside the hem of my pa
“Sorry.”

er like He chuckled. “Go change, Peach.”

Peach. That was the second time he’d called me by that nickname. I
it. A lot.

ter. “I I took the clothes and hurried to Allie’s bathroom, swapping wet for
before pulling my hair into a messy topknot.

The pants dwarfed my legs, pooling at my ankles. I rolled the waist
twice after cinching the drawstring tight. The shirt might as well have
tent, the sleeves draping past my elbows, but the cotton was warm, like
hadn’t been out of the dryer that long. Maybe he’d done laundry today
with cleaning. The scent of fabric softener and Mateo was a balm to m
aching heart.

The clouds were clearing.

’ When I emerged into the living room, Allie had abandoned her dolls
le tipped over a toy basket, spilling blocks and balls beside the coffee tab

“Better?” Mateo asked when I joined him in the kitchen.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

” He stepped close, raising his hand to my face. His thumb glided acro
chin. “Feel like studying?”

ie “Honestly? No.”

“Then how about we go flying tomorrow instead?”

“I have to work at noon.”

if her “We’ll meet at nine. Hopefully this weather will pass. And tonight, r
et. She just have a normal Friday evening. Good?”

Normal. Yes, I really wanted normal. “Good.”

dn’t get “Hungry?”

“Starved. I’d even eat a burnt grilled ham and cheese.”

“I bought a take-and-bake pizza. Most likely, it will survive the over
unscathed.”

“I love pizza.” It was the one food I’d always craved those years in t
woods. I hadn’t missed cheeseburgers or tacos or spaghetti and meatba
But pizza. I’d spent four years missing pizza.

s and a “Pepperoni with olives. That’s your favorite, right?”

“How ...” How did he know that?

nts. “Whenever we have pizza at Mom and Dad’s, you take a slice of the
and pick off every topping but the pepperoni and olives.” Mateo opene
fridge and pulled out a pepperoni pizza. Then he took a can of sliced o
from the cupboard.

The urge to cry or scream was so overwhelming I had to look away. I liked too much. Today had been too much. I was angry at my father. I was frustrated with myself. I was stupidly happy that Mateo knew my favorite dry pizza toppings.

It was all too much. I wouldn't talk to anyone about Dad. I wasn't sure what to think about Mateo. The only girlfriends to confide in had been his sisters. The emotions were a storm of their own, raining down in heavy sheets, and with no way to let them out, they manifested as tears.

Don't cry. Not in front of Mateo. Not here. But my chin quivered. The sting in my nose was burning like fire. I squeezed my eyes shut before I could escape.

Don't cry, Vera.

A pair of large hands clamped around my hips. Then my feet were off the floor, and I was flying.

"Wh—" I gasped, my eyes popping open.

Mateo deposited me on the kitchen counter with a thud. "Take a breath, Vera."

I tried to fill my lungs, but the air got lodged in my throat.

Mateo took my chin in his hand, holding my gaze. "Breathe."

My inhale burned. But I breathed.

"You don't have to right now," he said. "But when you're ready, you'll talk to me."

No, I couldn't. If I cracked the lid on that box, if I let even a little bit of pain free, it would break me into a thousand pieces. Besides, he couldn't know the secrets about Dad.

"Pizza," he said. "Yeah?"

I managed a nod.

He cupped my cheek, giving me a soft smile, then hoisted me off the counter. "Go relax."

I shuffled to the living room, holding up the legs of the sweats as I went and curled into a corner to watch Allie.

She hefted a pink tub of Lego blocks from her toy stash and brought it over, dropping it in my lap. "He go, Ve-wa."

"What should we build?"

Allie tapped her chin. It was something she'd picked up from Papa Harrison and was about the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

"A house?" I suggested. "Or a train?"

It was “Tain.”

rite “Good choice.” I opened the lid and took out the pieces to string together an alphabet train.

ure Mateo set the table and poured us each glasses of ice water. The scene was pepperoni and marinara and baking dough filled the air as the pizza cooled. And when it was done, we sat together, the three of us, eating a normal dinner, having a normal conversation about the work he’d done on the day today. We watched a normal, precious little girl make a mess with pizza. hat the olives she tried to poke with her finger.

a tear I helped get her ready for a bath and stood at the door to the bathroom while he washed her hair. Allie would give him orders. He’d let her be around.

off the Mateo had always been mesmerizing. The two of them together? It was magic.

ath, When she was dressed in lavender pajamas and ready for bed, he fixed her with a stare. “Don’t go.”

It wasn’t a request.

He disappeared to Allie’s room to rock her to sleep while I retreated to the living room.

u can I tried sitting on the couch, but the flutters in my belly made it impossible to stay still, so I cleaned up the toys.

t of the Mateo emerged as I was kneeling beside the coffee table to dismantle the Lego train.

it “Is she asleep?” My voice was breathy, my heart racing. Would he be here tonight? What else was he planning?

It dawned on me for the first time just how close we were to his bed.

He crooked his finger as he walked toward me.

e He crooked his freaking finger.

valked, down my spine. It was so unexpected, so incredibly hot, my jaw dropped. A shiver r

“Stand up.”

it I couldn’t stand. I could barely breathe.

Mateo held out a hand. As soon as my palm was in his, tingles went zinging to my elbow. He hauled me to my feet, taking me by the shoulder. He closed the gap between us.

My chest brushed against his. My nipples pebbled beneath my bra.

“You kissed me last week.”

I gulped. "Sorry?"

ether "You should be sorry." His hands threaded into the hair at my temple
"You kissed me before I could kiss you back."

nts of "Oh." My. God.

oked. "Oh." A grin stretched across his mouth as he bent closer. "My turn.
l Mateo sealed his mouth over mine, swallowing my gasp. He hummed
ranch sound so intoxicating and sinful, my body liquified. If not for the grip
a and on my face, I would have crashed to my knees.

m I melted against him, whimpering as he slid his tongue across my lower
ss him lip. He coaxed my mouth open, and when I parted, his tongue did a lazy
against mine. He tasted spicy and male and incredible.

My hands came to his chest, fisting his shirt.

was His arms banded around me, holding me close, as his body, hard and
strong, bent around mine.

ed me I lifted up on my toes and snaked my arms around his neck, locking
body to his. Our tongues tangled and dueled. He nipped and sucked until
whimpered.

to the This kiss was better than I ever could have imagined. All those nights
wondered what it would be like to kiss Mateo? The dream couldn't compare
ssible with reality.

I wanted to crawl inside him and never leave. The world beyond us
le the vanished. It got fuzzy at first, the colors blurring and swirling, then it felt
nothing.

kiss me There were no fears. No pain.

room. It felt so good not to worry. Not to hurt. Not to think. It was like being
numb to anything except Mateo. The relief was as addicting as his lips.

aced He slanted his mouth over mine, delving deep to explore every corner
my mouth. He growled against my lips, the vibration of his chest making
shiver.

Fire licked my veins. The pulse between my legs was almost unbearable.
More. I needed more. I loosened my hold around his shoulders to reach
between us, taking the hem of his shirt in my grip. I dragged it up his ribs
then slipped my fingers beneath the cotton and flattened my palms on his
ders as stomach. My fingertips traced the hard ridges and valleys of his washboard
abs. God, I wanted this shirt off. I wanted to see him, all of him.

My hand slid higher, lifting the shirt as I splayed my fingers across his
ribs. But before I could reach his chest, he shifted away.

“Fuck, Vera.” His breathing was as ragged as mine. His throat bobbed. His eyes locked with mine. Then he took a step away.

My heart plummeted as he righted his shirt.

That was it? We were stopping? Everything that had vanished during the kiss came rushing forward. The numbness faded.

“I promised you slow,” he said.

“I never asked for slow.”

“I don’t ... I’m not ...” He dragged a hand through his hair. “I want this right. For your first time.”

My first time? Oh. He thought I was a virgin. Considering my history made sense. “It wouldn’t be my first time.”

I’d had a boyfriend in high school and lost my virginity to him when I was sixteen. Seth Hendricks.

What was Seth doing now? Was he working or going to school? He was sweet and gentle. Dull. When Seth had kissed me, the world hadn’t faded away.

Tonight, I needed the world to fade away. I needed Mateo to kiss me.

“Noted.” Mateo’s jaw ticked. What did that mean? Was he jealous? Disappointed? “I still think we should take it slow.”

Slow sounded a lot like rejection. Slow sounded a lot like pity.

I brushed past him for the bathroom, locking myself inside.

With fumbling fingers, I traded his sweats for the clothes I’d hung to dry. Except my jeans were still wet and hard to drag up my legs. My sweat was cold and smelled like rain and dirt. I didn’t bother with my socks.

With them shoved in a pocket, I came out of the bathroom and found Mateo waiting.

His hands were braced on his hips. “Might as well turn around and put those dry clothes back on. You’re not running out of here like this. No more.”

He’d have to barricade the door to stop me. The look on his face said he might just do it.

We stared at each other in a silent standoff. Could I beat him for the prize? I was fast. But probably not fast enough.

“Daddy!” came a tiny voice from behind Allie’s closed door. That girl had come to my rescue.

“Shit.” His nostrils flared and he held up a finger. “Do not leave.”

ed as I stayed put until he crossed Allie's threshold. Then I bolted, rushing
the door to yank on my boots. With my toes squelching in the wet inso
slipped out the door.

g the And drove home alone. Where I could suffer in peace.
Alone.

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I stayed put until he crossed Allie's threshold. Then I bolted, rushing for the door to yank on my boots. With my toes squelching in the wet insoles, I slipped out the door.

And drove home alone. Where I could suffer in peace.

Alone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MATEO

It was an effort not to rip the door at Eden Coffee off its hinges. The chime that jingled overhead was too fucking cheerful. So was my sister's waiting smile. Not even the smell of cinnamon and sugar could swing my mood.

One look at my sour expression and Lyla straightened behind the counter. "Hi," she drawled. "Bad day?"

I pointed toward the hall that led to the kitchen. "Is Vera back there?"
"No." Her eyebrows came together. "She called in sick today."

"Fuck." I rubbed a hand over my jaw. Not a chance she was actually here.
"What's going on?" Lyla asked.

"She was supposed to meet me at the airfield this morning. Never showed." I'd waited around for an hour, texting and calling to make sure she was okay. Then I'd realized she'd stood me up.

I'd spent three hours cleaning the hangar and killing time, hoping it would burn off my frustration before I tracked Vera down at the coffee shop. The hangar was spotless. And I was still fucking pissed. I had been since the moment Vera had left the house last night.

I'd hit the brakes after that kiss and now I was the bad guy? No. Fuck. She didn't get to keep running away from me. Avoiding me. Standing in front of me. Especially after that kiss.

It was the game changer. Everything was different now.

There wasn't just something between us. There was something life-changing. And the chemistry? It was unlike anything I'd felt before. From the moment my tongue had touched Vera's, from the second I'd tasted her lips, I'd been hooked. Not a chance I'd let her go now.

Did she have a clue how hard it had been for me to stop that kiss? Every cell in my being had vibrated with the need to claim her. Keep her. Buy her.

fought back the desire to carry her into my bedroom and worship her under the dawn.

For once in my goddamn life, I wasn't going to screw up a relationship with sex.

Apparently, that made me an asshole.

"Earth to Matty." Lyla snapped her fingers in front of my face. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I just need to talk to Vera."

"Doesn't seem like nothing." She sighed. "I'm trying really hard not to interfere and ask about that night at Willie's."

Meaning either I spilled, or she was going to ask. By some streak of good luck I'd managed to avoid discussing that night with anyone other than Mori Vance's warning at the hotel. Given the look on Lyla's face, that streak was about to suffer a quick, efficient death. Might as well get it over with.

"Go ahead. Interfere."

Lyla gave me a sad smile. "None of us realized she felt that way about me. I guess I owe you an apology. I would have warned you."

"Don't apologize." I waved it off. "We've been spending time together. I'm teaching her how to fly."

"Oh." Surprise flickered in my sister's blue eyes. "She didn't mention that."

"It's new."

"Do you think this is smart? Teaching her? I don't want her to get her hopes up."

Lyla assumed I'd turned Vera down. Or maybe Lyla and Vance had thought that would be the case. Did they not think I was good enough? "I'm not teaching her to fly out of guilt, Lyla," I snapped. "She asked. I agreed."

"All right." Lyla held up a hand. "I'll stop and mind my own business. I didn't mean to insinuate that you wouldn't be anything but kind to her. ... love her. And the trauma she's endured. It's unthinkable."

"Yes, it is." I nodded. "But she doesn't want your pity. And she's not getting mine. That's not what this is about."

"Then what is it about?"

"I like her," I admitted.

"You do?" Lyla's smile was too big. "Really?"

"Yeah. Really. She's ... Vera." I wanted Vera.

And I wanted us both to walk away unscathed.

very

t I'd

ntil “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” I told Lyla. “Just give me ti
figure it out.”

hip Vera and I were not on the same wavelength at the moment, and add
my family into the mix would only make it worse.

“I can do that,” she said.

at is “Thanks.”

Another customer came through the door, so I shifted out of the way

“I’ll let you get back to work.”

t to “You could stay. We could talk. Catch up.”

luck, to rush home, wanting the time with her granddaughter.

m and With a wave, I left the coffee shop and retreated to my truck.

κ was Downtown Quincy was soaked from all the rain these past few days
red brick buildings seemed brighter, their gutters running on full. The t
were flourishing with the water, their leaves glistening and green. My t
out you. sloshed across the pavement as I headed down Main, and I cracked the
window.

her. Fresh rain was a favorite smell, but like the cleaning at the hangar, it
nothing to improve my mood. When I pulled off the highway and pass
on beneath the ranch’s archway, my hands were still strangling the wheel.

My frustration spiked when I pulled up to my parents’ house. The p
space beside the barn—Vera’s space—was empty.

er “Sick, huh?” I scoffed, gritting my teeth as I killed the engine. Then
slammed my door too hard before stomping up the porch to Mom and

hoped I was one foot inside before I remembered what Vera had told me al
t the doorbell. So I retreated to the porch and hit the button.

” Tiny feet pounded on the floor inside. Allie came running around th
ss. I corner with Mom following close behind.

. I just “Daddy!” Allie’s smile was a rainbow through the clouds, and for th
time in hours, I smiled.

ot “Hey, Sprout.” I swept her into my arms. “How was your morning?”

“Good,” Mom answered for her. “How was flying?”

“I didn’t go. Vera, um ... canceled.”

“Really? She took off this morning. I figured she was going to meet

“Nope,” I muttered.

Mom was the only one who knew I’d been spending time with Vera
asked her to keep it quiet. There weren’t many secrets between my fan

me to members, but Mom was the vault. When you asked her to keep something quiet, her lips stayed sealed.

ling “Thanks for watching Allie.”

“Of course. Are you set on taking her home? Eloise just called. I guess they’re doing a story time reading at the library and she was going to take Ophelia. Asked if Allie wanted to go too.”

7. “I don’t have it in me for a story time reading, Mom.”

“Oh, not you. Me. I needed to buzz into town anyway and hit the grocery store. Allie can come along.”

ie not “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Your dad has gone to Griffin’s for the afternoon. We’re out of here. Seems like you might need an afternoon to yourself. Go for a ride or something. Your dad brought Saturn, Neptune and Mars into the small pasture the other day because he was thinking about going for a ride if the weather cleared up. Maybe the rain will stop.”

Even if it didn’t, a hard ride sounded like a damn good idea. “Deal.”

I helped get Allie loaded in my truck, letting Mom take it instead of swapping the car seat to her Escalade, and as they drove down the lane I headed for the stables.

Saturn wasn’t at all happy when I caught him with a lead rope and harking him into a stall. He didn’t like to be away from his friends. But when I got into my saddle and rode him out of the arena, he perked up.

I My horse loved his friends. But he really loved to run.

Dad’s. I gave him his head, and with no particular destination in mind, I set out for a long ride through meadows and past towering trees. By the time we got back to the stables, the tops of my jeans and coat were soaked. The rain had slowed to a sprinkle but hadn’t entirely stopped.

ie first My body was drained, from the ride and a sleepless night, and I was ready for a hot shower and a warm meal. My mood was better. Not great, but

’ “Thanks, bud.” I ran a hand down Saturn’s nose before letting him free to roam the pasture and join the others. Then I put my tack away and shut off the stable’s lights.

The crunch of tires on gravel sounded as I reached the door.

you.” Vera’s Honda eased into the parking space beside the barn. If my truck had been outside Mom and Dad’s, would she have even come home?

. I’d I marched straight for the barn, the frustration from earlier returning with a vengeance. Guess that ride hadn’t really helped.

aily

ling “Vera,” I snapped the moment she stepped out of her car.
Her face whipped my way.
One look at her red-rimmed eyes and my stomach dropped. “What’s
ess wrong?”
ake Had something happened today? Was she really sick?
I closed the distance between us, taking her in from head to toe.
She looked a lot like me—rain slogged and exhausted. The scent of
ocery and earth clung to her clothes and hair. Okay, so she hadn’t spent the d
the hospital. She’d gone hiking again, hadn’t she?
Had something happened on a trail? A too-close encounter with an a
ll get or something?
r a ride “What happened?”
all “Nothing.” She looked on the verge of tears as she closed her car’s c
the and walked for the barn.
“Vera.” I followed. Not a chance she was running away from me ag
, “What the hell is going on?”
“Sorry, I wasn’t feeling like flying today.” She trudged to the loft.
, I I stayed close, worried that she’d falter and fall.
There was a weariness to her movements, a sluggish weight, that I’d
auled seen before. Like she was using every bit of strength to keep her chin u
swung keep herself moving forward.
When she reached the door, her shoulders sagged. She stared at the l
like she didn’t have the energy to turn it.
: out on “I’ll get it.” I slid up behind her, one hand on the small of her back a
made it opened the door and followed her inside. “Vera, talk to me.”
n had “It’s okay.” She shrugged. “Just an overcast day.”
“Why?”
ready “I went hiking.”
t better. “Did something happen?”
ree to “No.”
t off I locked eyes with hers. “Don’t lie to me.”
She dropped her chin.
“Hey.” I came closer, tugging the zipper on her coat free. With it go
ick had stripped mine off, tossing both with a thud to the floor. Then I hooked
finger under her chin.
with a The despair in her eyes was like a knife to my heart.
Did she have any idea how hard I’d work to never see that look agai

“Is this about last night?”

She shrugged.

“So yes and no?”

“Yes and no.”

“What can I do?”

Another shrug.

pine
lay at
mimal
“Peach. Throw me a bone.” I slid my hand across her cheek, my fingers diving into her hair. She must have worn a hat on her hike today, because only the ends were damp.

“Why do you call me Peach?”

So she had noticed. She hadn’t reacted when I’d said it last night. I’d assumed either she hadn’t heard it or she didn’t like it.

door
ain.
I threaded my fingers through her hair. “Because your hair reminds me of a sun-ripened peach on a hot summer day. Because you’re sweet. And because it’s my favorite fruit.”

“No, it’s not. You like strawberries best.”

“Not anymore,” I murmured, bending to take her lips.

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She sank into the kiss, like every muscle in her body instantly relaxed. Like the world beyond us just disappeared.

I hummed and dragged my tongue across her bottom lip, testing and tasting. Then I delved deep, her soft lips and sweet taste like heaven.

Like last night, it took a conscious effort to tear myself away. But I held her face in my hands and dropped my forehead to hers. When I cracked my eyes open, hers were waiting. “Why’d you leave last night?”

“You pushed me away.”

I blinked. Pushed her away? “I stopped us before we went too far.”

“Too far?” Her eyes narrowed, then she broke free of my hold. “I’ve spent the past two years chasing normal, Mateo. I want people to treat me like they treated me before. I want to be the person who I was before, and that just feels impossible. If not for all the fucked-up shit in my life, would you have stopped? I want to forget. I want ... you. But not if you’re going to tiptoe around me. Not if you’re going to treat me like I’m fragile.”

ne, I
a
The hurt in those beautiful eyes was a slap in the face. She thought I stopped because I pitied her.

n?
Fuck that. I closed the distance between us, taking her face in my hands. Then I kissed her. Hard. I plundered her mouth and pressed my body against hers so she could feel exactly how much I wanted her.

She whimpered as my arousal dug into her hip. When I ripped my n
away, we were both breathless.

“I want you. So much I can’t see straight. But I don’t want to fuck tl
I don’t want sex to be all we have. I don’t want to wake up in bed one
morning and have you tell me it’s been fun and all, but a relationship is
really what you’re after. That the months we’ve been together meant n
gertips And I don’t want to walk away and find out nine months later I have a
ise daughter no one was ever going to fucking tell me about. *That* is why I
stopped kissing you last night.”

The color drained from her face as the words poured from my moutl
d “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Oh.”

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She whimpered as my arousal dug into her hip. When I ripped my mouth away, we were both breathless.

“I want you. So much I can’t see straight. But I don’t want to fuck this up. I don’t want sex to be all we have. I don’t want to wake up in bed one morning and have you tell me it’s been fun and all, but a relationship isn’t really what you’re after. That the months we’ve been together meant nothing. And I don’t want to walk away and find out nine months later I have a daughter no one was ever going to fucking tell me about. *That* is why I stopped kissing you last night.”

The color drained from her face as the words poured from my mouth. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Oh.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

VERA

Today had taken a toll.

Numbness had spread throughout my body. Skin, muscle, bone ran surface to core. Not even a hot shower had chased it away. It started hours ago, the moment Mateo had left. It was like he'd collected the feeling in my nerves and stuffed it in his pocket, stealing it away when he'd walked out of the loft. With every passing minute, it had crept further. Sunk deeper.

Until finally, nothing.

I'd been sitting on the couch, knees hugged to my chest, for a while I didn't turn to look at a clock. I just sat here wishing that the numbness disappear.

What a stupid wish.

Without this numbness, I'd only hurt.

I ought to wish for something else, like a magic crystal that would glow red and warn me about days like today.

Days that scarred.

I'd found my father today. Sort of.

And the one person I wanted to tell, the person who might help me understand sense of what had happened on my hike, was Mateo. The one person who could never know.

Maybe I'd brought this bad day upon myself for standing him up at the airfield this morning. Karma had given me a swift kick in the ass.

My hike had been a disaster from the start. I'd left the ranch after calling in sick to work—I'd never called in sick before and the lie had festered immediately, coiling my stomach into a knot. But after Mateo's rejection, what I'd thought was a rejection—I'd needed air. I'd needed space.

I'd needed my dad.

Or at least, the hope that I might see him again.

So I'd set out into the mountains to continue my search.

I hadn't expected to find him. Maybe that was why today had been different. I'd gone out thinking I'd leave my name carved into the trunk of a tree with today's date and that would be the end of it.

I'd hiked until hunger had clawed and I'd stopped for lunch, scarfing protein bars. Then I'd found the best tree in sight, one with no hanging branches that might obscure my carving. I'd just taken out my pocket knife and opened the blade when I'd accidentally sliced my finger.

I'd yelped and cursed. As I'd popped the cut into my mouth to suck the blood, I'd caught movement out of the corner of my eye. For a second, I thought it was a bear and I was truly fucked.

But the color was wrong. Instead of a grizzly's cinnamon fur, I'd caught a flicker of orange-red popping out from behind a thick tree trunk. The red hadn't been on a head, but a face. A beard, thick and scraggly.

Dad would never stay clean shaven again, not without a razor and shaving cream. But he'd never let his beard grow unruly.

Until now.

In my mind, Dad looked the same as the day I'd left him two years ago. Stubbled. Strong. Sad.

The man I'd seen for a split second today looked like he'd been living for two years. There'd been dark circles beneath his eyes. A hollowed-out cheeks. And that nasty, frizzled beard.

He must have heard my yelp of pain when I'd sliced my finger. He'd reacted on instinct, a father rushing for his injured child.

Except he hadn't come for me. He'd darted out of sight. And when I'd sprinted after him, he'd vanished by the time I'd made it to the tree.

He'd been out there, watching me. He'd stayed hidden. He had to have heard me shout his name.

And he'd left me all the same.

He'd left me.

Why?

My chin quivered, but there were no more tears to cry. I'd left them on the forest floor as I'd hiked back to my car.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was delusional and the only person hiding in the rainy mountains today had been me.

But it was so ... real.

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on—or

As real as a kiss from Mateo.

God, I was such a jerk. I'd been in an awful mood when I'd finally r
home. He'd surprised me and thrown me off-balance. And instead of
k of a behaving like an adult, I'd thrown a tantrum about him pushing me aw

Not once had it crossed my mind that he might have his own reason:
g two taking this slow. Not once had I considered his feelings.

Whatever Alaina's mother had done to him, she'd sliced deep. That
; limbs flipped wasn't fully healed. And rather than respect his boundaries, I'd let my
bullshit come between us.

Damn it, what was wrong with me? I buried my face in my hands, th
off the , I'd numbness giving way to mortification and regret.

He'd left the loft right after our fight—if that even counted as a fight
ught a had returned with Allie and he'd gone to take her home. He'd left and
ed hadn't even apologized.

Tomorrow, I'd make this right. Tomorrow, I'd—

aving No. Not tomorrow.

Tonight.

He didn't seem mad, but the air between us wasn't clear.

I needed it clear. I needed to know we were okay.

Springing from the couch, I hurried to my bedroom. My muscles we
ng hard and sore, not just from the hike but from sitting in one spot for too long
s to his grabbed a dark green hoodie and pulled it over the T-shirt and sweats I
d dressed in after my shower. Then, not bothering with socks, I slipped i
pair of tennis shoes, swiped my keys from the counter and flew out the

It was a black night, the clouds blocking out any moon or starlight. I
l'd headlights turned raindrops into specks of white and my windshield wi
worked furiously to keep the glass clear as I bounced along the muddy
ive roads to Mateo's cabin.

The porch light was on when I arrived. Alaina's bedroom was dark ;
only a faint glow came from the main room's windows.

I threw the hood over my hair before climbing out into the rain and
running for the porch.

Like always, I didn't have to knock. By the time my foot landed on
all on stair, the door opened and Mateo stood in its threshold.

king in "Hi," I said, breathless.

He shifted sideways, waving me inside.

I pushed away my hood but didn't bother taking off my shoes. I was made it here to stay.

"I'm sorry," I blurted. "I know it's late. I just wanted to say that I'm ay. I was so caught up in my own head, I didn't think about what you might s for feeling."

"It's all right." He sighed, staring at me for a long moment. Then, fa wound than I could blink, he caught my elbow and hauled me into his chest.

I sagged against him, wrapping my arms around his waist. "I'm sorr "I'm trying, Vera. I'm trying so hard to do us right."

"Us?"

He buried his nose in my hair. "Us."

t. Anne My heart swelled so big it felt like it was going to come out of my th

I The clouds thinned. Gray skies made way for blue.

We stood there for a few long moments, just breathing each other in Mateo's arms relaxed and I eased away.

"You were crying today."

I shrugged. "A little."

"Because of me?"

"No."

re stiff He hummed. "Want to talk about why?"

g. I "No. Do you want to talk about her? Alaina's mom?"

'd He shook his head. "Not tonight."

nto a "Are we okay?" My voice sounded too small. Too vulnerable.

door. He tucked and untucked a lock of my hair. "Yeah, Peach. We're oka

My Relief coursed through my veins. The numbness was gone, and with

ipers knot in my gut. Maybe tonight, I'd actually be able to sleep. And tomo gravel I'd think long and hard about what to do about my father.

and "Good night." I rose up on my toes, placing a kiss on his cheek. The flipped up my hood and opened the door to the stormy night.

"Wait." He snagged my hand before I could duck outside. "Don't go meant what I said earlier. I don't want to fuck this up. Part of me know responsible thing to do is get an umbrella and walk you to your car. Bu the top other part wants to say fuck it. To pick you up and carry you to my bec pray like hell I don't ruin us."

I didn't want him to get an umbrella. I didn't want to go out in that r

"You won't ruin us."

"I might."

n't I laid my hand on his heart. His good heart. A heart intent on protect mine. "I don't want to go."

sorry. He held perfectly still, waging an internal war. There was a blue um ht be propped up beside the coat hooks. For a moment, I was sure he'd pick

Then he blinked, the war over, and crushed his mouth to mine.

ster Yes. I threw my arms around his shoulders, holding tight, as he haul off my feet. The kiss wasn't sweet or gentle. The moment my lips part y." Mateo's tongue swept inside to devour.

He licked and sucked, consuming me whole. The world beyond us disappeared.

roast. I wrapped my legs around his waist, wanting to burrow deeper into l strong body.

. Then He groaned, slanting his mouth the opposite way before pulling my lip between his teeth. Then he flicked the hood off my hair, kicked the shut and carried me through the house, straight to the open bedroom do

We were a mess of wet lips and wandering hands. God, he had big h hadn't noticed just how large until tonight. They splayed across my rib hips as he laid me on his soft bed. He dragged a wide palm down my tl before cupping my ass to pull me closer as his weight settled on mine. hard body covered mine, his hardness rubbing against my core.

I gasped, arching into his touch. It wasn't enough. I wanted more. If didn't get out of these clothes soon, I'd combust. "Mateo."

ay." "Fuck, I want to taste every inch of you." He dragged his lips down column of my throat, his tongue across my skin.

it, the I pulled at his T-shirt, fumbling, bunching it up and reaching for the rrow, But he was so tight against me, all the cotton did was stretch. "Off. Tal off."

n I Mateo reached behind his neck and yanked it off his body.

. I The heat from his naked chest was like an inferno beneath my hands was my turn to roam, to touch every inch. My fingers dipped into the s the muscled grooves of his back, tracing from his spine to the dimples just it the the waistband of his jeans.

l and I slipped my hands into his pockets, molding my grip to the curve of behind. His ass was perfect, hard and round and ... I squeezed. How r ain. years had I wanted to slide my hands into Mateo's jeans pockets? A gi smile broke across my face. It was better than the dream.

ting “Fuck, Vera.” He tore his lips away from my throat and leaned back
breath as ragged as my own.

brella My hands slid to his front, trailing up those washboard abs to the du
it up. of black, coarse hair on his chest.

ed me The cabin’s outside lights were on. They were losing the battle with
ed, night, but they cast enough of a silvery shadow into the room to reveal
heat in Mateo’s eyes. And the worry.

 “You’re shaking.”

 I was? I felt it then, the trembling in my legs and arms. It was only r
The good kind of nerves.

his “We can stop.” He swallowed hard.

 Oh, hell no. We weren’t stopping. I shifted to sit up, forcing him to c
bottom away. And when I had enough space, I ripped the hoodie over my head
door tossed it to the floor. “Don’t stop.”

oor. The corner of his sinful mouth turned up. Then he was on me in a fl
ands. I hands taking me beneath the arms to hoist me higher into the bed. Som
s and at the same time, he managed to strip off my T-shirt.

high My bra came next. The trembling stopped, the nerves erased by lust
His moment his lips captured a nipple and sucked it into his mouth.

 “Oh, God.” My skin, my bones, melted beneath his hot mouth.

I He cupped my breast, kneading my flesh as he tortured that swollen
with his tongue and teeth. Then he moved to the other nipple, giving it
the same treatment.

 He trailed his lips down my sternum, shifting lower to dip his tongue
hem. my navel. Then he pulled at the waistband of my pants, easing them do
ke it my legs. My panties came next, dragged over my thighs in slow, tortur
inches.

 Goose bumps broke out across my skin as a smile toyed with my me
s. It Mateo Eden, my Mateo, was stripping me bare.

 “You’re so damn beautiful, Vera.” His voice was hoarse. “Look at n

above I opened my eyes and found his waiting.

 “I see you.”

f his My heart stopped. A full stop. He saw me. If there were any lingerin
many doubts, they were gone by the time my heart started beating again.

ddy I put my hand to his cheek, his stubble rough against my palm.

 He twisted, kissing the inside of my wrist, then moved lower, taking
knees and pushing them apart.

, his His warm breath tickled my skin before he kissed my thigh. “Has an
ever done this to you?”

sting “No,” I confessed. High school boyfriend Seth and I had only been
together twice. Both times had been nervous and awkward and we’d fo
the more on the deed than foreplay.

the Mateo dragged his tongue through my slit.

I gasped, nearly coming off the bed.

His hands kept me pinned and he hummed a word I couldn’t quite m
erves. out, but it sounded a lot like *mine*.

Every fleeting thought left my mind as Mateo fluttered his tongue on
clit. There was nothing in the world but his mouth and this pleasure. G
ease loved his mouth. I hadn’t spent enough time appreciating his mouth.

I and I panted and writhed as he lapped at my center. My whole body tren
my toes curling into the bedding. The peak came so fast that my orgas
ash, his surprised me. One minute I was on Mateo’s bed, the next I was in the s

ehow, He licked me relentlessly as I pulsed. He drew out the release for wh
like hours, until finally, the white spots in my vision cleared and I cam
the to earth.

“Delicious.” He wore a smirk as he stood from the bed, like he’d jus
a prize. Then he stripped out of his jeans, setting himself free.

peak I propped up on an elbow and my mouth watered at the sight of his c
the long and thick.

“You’re ...” Holy God. Definitely different than High School Seth.

e into Mateo went to the nightstand to retrieve a condom, rolling it on his l
own Then he climbed on top of me, settling into the cradle of my hips.

ous He kissed my neck, whispering those lips against my pulse until I w
trembling again. There was an ache in my core, a need to be filled, the
outh. so strong it was like that first orgasm hadn’t even happened.

ne.” “Vera.” He pushed the hair away from my face, then lined up at my
entrance. “Close your eyes.”

I shook my head. I’d spent years memorizing Mateo’s expressions. T
one had never been mine. Now that it was, I wasn’t missing out. So I k
gaze locked on his, taking in the midnight blue of his eyes, as he broug
together.

I moaned, stretching around his length.

; my “Fuck, you feel so good.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowe
That sexy throat. I leaned up and dragged my tongue across that bur

anyone Mateo groaned and eased out only to thrust in again, this time routine deep.

I whimpered, moving beneath him as he brought us together, over and over. His strokes were measured. Controlled. His eyes fluttered closed, jaw flexing like he was holding back.

Next time, I wanted him to lose control. I wanted him to be real and unrestrained. But tonight, he fucked me slow.

Thrust after thrust, he rocked me to the edge.

I came on a gasp, my heart thundering as I exploded. Pulse after pulse, my orgasm put the first to shame. It was like shattering into a million pieces, and when those pieces came together again, I was someone new.

Mateo's. I was *Mateo's.*

"Fuck, Vera." He gritted his teeth, holding back for a moment. Then he came on a roar into his pillow.

We were both entirely spent and boneless when he collapsed on top of me. I savored his weight, breathing in his scent, until he rolled to his back, pulling me with him as he positioned me on his chest.

Below my cheek, his heart was hammering.

He brushed an errant lock of hair away from my cheek before finally shifting us apart.

While he went to the bathroom to deal with the condom, I hugged a pillow, fighting sleep.

When Mateo returned, he curled his body around mine, holding me close. And just as I was drifting into dreamland, his lips brushed the shell of my ear as he whispered, "Mine."

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I came on a gasp, my heart thundering as I exploded. Pulse after pulse, this orgasm put the first to shame. It was like shattering into a million pieces and when those pieces came together again, I was someone new.

Mateo's. I was Mateo's.

"Fuck, Vera." He gritted his teeth, holding back for a moment. Then he came on a roar into his pillow.

We were both entirely spent and boneless when he collapsed on top of me. I savored his weight, breathing in his scent, until he rolled to his back, taking me with him as he positioned me on his chest.

Below my cheek, his heart was hammering.

He brushed an errant lock of hair away from my cheek before finally shifting us apart.

While he went to the bathroom to deal with the condom, I hugged a pillow, fighting sleep.

When Mateo returned, he curled his body around mine, holding me close. And just as I was drifting into dreamland, his lips brushed the shell of my ear as he whispered, "Mine."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MATEO

Birds chirped beyond my bedroom windows, drawing me from sleep. I stretched my arms wide, and buried my face in a pillow, smelling Vera's sweet scent on the sheets.

I reached for her but the other side of the bed was empty. As I pushed up on an elbow, a sunbeam hit me right in the eyes. Damn, that was a bright one. Last night's storm must have passed.

What time was it? I twisted to look at the clock on my nightstand. Eight o'clock. I'd slept two hours longer than normal. Allie rarely let me sleep past six.

Allie. "Shit."

I ripped the sheets from my legs and flew out of bed. My boxer briefs were on the floor, stuck in my jeans from where I'd shoved them off last night. I dragged both on, not bothering with my zipper, and bolted for the door.

The moment I turned the knob, I heard Allie's soft giggle. The smell of coffee and bacon hit my nose, and when I searched the house, I found the girls together in the kitchen.

Vera had Alaina on her hip. The two of them were staring out the window over the sink.

"Tee." Allie pointed.

"Yes, that's a tree. What color is it?"

"Green." Someday, Allie would be able to say her colors. I hated that day already.

"And what color is the sky?"

"Blue."

"Good job, Jellybean." Vera kissed Allie's cheek. "Do you know what sound a dog makes?"

"Woof woof."

“That’s right.”

They smiled at each other, and my hand came to my heart.

After last night, there was no going back with Vera. She wasn’t just my skin, she’d burrowed down to my bones, infusing the marrow each passing day. The way she was with Allie was ... a gift.

For the first time in her life, Allie had someone like a mother. I patted my pocket for my phone to take a picture, but it was empty. It must have fallen on the floor at some point last night. So I stared, committing the moment to memory, wishing I could bottle it up for Allie to revisit when she was old.

I watched them run through barnyard animal noises. A cat. A chicken. A sheep. A cow. Every sound was followed by a quiet laugh.

sleep. I
ng

No matter what else happened today, it would be a good day.

“What sound does a pig make?” Vera asked.

ed up
ght sun.

Allie snorted. Not an oink. A snort.

A snort that sounded a lot like the one Vera made when she laughed hard.

ight
ep past

I hadn’t taught Allie to snort. Vera must have. Was it possible to love someone this early in a relationship?

Though I guess we weren’t exactly new, not in a lot of ways. Vera had been a part of my life for years. A part of Allie’s too.

fs were
ght. I

We were just starting down a different path.

And there was no looking back.

l of
my

“Daddy!” Allie spotted me first. She squirmed so Vera would set her feet down, then her feet pounded across the floor as she raced over and into my arms.

indow

“Morning, Sprout.” I kissed her temple and pushed her hair off her face. I carried her to the kitchen. “How are my girls?”

7

Allie let out a string of words, something about Vera and eggs and jam. And Vera blushed, trying to hide her rosy cheeks with her coffee mug. God, I hoped that blush didn’t fade. I hoped that twenty years from now she blushed just as often and kept giving me that sweet, shy smile.

“Hi.” I took her chin, tilting her face up. Then I brushed a kiss to her cheek, my tongue darting out for a quick taste.

at

“Hi.”

“Sorry I slept in. I haven’t done that in, well ... two years.”

“Daddy, dow.” Allie kicked her legs to be set free.

She raced off like a rocket for the toys I'd cleaned up last night. The I'd have to clean up again tonight.

under "I hope you don't mind, but I cooked breakfast." Vera nodded to the where a frying pan was out with scrambled eggs and bacon. "Allie was hungry."

ed my "Not at all." I hauled her into my arms, her hair tickling my naked c

allen "What are you doing today?"

nt to "I have to work at ten."

older. "For how long?"

n. A "Until closing."

Damn. So much for spending a day together. "All right."

"I should actually get going so I can make it home to shower and ch then get to town."

too "Drive safe. The gravel roads get slick when they're wet." The warn was pointless. Vera drove exactly like my father: five miles under the s limit and with hands placed firmly on ten and two.

re I kissed her perfect mouth, then stole her coffee mug, taking a sip as walked to the door.

ad She pulled on her shoes. "Bye, Allie."

"Ve-wa, you go?" Outrage contorted her little face.

The feeling was mutual.

"Sorry. I have to work."

r "Oh." Allie's pout was short-lived. It disappeared a second later wh o my picked up a doll to brush its hair.

face as Damn, I regretted sleeping in. She opened the door and stepped outs before I was ready to say goodbye. "See you later."

"Bye." She smiled and jogged down the porch stairs.

uice. I leaned against the doorway, the air cold against my naked chest, ar ig. watched as Vera got in her car. Then, with the brake lights glowing rec now, because, like Dad, she'd ride those brakes so hard they'd need to be re every year, she retreated down the mountain.

r lips, With a sigh, I turned inside and went about my day, starting with a breakfast that wasn't cereal for a change. Then Allie and I got dressed muck boots and old jeans to go outside and work on the sunken firepit building out back.

Allie jumped in puddles while I arranged blocks for the retaining wa when we were both soaked, her with water and me with sweat, I went i

toys to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch.

As the afternoon passed, I checked the clock too. I picked up the hot stove, Allie mess it up, then picked it up again. Restless energy made it impossible for me to sit and read or watch TV.

Would it be too clingy to visit Vera at Eden Coffee? Probably. Yes. *hest. it.*

Another rainstorm brewed during Allie's nap, thwarting any plans to go outside and keep working, so I took a shower and put on clean clothes. By the time five o'clock rolled around, two hours until Vera would be at work, I'd had enough of my own damn house.

So I loaded Allie into my truck and we set off for town to have an evening change, dinner at Knox's restaurant.

Knuckles was on the first floor of The Eloise Inn. Two family businesses, one owned by my brother, the other my sister, that were the heart of downtown Quincy. And across the street, the other piece of my hometown heart, Eden Coffee.

I wasn't going to visit that little green building. Yet. We'd probably be there after dinner.

The restaurant was busy for a Sunday night. Though these days, it was always busy. Knox's food had a chokehold on tourists and locals alike.

Once the busy summer season started, there'd be no popping in for a bite unless I wanted to sit in the kitchen. Every table would be full from noon to close. But even then, I didn't go often without Knox's cooking. My brother took pity on my pathetic culinary skills, and Knox would swing out extra from Knuckles to the cabin.

There was never extra. But I think he worried Allie would come to prefer the blue box macaroni and cheese over his homemade version.

The hostess seated us at a booth in the back corner of the restaurant, a place where Allie could bounce around and not disturb other patrons. After placing leaving a coloring menu and crayons for my daughter, she went to get drinks and let Knox know we were here.

My brother came out with flour dusting the sleeve of his black T-shirt and a dish rag hung from his back jeans pocket.

I was "Hey." Knox clapped me on the shoulder, then bent and snagged Allie from the booth for a hug. "How's my Allie girl?"

She giggled as he blew a raspberry on her neck. Then she pointed to the crayons, prattling off their colors.

He set her down, sitting in the space beside her while she went wild with coloring. Her tongue stuck out of the side of her mouth as she fistfisted a scribble scribbling over the kids' menu.

Those were Memphis's contribution to the restaurant. Since she'd come into my brother's life, they'd not only added coloring pages for kids at Knuckles, but the number of options on the kids' menu had doubled.

"Didn't think you'd be working tonight," I told him.

"I'm trying to put in as many hours as I can before the baby is born. Memphis wanted a special hot dog and movie night with the boys."

Their daughter was due any day now. They were naming her Annie, Mom. I liked that we'd have an Annie and an Allie. I hoped their similarity wouldn't end with their names and that they'd become friends, not just cousins. We all wanted our kids to be close.

"Let me know what I can do to help," I told him. "Whatever you guys need."

Knox and Memphis had come to my rescue more than a few times when Allie was a newborn. They'd done more than just show up with meals. Not long after I'd brought Allie home from Alaska, Knox had hung out in my cabin one afternoon just so I could take a nap. And whenever I was in need for a babysitter, Memphis was right behind Mom in line to volunteer.

"So how are things going?" he asked. "Lyla mentioned you're teaching Vera how to fly."

News didn't take long to travel through our family, did it? "Yeah."

"How's it going with you two?"

It would be easy to blow him off. But both Griffin and Knox had always been more than just my brothers. Because they were so much older, I'd always looked up to them. Tried to be like them.

They were good men. They were good husbands and fathers.

And if I wanted to be like them, maybe all I needed to do was ask for help.

"I don't want to fuck it up with Vera." For myself. And for Allie. I couldn't want to mess up the chance for her to have someone like that in her life.

"Then don't fuck it up," Knox said.

I laughed. "That easy?"

"Yeah, brother. It's that easy. Just love her. The rest takes care of itself. Just love her.

Simple. It sounded too simple.

“If you can’t do that,” Knox said, “let her go.”

crayon, No. Not an option. Not after last night.
Just love her.

ome Could I do that?
I cared about Vera. But love? It was too soon. Too early. But the poi was there, like a flower waiting to bloom. Waiting for when the time w right.

And “Thanks,” I told Knox.
“Anytime.” He kissed Allie again, then tapped the menu. “I’m maki after myself a cheeseburger quesadilla for dinner. Want one?”

arities “Hell yes.” It was my favorite concoction of his and something he re to put on the Knuckles menu. It was for special guests only.

ys “Allie, do you want chicken strips and french fries?”
“Yep.”

hen He ruffled her hair, then slid from the booth, disappearing to the kitch the waitress brought over our drinks.

too. Allie nibbled on her food. She was a good eater, albeit slow, and by t at the time we made it out of Knuckles, the lights were off at Eden Coffee an a bind Vera’s car was already gone from the alley.

ing So I headed to the ranch, bypassing Mom and Dad’s house to park b the Honda. Then I carried Allie to the loft and knocked on Vera’s door

She answered with wild hair and a massive, wet stain on the front of Eden Coffee shirt. “Hi.”

ays “Hey.” I nodded to the stain. “You okay?”
“I was locking up and spilled my coffee.” She gave herself an eye ro l opened the door so we could come inside. “Not my most graceful mon

“Ah. Want to take a shower? Or just change your shirt before we lea Vera blinked. “Uh, where are we going?”

or a bit “Home.”
“Oh. Um, I didn’t ... I have to study tonight.”

lidn’t “Okay.”

e. She didn’t move. Why wasn’t she moving?
“Vera, get your stuff.”
“But you just said okay.”

self.” “Okay, as in you can study at home. Allie sleeps best in her bed. An want you in mine.”
Her cheeks pinkened.

It never got old.

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It never got old.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MATEO

Thunder shook the house, waking me from a dead sleep. I lifted my head, holding my breath as I listened for Allie's cry. But other than the clatter of rain on the roof and the grumble of lingering thunder, the cabin was quiet.

So I sagged into my pillow, stretching for Vera on the other side of the bed.

The empty bed.

This time when I sat up, it was all the way. "Vera."

My room was empty.

I tugged the covers away to slide out of bed, swiping my sweats off the floor from where she'd stripped them off me earlier. With the waistband hanging low on my hips, I searched for her in the living room and kitchen.

"Vera," I murmured.

Nothing.

What the fuck? Had she left?

After I'd picked her up from the loft, we'd driven to the cabin. She'd wanted to bring her car—I'd driven at turtle speed so she wouldn't feel rushed.

Then she'd studied while I'd gone through Allie's bedtime routine. When my daughter had been tucked into her bed, sound asleep, I'd waited for her to finish with her schoolwork. The minute she'd closed her textbook, I'd picked her up from the chair and carried her to my bed. While the rain fell outside, I'd worshiped her body.

It was the best damn sex of my life. She came alive under my hands. She was shy but playful. She let me take control, let me teach her what I liked. It was easy to learn what sent her over the edge. The noises she made ... thinking about her moans made my cock twitch.

So where the hell was she? I walked to the door, peering outside. He was still parked beside my truck, its paint glossy from the rain. I turned dragging a hand through my hair.

Allie's bedroom door was cracked.

I padded across the house, peering inside my daughter's room. And there was Vera, wearing my T-shirt and standing at the window, staring into the night. One arm was wrapped around her middle. The other clutched the wooden rail of Allie's toddler bed.

She gasped when I came to stand behind her, arms wrapping around my shoulders.

"Sorry," I whispered. "Thought you heard me. You okay?"

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han the
the
the
She kept her eyes trained forward, her pale face reflected in the glass. "I don't like thunderstorms."

Like the heavens had heard her whisper, lightning flashed and then a rumble of thunder boomed, threatening to cleave the sky.

Vera's entire body jerked. The hold she had on Allie's bed tightened into a death grip.

She was in here, standing guard, wasn't she? She was protecting my daughter from the storm.

the
id
hen.
My heart split down the middle. One half, so fucking full that she loved Alaina enough to act as her guardian. The other half, devastated for the terrified woman in my arms.

I didn't know the whole story about the day her life had changed, that her father had murdered her family. I wasn't even sure if Vance and Lydia knew that whole story. But I'd bet every penny to my name that it had happened that night.

d
l
"Come on, Peach." I peeled her fingers off Allie's bed and forced her away from the window. Then I swept her into my arms, cradling her against my chest as I carried her back to bed.

When
r Vera
'd
poured
Beneath the covers, I curled my body around hers, my chest to her back. With our legs twined, I held her so tight that when the next thunderclap rattled the house, I absorbed her flinch.

"Breathe," I whispered into her hair.

"I hate this."

. She
ked. It
just
It was agony, hearing the pain in her voice. How had she handled storms before now? Alone? The image of her huddled in a corner, shaking, poured into my mind. Even in my arms, she trembled.

er car “What can I do?” I asked.

l, “My dad used to talk me through them. He’d make up a story or sing a stupid song. Anything to keep my mind off the thunder and lightning.”

He’d comforted her through thunderstorms, even though the reason there terror was a nightmare of his making?

the Unless the trauma from her past wasn’t tied to a thunderstorm and h e was rooted in some other horrific event. Unless I’d gotten it wrong. Maybe these storms had been awful when she’d lived with him in the woods.

her The only way to know was if Vera opened up. It wasn’t happening t not when she was locked up tight.

There was a chance she’d never share the details of her past.

s. “I But maybe it was time to share mine.

a crack “How much did Lyla or my parents tell you about Alaina’s mother?”

l into a much.” This time when Vera jerked, it had nothing to do with the weather. S twisted in my hold, easing away just enough that she could see my face

“You never asked?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Why not?”

ved “I wanted to hear it from you. If you wanted to tell me.”

Spoken like someone with secrets she didn’t want to share. Secrets s e day been pressured to share. But secrets she’d keep until she was ready to r them on her terms.

yla “Do you want the short or the long story?”

“Long.”

er away received the condensed version. But I wanted Vera to have it all, start t my finish. To be the one person on earth who didn’t get the shortcut becau was hard to discuss.

ack. Vera snuggled closer as a flash came outside. But when the thunder rumbled, this time she only tensed.

“I was living in Alaska when I met Allie’s mom. I was working out Fairbanks, flying supplies to remote areas of the state.”

orms Most of the friends I’d made were other pilots who worked for touri companies. They’d fly people around to see bears or glaciers. Drop gro pped off at a remote cabin to fish for a week, then go back to pick them up.

My buddies had flown people while I'd transported cargo. My employers were an older couple who'd owned their company and small fleet for over twenty years. They reminded me a lot of my parents. Completely in love for her even after having been married for decades. Hardworking. Honest. Kind.

When I'd put out feelers for jobs in Alaska, I hadn't known what to expect. It was lucky that they'd called me first, that we'd hit it off so well on our initial phone call. And when they'd offered me a job to fly one of their planes, I'd accepted and moved my life to Fairbanks.

"I liked the town," I told Vera. "It was similar to Quincy. A little big on night,

Tourism was a driving force in the local economy, and for the most part the people were friendly and welcoming.

"My friends and I would go hiking in the summer on an off day. We'd meet up for drinks at our favorite bar. That's where I met Madison."

"That was her name?" Vera asked. "Allie's mother?"

"Not really." I nodded. "She had blond hair and hazel eyes. Her nose turned up at the tip. Allie looks nothing like her."

Because she was mine. Even if Madison's family hadn't insisted on a paternity test, there wasn't a doubt in my mind. One look at Alaina and Eden genes shined bright.

Vera curled closer as the thunder continued, seeking comfort and of course she'd reveal it too as she listened.

"Our relationship was casual. We'd cross paths and hook up for a night. That went on for a few months. Then the occasional night together became not so occasional. Every weekend turned into three or four times a week. Then we were seeing each other every night. And I just ... fell for her."

It was the first time I'd fallen for a woman. I'd never seen the end coming. No matter how many times I replayed our relationship, I still couldn't see it. I'd missed the warning signs. There'd been no hints that she was growing tired of my company. She'd appeared just as committed. Just as addicted.

"One night, I showed up at her house, thinking it would be like any other night. We'd have dinner. Hang out for a while. Go to bed. She answered the door and stared at me like I was a stranger. Wouldn't even let me inside. I told her it was fun but she didn't want anything beyond sex."

The way she'd stared at me, like I'd meant nothing. I'd never felt used before that moment.

"It was ..." I blew out a long breath. "Shocking. I cared for her."

"Did you love her?"

oyers “I don’t know,” I murmured. “Maybe. Too much has happened since
ver much that’s tainted what might have been love. Does that make sense?
ve, “Perfect sense.”

id. Did Vera feel that way about someone? Her father, maybe?
expect. I buried my nose in her hair, breathing in that floral and apple scent.
ur made telling this story easier. It made me realize how much Madison a
cargo had been missing. How we never would have worked, despite my best
efforts.

gger.” Because I was meant to be here in this bed. With Vera.

part, “I came home the week after Madison ended it. Quit my job. Gave u
apartment. I hadn’t planned to leave Alaska, but I realized just how al
e’d was up there. My friends were fine, but they weren’t my family. I got
homesick for Montana. Alaska is beautiful. But it’s not home.”

the So I’d returned to the ranch and picked up exactly where I’d left off.
Maybe I still wasn’t sure what exactly I’d been searching for in Alas
But when I’d come home, my expectations had changed. I’d realized th
a working for my parents and siblings was better than being alone.

l those “I helped Griffin on the ranch. Pitched in at Mom and Dad’s. Did w
Eloise needed at the hotel.” Especially after the shooting that had happ
fering the lobby. She’d had a hard time coming back to work after a disgruntl
employee had tried to kill her. Would have killed her, had Jasper not ju
ght. in front of the bullet.

ame “That first year back, I was busy. Besides work, there was a lot to be
k. on the cabin. I put on a new roof and expanded the clearing. If I got a v
” I’d go fly. And then Lyla got attacked.” Vera’s father had nearly strang
oming. my sister. He’d let her go, but not without leaving bruises all over her
spot “We all searched for him. Did you know that?”

my Vera stiffened. “Mateo, I—”

“Later.” We’d talk about that incident and her father later.

other She nodded.

ed the That had all happened before Vera had escaped and shown up in Ida
le. Told Vance’s doorstep.

ed She’d been in Montana then, hadn’t she? She’d lived in the mountai
where she still loved to hike. Did she ever revisit their old campsites? I
she found him already? Was she meeting him on her hikes?

Curious as I was, this wasn’t the time. Not as the loudest blast of thu
shook the walls and the rain pelted the tin roof.

e. Too Vera jerked, nuzzling closer. I listened for Allie again. If this storm
” up, it would wake her too. But there wasn't a sound.

It “A buddy of mine, another pilot, was getting married that June, so I
nd I back for a quick weekend trip to go to the wedding. After the reception
went to my favorite old bar for a drink. Madison was there. We hooked
Try as I might, I'd still cared for her. Still wanted her. “I knew the score
And she'd made sure to remind me the minute I'd climbed out of her
to deal with the condom.

A condom that had broken.
up my “I came home after the wedding. Put her out of my mind for good. U
me I months later, when I was about to come to a family dinner, and got a call
from one of Madison's friends. We'd met before. She'd go with Madison
the bar from time to time. I'm not even sure how she got my number, but
glad she had it.”

ska. When she'd told me her name, I hadn't even remembered who it was
hat “Mateo?”

“Yes.”
whatever “This is Leesa.”

ened in “Who?”

led ex- “Leesa. Madison's friend.”

umped “When I left Alaska after that wedding, I hadn't expected to hear from
Madison again. We were done. She was done. I'd already moved.” I'd
e done her up.

whim, Maybe that had been my mistake. Maybe I should have stuck around
gled much would be different if I'd stayed.

throat. Madison might still be alive.

“Leesa told me to get to Alaska. Right away. That Madison was ... ;
didn't understand it at first. I thought she was asking me to get there to
find her, like a search and rescue.”

But when Leesa had started crying, when she'd said that Madison was
who on dead, I'd dropped to my knees on the cabin's kitchen floor.

ns “Madison started hemorrhaging after Allie was born. The doctors couldn't
stop it. She died in the delivery room.”

Had “Oh, God,” Vera gasped. “Mateo. I'm so sorry.”

under My throat was thick, the words hard to choke out. “She didn't tell me
months and she never told me she was pregnant.”

kept I took a minute, breathing through the tightness in my chest. Madison's death had been a tragedy. But everything else had been a betrayal. It was harder to talk about than the rest and was the part that didn't make the short.

l up." "Allie was two days old when Leesa called me."

re." "Wait. What?" Vera pushed back, eyes wide.

r bed I nodded. "Madison's family was going to take Allie. Only a few people knew I was her father, and they decided after Madison died, they were going to tell me. Because Madison was never going to tell me. Leesa thought it was wrong. So she went behind their backs and made that phone call

all *Thank fuck.* I wouldn't have known my daughter otherwise. I'd have missed out on her entire life.

out I'm "When I showed up in Alaska and marched into the hospital, well ... a mess. Madison's family refused to acknowledge me. They said I was Allie's father. I had to fight to get a paternity test."

"Seriously?" Vera's eyes bugged out. "How could they do that?"

"They wanted her." I shrugged. "I'm just glad I was able to make it so fast. Before they let anyone take Allie home."

om If not for my own plane, I wouldn't have made it. That had been another harrowing flight, riddled with nerves and shock and adrenaline. Exactly the mental headspace they teach pilots to avoid.

given "When the dust settled, after the paternity test results came in, the hospital released Allie to me. Madison's parents were furious. Threatened to go to court for custody. I knew I needed to get the hell out of Alaska. But eventually, I promised they could have a relationship with her. That they were welcome in Quincy at any time."

gone. I "Have they ever visited?"

help "Not once." No visits. No birthday cards. No Christmas presents. No phone calls. They were as dead to Allie as her mother. "I haven't spoken to them since the hospital."

ouldn't "Idiots," Vera scoffed. "They don't even know what they're missing." "Yeah." I breathed her in, a smile ghosting my lips. God, I loved that she was mad. That she knew how special Allie was. That she'd fight to save my daughter's life.

e. Nine This woman. She was spinning everything around, like I'd been wearing my shirt backward for years and she'd finally made me turn it right.

n's "Do you think Madison would have ever told you?" Vera asked. "A
as Allie?"

story "I don't know," I murmured. "I spent a lot of time with Leesa at the
hospital. She was the one who'd brought Madison to the hospital when
gone into labor. She'd stuck around after Madison died. When I asked
same question, she just stayed quiet. I think she wanted to give her frie
benefit of the doubt."

ople Vera gave me a sad smile. "Understandable."

n't "Someday, Allie will ask about her mom. I hope by then, I'll know
hought say."

l." "You will." She lifted her hand to my cheek. "Thanks for telling me
Thunder boomed again, but Vera didn't so much as blink. She kept l
it waseyes locked on mine, and when I bent to take her mouth, she sank into
n't kiss.

My sweats were stripped to the floor once again. The T-shirt she wa
wearing was dragged over her head. And when I slid inside her tight b
there the world faded away. The storm. The past. All that mattered was Vera

When we broke apart hours later, limbs tangled and skin sweat-slick
other thunder's roar had faded to a rumble. The wind had stopped whipping
y the the walls. The rain was slow and steady, white noise that followed us t
into sleep.

ospital The next morning, when I woke to find Vera in the kitchen with All
to again, the sky was blue. The sun was shining.

en The weather today, inside and out, was clear and a million.
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“Do you think Madison would have ever told you?” Vera asked. “About Allie?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “I spent a lot of time with Leesa at the hospital. She was the one who’d brought Madison to the hospital when she’d gone into labor. She’d stuck around after Madison died. When I asked her the same question, she just stayed quiet. I think she wanted to give her friend the benefit of the doubt.”

Vera gave me a sad smile. “Understandable.”

“Someday, Allie will ask about her mom. I hope by then, I’ll know what to say.”

“You will.” She lifted her hand to my cheek. “Thanks for telling me.”

Thunder boomed again, but Vera didn’t so much as blink. She kept her eyes locked on mine, and when I bent to take her mouth, she sank into the kiss.

My sweats were stripped to the floor once again. The T-shirt she was wearing was dragged over her head. And when I slid inside her tight body, the world faded away. The storm. The past. All that mattered was Vera.

When we broke apart hours later, limbs tangled and skin sweat-slicked, the thunder’s roar had faded to a rumble. The wind had stopped whipping against the walls. The rain was slow and steady, white noise that followed us both into sleep.

The next morning, when I woke to find Vera in the kitchen with Allie again, the sky was blue. The sun was shining.

The weather today, inside and out, was clear and a million.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

VERA

Lyla nudged my elbow with hers as we stood behind the counter at Eden Coffee. “So ... flying lessons?”

I laughed. “How long have you been wanting to talk about this?”

“Since Mateo came in here on Saturday.”

“Ah.” I nodded. “I’m proud of you for waiting four whole days.”

“It took every ounce of my willpower.”

Part of me wanted to keep it all inside. Whatever was happening with Mateo was ... unbelievable. Incredible. If I talked about it, would I jinx it? But at some point, everyone in his family was going to know that I’d spent the last four nights in his bed—if they didn’t already.

I had enough secrets to keep. Mateo didn’t need to be another one.

“I sort of stood him up on Saturday,” I said. “He wasn’t very happy about it.”

“So that’s why he was in such a bad mood. Well, he was overdue for a reality check,” she teased. “He hasn’t been stood up enough in his life.”

“It wasn’t my finest moment. I felt bad and apologized. We talked it over and I guess ... we’re together? I don’t know. I’ve had a crush on him for so long that it still feels surreal. And it’s moving so fast I haven’t had time to really figure it out.”

Mateo’s plan to take it slow had been entirely discarded. If I wasn’t working, I was at the cabin. Last night when I’d suggested I sleep in my bed at the loft for a change, Mateo had hidden my keys so I couldn’t leave. I’d found them in the freezer this morning.

“Tell him to slow down,” Lyla said.

“I don’t want to.”

She giggled. “Okay, then buckle up and enjoy the ride.”

God, what a ride it had been. Was it possible to become a sex addict four nights? Because I was hooked on Mateo. I realized now why he'd worried that sex would become the focus. It was quickly becoming an obsession.

He worshiped my body and made me feel cherished. Craved. He never made me feel naive. He loved discovering and claiming any firsts. My pleasure was his priority, his reward, and he did not disappoint.

But while I loved having him inside my body, our nights together were more than just trading orgasms. There was intimacy in every touch. In every moment of sleep.

at
is?" Whenever I rolled to the other side of the bed, he'd drag me back to sleep pressed against his side, wrapped in his strong arms, with his head surrounding me and his nose buried in my hair.

h
x it?
pent He touched me constantly. A brush of his knuckles against mine when we crossed paths in the living room. A tuck and untuck of my hair behind when we were at the dinner table. Little caresses that were playful and but promised there'd be more as soon as Allie was tucked in her bed.

“You're happy?” Lyla asked. I loved her for the concern etched on her beautiful face.

“I'm happy.”

about She didn't need to worry about my heart. Down deep, I knew Mateo wouldn't break it.

r an He wouldn't have chased me otherwise. If he wasn't in this to stay, I wouldn't have started an us in the first place. Not just for my sake. But for Allie's. He wouldn't let a woman into her life who might disappear.

out
or so
e to “When you get a chance, maybe give Vance a call,” Lyla said. “He's worried since Willie's.”

“He's always worried.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Can you blame him?”

“No.” After everything, if I were Vance, I'd be worried too. “I'll call later. See if he wants to meet for lunch.”

y own
ave. “He'd like that.” She pulled me in for a quick sideways hug, then she surveyed the display case and its empty spaces. “Looks like I need to be busy. What should I make? Muffins? Scones?”

“Carrot cake muffins?”

“With cream cheese frosting. Absolutely.” But before she could head to the kitchen to bake, the door opened, the shop's bell a cheerful chime.

in just A man wearing a pair of pressed slacks, a crisp white shirt and a bla
been blazer strode across the room. His blond hair was parted in a severe lin
above his left eyebrow. His gait was unhurried, but something about hi
made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

ver A gust of cold air and sharp energy accompanied him as he approach
counter.

I stiffened as he smiled. That was a wolf's smile.

ere Lyla must have noticed it too. She didn't move as he stopped in fron

every "What can we get for you?"

"Coffee. Cream and sugar."

his. I "Of course." She gave him a fake smile, then nodded for me to get h
t coffee. Like she didn't want me anywhere near this counter. "Anything

en we His gaze shifted to me. He stared for too long, unblinking as he took
hair and face. "Vera Gallagher?"

an ear My stomach dropped.

sweet He was a cop, wasn't he? Given the suit, probably a federal agent.

I hadn't looked closely enough at his torso when he'd walked inside
ier I'd bet my paycheck there was a holster and sidearm beneath that blaze

What was he doing here? What did he want? My heart was beating t
fast. My palms felt clammy, but I held my chin high and gave him a
saccharine smile. "Yes? I'm Vera Gallagher. Can I help you?"

he He held out a hand, not to shake mine, but to hand over the crisp, wl
business card I hadn't noticed him pull from his pocket. "Agent Ian
Swenson."

An FBI agent. *Fuck*. My nerves spiked, but I kept my smile fixed, m
s been shoulders relaxed, and tucked his card in the pocket of my apron. "Wh
do for you, Agent Swenson?"

"I'd love a moment to talk."

"About?"

I him "Your father."

ghed as My stomach plummeted to my tennis shoes. "Oh. Um, well, obvious
working."

to get "I'll wait." That wolf's smile widened.

I hated him already.

d for "Let me get your coffee," I said, holding up a finger. Then I moved
coffee cups, plucking a clean ceramic mug from the tray and filling it v
black coffee. His eyes bored into me the entire time.

ck When I set his mug on the counter in front of him, I pointed to the st
e against the wall where he could find cream and sugar. “Two dollars.”

im His eyes narrowing, he took a money clip from his pocket and slapp
five-dollar bill on the counter. “Keep the change. I’ll just find a table to
hed the wait.”

As in, don’t keep me waiting. *Asshole.*

I glared at his back as he carried his mug away.

it of us. Lyla leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Have you met him before

“No.” That was not the agent assigned to my dad’s case. That guy had
been older and shorter. I’d met him in Idaho two years ago. Even after
his and I had moved away from Coeur d’Alene to Quincy, I’d wondered if
g else?” follow me here. If he’d check in on me from time to time.

in my But I hadn’t heard so much as a whisper from the FBI in two years.

Either this Agent Swenson was here to ask questions about the past.
was here to break some horrific news.

Maybe they’d found Dad. Maybe he’d mentally cracked, hurt someo
, but again and finally been caught. Maybe he hadn’t been in the woods on
er. Saturday and my imagination was just playing tricks on me. Maybe Da
oo alive but locked in a jail cell.

“I’m calling Vance.” Lyla fished her phone from her apron, but before
could make the call, I put my hand on her wrist.

ite I shook my head, gaze locked on Agent Swenson’s shoulders as he v
to a table. “Let me find out what he wants first.”

If Vance rushed down to the cafe, he’d take over this discussion. Ma
ly Swenson would see it as Vance simply trying to protect me. Or maybe
at can I think we both had something to hide.

Lyla’s eyebrows came together but she nodded. “Talk loud. I’ll
eavesdrop.”

Swenson took the table closest to the counter, probably because he v
to eavesdrop too.

sly I’m I rounded the counter and took a chair opposite his.

He relaxed into his seat and kicked a leg up over his knee, like he w
to talk about sports or the weather. He swirled a straw in his coffee, try
appear unhurried and carefree. But his muddy hazel eyes betrayed him
to the were locked on mine with an intensity that almost made me squirm.

with Almost, but not quite.

tation “You want to talk about my father.” I leaned my forearms on the table.
“What about him?”

ed a “Have you heard from him?”

o “You mean like a phone call or weekend visit? No. I haven’t seen my father in over two years.”

“He hasn’t made contact with you?”

“Why would he?”

e?” “You’re his only surviving daughter.” He could have just said daughter.

ad But he had to add those other words. *Only surviving*. It was a knife, opening Vance the wound of my sisters’ deaths.

if he’d This bastard could rot.

“Is there a point to this visit, Agent Swenson?”

“I’m new on this case. The previous agent retired.”

Or he *Shit*. I’d liked the previous agent. He’d been conveniently scarce. Why I have the feeling that Swenson was about to make my life miserable?

one “According to his notes, it had been a while since he checked in with me. Last you spoke was in Idaho, correct?”

ad was “Yes.” Back when Vance was managing the authorities and the press. Maybe I should have let Lyla call him down.

ore she “He didn’t realize you’d moved to Montana,” Swenson said.

“Was I supposed to run that by him first?”

walked “No.”

aybe Silence stretched between us as he sipped his coffee, eyes never leaving mine.

he’d Intimidation was his go-to tactic, wasn’t it? He was an arrogant cop who thought he could frighten a woman. Asshole.

I wasn’t obligated to talk. To anyone. So I sat perfectly still, hands clasped in my lap, and let Swenson stare.

wanted Was there more to this visit? Or was it really just an introduction? A preliminary assessment? Why, after all this time, was the FBI in Montana? Why not

as here If they’d arrested Dad, I would have heard about it, right? Or Swenson would have mentioned it already. Vance or Winn would have probably been coming to see me, too.

. They The longer we sat and stared, the longer this visit felt tactical. Swenson wasn’t here to deliver news. He was here for information. His gaze was assessing. Too suspicious. Too curious.

Exactly what I didn’t need in my life.

le. The door's jingle sounded, drawing my attention, and a sweet voice through the room.

y "Ve-wa!" Allie raced across the cafe, her feet unable to keep up with body. She crashed on her hands and knees, but shoved herself back up kept on running.

"Hey, Jellybean." I stood from my chair in time to scoop her up and her cheek, then turned as Mateo walked over.

ter. He had his attention locked on Agent Swenson. When he finally meeting gaze, a thousand questions lingered behind those blue eyes.

"Hey, Peach." Mateo pulled me in for a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi."

"What's going on?"

hy did "Nothing." I waved off Swenson, dismissing him like the pest he was. "What are you guys doing?"

"Thought we'd come visit."

h you. The scrape of chair legs from the table had us both turning as Swenson stood, his coffee mug now empty. He wore an arrogant smirk as he rounded the table. "You've got my card, Vera."

"I sure do." I patted my apron's pocket.

Swenson whistled as he walked to the door, stepping outside and onto sidewalk. Then he disappeared from view, looking like a man out for an afternoon stroll, not a snake in the grass.

ving I turned, finding Lyla's eyes waiting. When I gave her a single nod, left the counter for the kitchen. To call Vance.

who "Who was that?" Mateo asked.

Allie played with the ends of my ponytail, oblivious to the edge in her clasped voice and the nervous breath I finally let loose.

"An FBI agent."

n Mateo's jaw flexed. "What did he want?"

ow? "To know if I've had any contact with my father."

on "You left your father almost two years ago. And the FBI is just now heard getting around to a visit?" He sounded mad, like the system had failed

son "He's new on the case," I told Mateo. And hopefully, like his predecessor Swenson would give up as soon as he realized that, short of a miracle, s too never find Cormac Gallagher. "I'm sure this visit was just protocol."

"Or maybe the FBI has finally decided it's time for justice. It's not r Vera. That your dad is out there living without consequences after what

echoed done.”

What Mateo thought Dad had done.

h her Yes, Dad was guilty of hurting Lyla. I’d always be angry at him for

and But for everything else?

If the FBI found Dad, there wouldn’t be justice.

kiss Dad had seen to that already.

t my God, what a mess. Was it too much to ask that I’d just be forgotten?
he’d be forgotten? Apparently so.

“Maybe you should call him,” Mateo said. “The agent. Tell him even
you know. If he’s new, he might have better luck at finding your father
him away for good.”

The anger in his voice made my insides churn.

is. Mateo didn’t know the whole truth. It didn’t surprise me he was furious
about what Dad had done to Lyla. I was upset about it too.

Dad wasn’t innocent. But he wasn’t guilty either.

son Lyla cleared her throat, coming to stand at my side. She smiled at her
minded brother, let him kiss her cheek, then turned to me. And between us passed
a silent exchange.

to the If I was in this with Mateo, if I was going to keep him in my life, my
secrets couldn’t stay hidden forever.

in Whether I wanted to or not, one day soon, I’d have to tell him the truth.
I’d have to open that box.

she

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“Maybe you should call him,” Mateo said. “The agent. Tell him everything you know. If he’s new, he might have better luck at finding your father. Put him away for good.”

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Mateo didn’t know the whole truth. It didn’t surprise me he was furious about what Dad had done to Lyla. I was upset about it too.

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I’d have to open that box.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

VERA

Guilt settled like a one-ton boulder in my gut as I tiptoed from Mateo's bedroom. He was sound asleep, his hair a disheveled mess like every morning. I eased the door closed and froze, breath held, ears straining for any noise.

I was quiet in the mornings when I woke up first, but I wasn't silent. Mateo never stirred as I made coffee or breakfast if Allie was hungry. It would be just my luck that today he'd wake up early too.

The house was still, not a sound came from beyond the door, so I eased the door backward and padded to Allie's room, peeking in to make sure she was asleep too.

Her hair, like her father's, was a wild mess of silky brown waves. Her eyes were pursed, her eyelashes perfect crescents above her smooth cheeks.

I'd miss her this morning. I'd miss having alone time with her before Mateo woke up. But what I needed to do today couldn't wait.

On hushed footsteps, I snuck to the cabin's door and left as it clicked shut. With my keys in hand, I hurried across the porch, careful not to make a sound on the boards that creaked. And when I reached the last stair, I bounded down the dirt, jogging to my car in bare feet.

Robins tweeted in the morning light, greeting the dawn. A chill snaked down my spine as I climbed into my car and turned on the engine, eyes fixed on the house, hoping like hell the door didn't whip open as I reversed a few feet.

I didn't breathe until I was half a mile away. The pit in my stomach deepened with every minute. God, Mateo was going to be so pissed. My groan filled the car.

We hadn't talked about Agent Swenson last night. When I'd made it to the cabin after work, Allie had been throwing a fit about her bath so I'd he

Mateo get her ready for bed. And once she was asleep, our mouths had used for anything but talking.

But I was only delaying the inevitable.

Mateo would need to know the truth about Dad. Just ... not yet.

Even Vance had agreed we needed to be thoughtful about what and we shared now that the FBI was in Quincy. He'd come to the coffee shop yesterday about five minutes after Mateo had left. Luckily, it had been afternoon, so we'd been able to sit down and replay Swenson's visit.

Vance's theory was that Swenson was a young, cocky agent trying to prove himself. What better way to impress his superiors than to solve a case that would make a media splash?

Mateo's
e it was
and I'd been in enough headlines to last a lifetime. In Quincy, I was just wasn't *that* girl who'd survived *that* night.

Swenson would have to find a new case to crack because I refused to the news again. He'd find nothing in Montana. I'd make sure of it.

Mateo
d be The sun's first rays crept over the mountain horizon as I drove off the ranch. By the time I made it to town, the sky was a kaleidoscope of blue golds. This was Dad's favorite time of day. He always preferred the sun to sunset. He said there was nothing more hopeful than the light of dawn fresh start on a new day to move past yesterday's mistakes.

sed
s sound There was no such thing as moving on, especially for Dad. He'd fought er lips tied to his sins. Trapped by old horrors.

Maybe the same was true for me. Maybe it would never go away.

Maybe that was what we both deserved.

As the highway turned into Main Street, I slowed to a crawl, creeping d shut. toward The Eloise Inn. The hotel stood proudly as the focal point and t a sound building in downtown Quincy. Most of the lights were off, guests still d to the into warm, plush beds.

ed But a few rooms had a golden glow from behind their drawn curtain including the corner room on the third floor.

s glued Agent Swenson's room.

way. Lyla had gone to the hotel yesterday to visit Eloise. While she was t she'd found out which room was Swenson's.

ly An early riser. The clock on my dash showed it wasn't quite five.

t to the I looped around the back of the hotel to the parking lot. Swenson's c lped simple black SUV with Washington plates, was in the second row. Its

I been windshield was coated with dew. Lyla had gotten the make, model and number from Eloise too.

Good. He was still in the hotel.

So far, my morning was going to plan.

how While Mateo had dozed soundly last night, I'd stared at the dark ceiling unable to shut my mind off. I'd spent too many years living under a cloak of a slow paranoia. Dad's. My own. My irrational fears had reached their peak at two.

o I'd convinced myself that Swenson had been outside, staking out the mountains waiting for me to lead him to Dad. So I'd decided that before I left for mountains today, first, I'd make sure I wasn't being followed.

Vera. I Vance said there was a slight risk that Swenson had gotten a warrant for my cell phone history. That he could have surveillance on my location to know about my hikes. Maybe he'd even bugged my car. But Vance had said there wouldn't be much probable cause for such extreme measures.

ie Yes, Dad was a fugitive. But the FBI had bigger cases than my father's. So as long as Swenson wasn't physically following me, there wasn't a rise in likelihood he'd have a clue where I was going.

vn, a Relief came in a long breath and I aimed my car back to Main, putting Quincy in my rearview. I took the familiar roads through the countryside toward Sable Peak. Then, parking in the same place where I'd been leaving my car for weeks, I retrieved my pack from the trunk, secured it on my shoulders and started my climb.

ig The ground was slick with frost. The trees would keep the forest's floor shaded for another few hours. My breath fogged in white clouds that billowed behind me, and even though it was chilly, my muscles warmed. Sweat tucked at my temples.

s, I stayed on the trail for a mile before I veered off in the direction I'd been on Saturday. The day I thought I'd spotted Dad.

here, Was he here? Was that why Swenson had come to Montana? Was it possible that Dad had been seen by a hiker? Maybe he'd gone into town for something critical, like first aid supplies, and someone had recognized his hair and face.

car, a It wasn't exactly easy for Dad to blend in with a six-inch scar running down his eye to chin.

He'd earned it from a car accident of sorts. He'd been in his twenties for a run, and came across a kid playing basketball in his driveway. The

l plate had rolled into the street just as an oncoming car was passing by. Dad l
watched as the kid chased his ball, oblivious to the danger. And so Dad
sprinted to the rescue, pushing the kid out of the way and taking the br
the hit.

ling, I was proud of that scar. Even if the world thought he was evil, even
oud of scar only added to the illusion, my dad was a hero. To that boy he'd sa
round And to me.

Off the trail, the hike was harder. I had to pick my way over rocks a
e cabin, branches, around bushes and trees. Dad had taught me how to hide foo
the When we'd been together, I'd jump over muddy patches. I'd walk on p
needles rather than dirt.

t for But today wasn't about hiding my tracks. Today was about speed, so
and the easiest path through the underbrush.

d also Another hour and my legs were straining, my lungs burned. But I ke
s. pushing hard until I reached the spot I'd been Saturday.

er. I took a moment to regain my breath, fishing my water bottle from r
t much pack for a drink. Then I cupped my hands around my mouth and let ou
piercing whistle.

ng Like always, silence was my only reply.

de My shoulders sagged. *Damn.*

iving Of course he wasn't out here. It was early. He was probably still wh
7 he'd made camp. And if he really was hiding from me, then he wouldn
around this area. Still, I had to try. This was as good of a place to start

loor I took the pocket knife from my backpack, opening it more carefully
illowedtime. And I found a nearby tree, ready to make the carving I hadn't on
beadedSaturday. My initials with the date. Except just as I cut away a piece o
bark, I hesitated.

l taken What if Swenson came out here? He certainly didn't seem like the h
type, not with his starched clothes and polished shoes, but he might su
me. Finding my footprints was one thing. That would be easy enough t
n for chalk up to a simple hike.

his red But a deliberate marking? I didn't need him stumbling upon a carvir
deciding to stick around Montana for the foreseeable future.

ig from So I closed my knife and tucked it away and, for good measure, whi
one more time.

s, out "Are you out here?"

e ball My mind knew the answer, even though my heart refused to believe

had This was a foolish search by a foolish girl. Why couldn't I let this go
I had couldn't I just stop? Part of me wanted to keep going, keep looking. The
unt of was young and I could cover a few more miles before I needed to turn

But the other part was so tired. So sick of these mountains. I could stop
if that here alone. Or I could go back to the cabin and spend the day with Mat
ved. Allie.

I whistled.

nd Nothing.

prints. I just wanted to go home.

ine On a sigh, I turned around, ready to hike back to the trail. But as I took
first step, I heard something different. Something not born from the wind
I took A nearly inaudible whistle. The sound was so faint, it could have been
trick of the wind.

pt But my heart stopped, my entire body going still, as I listened.

More nothing.

ny It was probably just the wind. Maybe a strange bird. But just to be sure
it a cupped my hands around my mouth for one last whistle, this one as loud
could muster.

My pulse boomed so loudly in my ears that I barely heard the reply.
was there, in the distance, a whistle just like mine.

ever "Oh my God. Dad!" I almost tripped on my next step but caught my
it's stickbalance. Then I ran, not uphill or deeper into the mountains, but in the
as any. direction from which I'd come, toward the trail. Maybe he'd come across
/ this footprints in the frost. Maybe he'd followed me this way and was rushing
catch up.

f loose I whistled again, my backpack bouncing on my shoulders as I hurried
pace between a jog and a walk.

iking The replying whistle got louder. Clearer. Both of us moving in the same
rprise direction toward each other.

io He was here. He had to be here. He was alive and coming for me.

"Dad!" I rounded a tree, jumped over an exposed root, then slowed to
ig and listen, my chest heaving.

The whistle. It was close.

stled I scanned the trees, searching past brush and branches. When the sound
came again, I followed it to my right. My boots thudded on dirt and
sweat dripped down my spine, but I pushed harder. Faster. Until the whistle
it. was so loud he had to be close.

Why? I skirted a patch of thick underbrush, and there, standing in a gap between two thick evergreens, was the man who'd heard my call.

back. My heart stopped.

My Mateo, blue eyes blazing with fury, stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What the fuck is going on, Vera?”

took my
breath.
I

sure, I
said as I

But it

cross my
finger to

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to

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edges,
whistle

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Mateo, blue eyes blazing with fury, stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What the fuck is going on, Vera?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MATEO

“Mateo, I—”
“Not yet, Vera.” I stalked down the trail, careful not to go too fast so she could keep up.

We’d been walking for a while, probably a mile, maybe more, and though she was ready to talk, I was not. The fury coursing through my veins was a vicious beast, and I needed more time to put it on its leash.

What was she thinking? What the hell was going on?

I’d give her credit for a stealthy escape this morning. She’d been quiet, not quiet enough.

I hadn’t woken when she’d slipped out of bed or left the house. But the old Honda’s engine didn’t exactly purr. It had been enough to rouse me from sleep, and when I’d realized what was happening, I’d shot out of bed, ran to the front door just in time to see her taillights disappear.

By the time I’d gotten dressed, then woken up Alaina to change her diaper before loading her into the car, I hadn’t known exactly where Vera might have gone, but I’d had a hunch. So I’d dropped Allie at Mom and Dad’s place, grateful they were able to babysit, then hustled to Sable Peak, hoping like hell I’d find Vera on her hike.

Locating the Honda had been easy enough. But Vera?

I’d followed the trail, hoping I’d be able to outpace her and catch up. Damn it, she was fast. And then she’d abandoned the trail.

If not for all the mud, I would have missed the spot where she’d veered off the path. Luck had been on my side, and I’d spotted a footprint. They were few and far between, but I’d managed to head in the same direction.

She’d whistled. If not for that, I wouldn’t have found her. I’d lost her and had been going in a different direction entirely when I’d heard the noise in the distance. Then she’d yelled.

She'd yelled for her fucking father.

Deep down, I'd suspected this. That these hikes were tied to Cormac didn't want to believe it. Was she searching for him? Or had she found already? Maybe, if I'd waited a bit longer, I would have caught them together.

Fuck. Was she hiding him? Helping him? After all he'd done, how could she?

It was no coincidence that she'd come out here today, the morning a that FBI agent had arrived in Quincy. And instead of telling me about it she'd just run away. Would she ever drop her guard and *talk* to me? Or would she always keep me in the dark?

My hands fisted and unfisted, and by the time we made it back to our vehicles, I was still really fucking pissed.

I dug my truck's keys from a pocket and unlocked the doors, opening the passenger side first. "Get in."

"But my car—"

"Can rust out here for all I care."

She frowned. "Mateo."

"Get. In."

"Don't be mad at me."

"Mad?" I scoffed. "You fucking scared me, Vera."

Her face blanched. "I'm sorry."

"Don't ever do that to me again. Don't ever leave without telling me you're going. If something is wrong, talk. To. Me." I jabbed a finger in her chest with each word.

That was the real problem here. Not that she'd gone hiking alone, though she didn't like it. Not that she'd snuck out of bed and my house. If she kept holding these secrets, if she kept setting me apart, we'd never survive it.

"I'm sorry, Mateo."

The regret on her face eased some of my anger. "You're searching for him."

She nodded.

"Why?" There was venom in my question.

Vera swallowed hard. "He's my dad."

Yes, he was her dad. She loved him still, didn't she? After everything done, she loved him. Had he brainwashed her or something? I didn't know.

how to deal with that. I didn't know how to deal with this. Hell, this was
2. But I fucked up. Absolutely, incredibly fucked up.

l him How did I fix this? I dragged a hand through my hair. "Have you been
seeing him?"

She shook her head. "No."

ould "But you've been looking for him. For how long?"

"Two years. Since we came back to Montana."

fter Two years? Well, I'd give Vera one thing. She was stubborn as hell.
it, Was that why she'd moved to Quincy with Vance? I'd assumed it was

r would stay close to Vance and Lyla. But she was really here to find her father
wasn't she?

ir "How do you know he's in Montana?"

g the "I don't but ..." She dropped her gaze, eyes closing. "This is where
we were living."

That, I knew. But it was only a fraction of the story, wasn't it? How
exactly had she ended up in Idaho with Vance? What did my sister know
she wasn't telling us?

Whatever story Vera, Lyla and Vance had been spinning was probably
bullshit. My sister had been lying to me, to all of us, for years.

It hurt. Our family was better than that. But I'd give Lyla the benefit
doubt. I'd give her the courtesy she hadn't extended to me. If she'd lied
had to have been for a good reason.

e where Probably for the sake of the woman at my side.

to my "Time for the truth, Peach. The whole truth."

Vera's shoulders sagged, like the weight of that truth was a heavy burden.
ough I When was she going to realize that she didn't need to carry it alone?

t She walked to her car, climbing up on the Honda's hood. With her
it. backpack stripped and resting behind her, she pulled her knees into her

That familiar defensive position.

or Someday, she'd learn she didn't need it. Not with me.

I sat on the hood beside her, the heels of my boots braced on the bumper.
Then I gave her the minutes she needed to tear down the walls guarding
truth.

"Dad grew up in Alaska. He became a cop and when he moved to Idaho
ig he'd he worked for a backcountry unit because he loved being outside. He
now said that he was born out of time. That he would have loved to have been
the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He was into survivalist stuff, always

as researching how to make different snares or traps. He could look at any
and tell you if it was poisonous or not. And he said that someday, he w
en to apply for that show *Alone*.”

If Cormac had been a survivalist, no wonder they’d lived off the grid
There was no way an average person could stay alive. But if he had the
skills? Yeah, he could live off the grid for a long damn time.

“I don’t want to talk about that night.” More walls. Walls that were
coming down, not today.

as to “All right.”

“He didn’t kill them.”

My gaze whipped to her profile. What? Cormac was innocent? How
that possible?

we Vera sat perfectly still, barely breathing, as she stared into nothingne
“My sisters. He didn’t kill them.”

Then who?

ow that “But he did kill her.” Vera’s voice was ice.

Her.

oly Her mother. Norah Gallagher.

Cormac had killed her mother. Why?

t of the Was it because Norah had killed Vera’s twin sisters? Oh, fuck.

d, it This wasn’t a little secret. This was *the* secret.

Her mother had murdered her sisters. And for years, the world had
believed Vera had drowned with them.

My brain struggled to rewrite everything I’d thought I’d known.
urden. Everything.

If Cormac had murdered her mother, he was far from harmless. But
mother had killed her sisters, well ... maybe he’d had a reason. What t
: chest. fuck? What the hell had happened that night?

“Dad took me away,” she said. “He loaded up everything he could in
hurry. His gear and guns. Clothes. Boots. Medicine. Not a lot of my stu
nper. so much that people would notice my things missing, but enough. We
g the stopped at an ATM for cash. I stayed out of sight. And then we left Ida
We drove all night and made it to the Olympic National Forest before
laho, We ditched the truck at a gas station, then started walking. I lost track
always time, so I’m not sure how long we went before he finally let us stop. T
: en on first year is kind of blurry.”

y berry Blurry? He'd taken her the night her mother had drowned her sisters
anted Yeah, that time would have been *blurry* for me too.

d. So Cormac had kept Vera with him. Why? He had to have known he
d. hard that lifestyle would be. Why hadn't he let her go and walked away

Stupid question. A team of wild horses couldn't drag me away from
And if he had murdered Norah, his choices were to run or go to prison.
not former meant staying with Vera. Maybe he'd thought the best place fo
was at his side. I couldn't exactly fault him for it.

Well, she wasn't brainwashed. That was something. She'd stayed w
dad because ... he was her dad. Maybe not quite the villain I'd thought
was minutes ago.

But he shouldn't have taken her. He should have left her behind. Va
ess. would have helped her. He could have gotten her into grief counseling
therapy.

Cormac had taken a traumatized teenager and isolated her from the
He'd done it to keep her close. Because he hadn't wanted to lose her.

I wouldn't have wanted to part with Allie either. That I could unders
But everything else? Despite Vera's love for her father, Cormac was fa
blameless. It was going to take some time for this to sink in. To make
of it all.

"We moved around a lot," she said. "Stayed hidden. Stayed in the
mountains."

There was no shortage of remote locations in the Pacific Northwest.
if Cormac knew what he was doing, he could have just bounced from
national forest to national forest. From Idaho to Washington to Oregon
if her Montana. There were thousands upon thousands of acres of untamed
he wilderness, most of which had never seen a human being.

"It wasn't horrible." Vera shrugged. "Dad did his best to make it
n a comfortable. We kept moving, kept biding time."

uff, not "Time for what?"

"Time to be forgotten. Dad's goal was always to get to Canada. He t
ho. maybe if we traveled far enough north, we could set up in a small town
dawn. no one would recognize him. But he was worried that crossing the border
of would be a risk. Even though it's relatively unguarded, he worried there
hat might be surveillance equipment, like drones, or thermal imaging cameras.
Maybe the roads had embedded sensors. He just didn't want to chance

soon, so we waited. Kept moving. Kept hiding. And eventually, we came to Montana.”

To Quincy.

“I got sick about four years ago. We’d had a few weeks where there was nothing to eat. My body was worn down, and I think I was dehydrated. It wasn’t anything serious but Dad didn’t want to risk pushing too hard. We’d just made it to Montana. He found a place tucked far away and let me rest for about a month. He built us a shelter. Hunted a lot. Once I started feeling better, I didn’t want to leave. I was tired of always being on the move. I stayed.”

If they’d arrived in Montana four years ago, that meant they’d been out here for two years. Two goddamn years. I loved camping. Give me a few weeks, even two months, and I’d be happy. But two years? Damn.

“Is that the longest you stayed anywhere?”

She nodded. “I liked it here.”

“Where?”

Vera pointed north. “About ten miles from here. I’ll take you there someday. It’s not exactly easy to get to, but it was close enough to town that we could go in for supplies.”

I blinked. “You came in to Quincy?”

“About once a month.”

Had we crossed paths? Huh.

Vera probably knew the mountains around Quincy better than me or my brothers or even Dad. It made me feel better about all the hiking she did. It was great, but it eased a few fears. No wonder Vance never objected to her coming here.

“This is where Vance found you, isn’t it?” I guessed. “You didn’t just show up on his doorstep in Idaho.”

“Yeah. They were partners. Did you know that? He never gave up on finding Dad. Not because of their friendship. Vance thought, like everyone else, that Dad had killed us all.”

Vance had come to Montana for justice. After Lyla was attacked, the police had put out a bulletin describing Cormac. His build. His red hair. The scar across his face. Vance had seen the APB and come here.

“I’d come to town for supplies. Vance saw me. Chased me down. I told him to Dad.”

“Then what?”

“Dad told him the truth. Lyla was there too.”

me to I blinked. “What? Vance let that motherfucker around her after he tr
kill her?”

Vera flinched and guilt flooded her gaze. “I didn’t know what he did
wasn’t her. Not until after Vance found us. I’m sorry. He shouldn’t have done
wasn’t promised he wouldn’t have let it go too far, he was just trying to scare
ist enough to buy himself time and get away. He was worried that someone
for would find me. I’m not making excuses for him. I’m just ... I’m sorry.
g it had never happened.”

So we “And what does Lyla think about all this?”

Vera gave me a sad smile. “She has Vance.”

living If Cormac hadn’t attacked her, Vance never would have come to Qu
: two And he never would have found Vera.

Son of a bitch. I’d still hate Cormac for what he’d put Lyla through.
damn if it hadn’t changed everything.

“You know the rest,” Vera said. “I left with Vance. We knew it would
impossible to convince people he didn’t murder my sisters, so we didn’t
bother trying. We decided to tell everyone I’d left him in Idaho. Let them
n that I keep thinking he’s a monster. Better that than have the FBI in Montana

Well, they were here now. “You came out today to try and find him
warn him away.”

“Yes. He should leave.”

“How do you know he’s here?”

: my “I don’t.” She hugged her knees tighter. “I just ... hoped. I didn’t thi
d. Not he’d really leave me.”

hikes. If Cormac had kept Vera hidden all these years, if he’d been determi
st keep her close, my guess was he hadn’t gone far.

n “He’s all I have left, Mateo. I know he’s not perfect. I know he’s do
some horrible things. But he’s my family. I need to find him.” A tear r
yone down her cheek. “He’s my dad.”

e “Hey.” I cupped her cheek in my hand, forcing her to face me. “He’s
all you have. Not anymore.”

r. The She sniffled, her chin quivering. “I’m sorry. I know I should have to
a long time ago but ... how? It wasn’t like I could show up at a family
: ook and say, ‘Oh, remember that time my dad almost killed Lyla? Yeah, it
now.’”

How the hell could she make me want to laugh right now? This won
wrapped her up, hauling her into my chest to kiss the top of her hair. “I

ied to now on, we go out here together.”

“W-what? You want to help?”

l to “Yeah. And I don’t want you out here alone. Not anymore.”

it. He Her eyes softened. “Thank you. But I have to come out here alone. I

her sees you, he won’t show himself.”

ie “Oh, I think he will.” I was banking on Cormac’s protective instinct

I wish come roaring to life. If he saw me with Vera, his curiosity might get th

better of him. He’d want to meet the man sleeping with his daughter. “

part of your life?”

“Yes.”

incy. “Then he’s got to meet me at some point.”

“But—”

But “Just say yes, Peach.”

She sighed. “Yes.”

ld be “No more hiking alone. Promise?”

’t “Promise.”

em I bent and dropped a kiss to her mouth, then slid off the hood of the

a.” held out my hand. “Let’s go get Allie and head home.”

and She set her hand in mine, but not to climb off the hood. Her grip tigl

“Mateo?”

“Yeah, darlin’.”

Her chin quivered. “Thank you.”

ink With a tug, I pulled until she was on her feet and in my arms. Then I

on to her. There wasn’t much else to say, not until I could puzzle it all

ined to my head, so I just held on to her.

ne Tight enough that maybe the next time she thought about going it al

she’d remember there was no need.

olled

s not

ld you

dinner

’s cool

nan. I

From

now on, we go out here together.”

“W-what? You want to help?”

“Yeah. And I don’t want you out here alone. Not anymore.”

Her eyes softened. “Thank you. But I have to come out here alone. If he sees you, he won’t show himself.”

“Oh, I think he will.” I was banking on Cormac’s protective instincts to come roaring to life. If he saw me with Vera, his curiosity might get the better of him. He’d want to meet the man sleeping with his daughter. “Am I a part of your life?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s got to meet me at some point.”

“But—”

“Just say yes, Peach.”

She sighed. “Yes.”

“No more hiking alone. Promise?”

“Promise.”

I bent and dropped a kiss to her mouth, then slid off the hood of the car and held out my hand. “Let’s go get Allie and head home.”

She set her hand in mine, but not to climb off the hood. Her grip tightened. “Mateo?”

“Yeah, darlin’.”

Her chin quivered. “Thank you.”

With a tug, I pulled until she was on her feet and in my arms. Then I held on to her. There wasn’t much else to say, not until I could puzzle it all out in my head, so I just held on to her.

Tight enough that maybe the next time she thought about going it alone, she’d remember there was no need.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

VERA

My fingertips kneaded my temples in slow, measured circles. If I pressed hard enough, I could force the information to stay locked in my brain for my upcoming exams.

Since Mateo and I had started this relationship, I'd neglected my own classes. I just couldn't muster the motivation to spend hours with my nose to a textbook when I'd rather spend my time with him. But too many nights learning sexual positions rather than psychology and I was far, far behind.

Yesterday, after Mateo had found me on Sable Peak and we'd brought Allie home, I should have knocked out a few hours with my textbooks. I'd been too raw after that confession about Dad, so I'd opted to relax with Mateo and play with Allie. After we'd put her to bed, instead of studying even thirty minutes, I'd let him carry me to bed, where we'd fucked for hours.

Those orgasms might cost me my final grades.

I had two tests next week I was ill prepared to take, and as much as I would have loved to relax at the cabin after working at the coffee shop this morning, I'd come to the loft and forced myself to study.

I'd never understood the concept of cramming until now. My head was full of facts and information that even the idea of what to eat for dinner made my skull ache.

A thud echoed. Was someone coming up the stairs? Or was it just my head throbbing?

"Vera." Mateo knocked on the door.

"Come in."

"Hi—" His eyebrows came together when he saw me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing but impending failure." I swung a hand out at the sea of papers and books spread across the coffee table. "Ask me how studying is going."

He crossed the room and sank down beside me on the couch. “Have been studying all day?”

“Since I got home from work.” I sagged into his side. “My head hurts it’s Friday. We’re supposed to study ground school stuff. But, Mateo, I might die if I have to read another word. And I don’t even really want to be a pilot. The flying part is fun and cool, but I don’t care about weather systems or magnetic variation or runway diagrams.”

The words came out in a rush. I hadn’t even realized how I was feeling until this moment.

“Don’t be mad.”

Maybe Mateo shifted, taking my face in his hands. “I don’t care if you want to be a pilot or not. You can just come fly with me.”

y “Okay.” I exhaled. “You’re sure you’re not disappointed?”

line “Not a bit. People change their minds all the time once they get into becoming a pilot is hard.”

lose in “After that first flight, I just thought maybe it would make finding it easier. That’s why I asked you to teach me. And if you had to teach me, it would give you a reason to fly.”

its ind. “Peach.” His eyes softened.

ght . But “You love it, Mateo. I saw it when we were up there. If you could do anything in the world, from Quincy, what would you do?”

with ng for “Fly. But I don’t know how to turn it into a career. Not here.”

r My heart sank. “You were born to fly. Promise me you’ll go more often. Please?”

I He studied me for a long moment, then nodded. “Promise.”

this “Good.”

was so Mateo tugged on the end of my ponytail. “And what about you? What do you love?”

r made You. “Naps.”

y brain The corner of his mouth turned up. “No naps. I came over to get you for an impromptu family dinner. Everyone is at Mom and Dad’s.”

“Oh.”

“That’s your tired *oh*.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

ig?” “You have different *oh*s. That’s the tired one. You have another where you’re surprised. One when you’re entertaining Allie, pretending to be

apers ng.”

you enamored with whatever she's showing you. And the *oh* you make wh
like this." He bent, his lips finding my pulse.

ts. And The moment his tongue skated across my skin, I shivered. "Oh."
I can't. His chuckle was deep and sexy. "Are you hungry?"
t to be My fingers threaded through his hair as I hummed.
systems "I'm taking that as a no." He laid me down, pressing me into the cou
his weight settled on mine. His mouth worked lower, tracing the line o
ing collarbone to the hollow beneath my throat.

I smiled for the first time in hours, letting him erase the stress and
exhaustion from the day as he trailed kisses across my jaw and up to m
t to be He broke away to lift me up, rip the tee off my body and unclasp my
Light streamed through the windows, highlighting the flex of his jaw a
worked my jeans off my hips and legs.

it. The blue of his eyes darkened as he stripped my panties away next.
every article of clothing I'd donned this morning was puddled on the fl
dad stood from the couch and stared at my naked body.

e, it The perusal was slow and deliberate, moving from head to toe. With
passing moment, my heart beat faster. Heat bloomed across my skin as
core throbbed.

o I reached for him but he didn't move. So I spread my legs wider, cup
my breasts with my hands. Every time we were together, I found myse
growing more confident. My cheeks flushed, both with desire and a ru
ften. nerves. Without the cover of darkness, this was as bold as I'd ever bee
I liked it. Did he?

His gaze locked on my pussy, and when that Adam's apple bobbed,
back a smile. He liked it. "You're fucking perfect, Peach."

at do With one hand, Mateo yanked off his plain black T-shirt, dropping i
floor. My mouth watered at the sight of his broad chest and those wash
abs. Though I did love dragging my tongue over his throat, that V at hi
i for an was my favorite place to lick.

The oval medallion of his belt buckle clinked as he worked it loose,
noise carrying through the loft. He let it hang loose as he flipped the bu
on his jeans open. His fingers were poised, about to drag down the zipj
when I threw a leg over the back of the couch.

en "Hell, woman." He rocked back on his heels. "You're drenched."
I was blushing. But it felt like a reward these days, not something to
So I let my gaze wander over his body. The roped arms. The chest so s

en I go was like carved stone, yet the perfect pillow to sleep on each night. The bulky thighs that strained the denim of his jeans.

Mateo toed off his boots and shed the jeans. His cock sprang free the moment they were gone.

No underwear. My core clenched. God, that was hot. Why was that? He fisted his shaft, stroking it a few times as we stared at each other. He dropped a knee to the couch and covered me with that muscled body, skin hot against mine.

His hands dove into my hair, his eyes locked on mine. I leaned up, ready for a kiss, but he backed away. "What?"

"I—" He shook his head. "You're beautiful."

Before I could respond, his mouth crushed mine, his tongue sweeping inside. He rocked against me, his arousal pressed against my slit and the head of his cock rubbing against my clit.

"More," I panted into his mouth. "I need you inside."

He growled, nipping at my jaw. Then he fitted himself at my entrance, every thrust home, filling me completely.

I cried out as I stretched around him, my body fluttering around his. Every night I tried to draw it out, to hold back that first orgasm, but no matter how hard I fought, it was pointless. My body was at Mateo's mercy, and when he kissed me deeper, his hands fisting my hair with a tug, my inner walls clenched.

He eased out and slammed inside again. The sound of our bodies coming together mingled with ragged breaths. "You feel so damn good."

"Yes." My fingers clawed into his shoulders as he pounded us together.

"I'm going to fuck you hard and fast, darlin'." Then tonight, we'll go to the beach and play." He slid a hand to my ass, squeezing the cheek. A promise of more beach play to come later.

My pussy clenched. "Yes."

His hips never slowed, his thrusts hitting a spot inside that made my body tremble. He delivered on his promise, fucking me hard and fast until I was writhing beneath him.

"Come, Vera. Come with me." He reached between us and flicked my clit.

"Oh, God." I detonated, my back arching off the couch as I cried his name. That coarse dusting of hair on his chest tickled my nipples as I came again. The world blurred to nothing but the clenching of my body, rocking me to the solid bottom.

e thick, Mateo let out a string of curses as I squeezed around him. His nostrils flared, his jaw clenching, then he tilted his head to the loft's ceiling and let out a roar as his own release took over.

His come leaked hot between us. A sheen of sweat glistened on my skin. My chest heaved as I tried to regain my breath. When I finally managed to crack my eyes open, Mateo was locked above me, arms braced on the couch, his head as the final waves of his own orgasm faded.

Last night had been the first time we'd had sex without a condom. I had no birth control and neither of us had been with anyone in a while.

Now there was nothing between us. That made it even better.

"Fuck, Peach. It's always so good." He kissed my chest, right over my heart, then eased away. But he didn't leave the couch. He reached between us, finding my sensitive flesh. Then with a smirk, he pushed his come into me with a finger.

I gasped, my mouth parting. "Oh."

"That's a new *oh*. I like it." He licked his lower lip. Then he licked my neck.

He kept me pinned to the couch as he played with me for a few more minutes. His fingers slick and warm. But he didn't make me come, not again. *Tease*—another preview of what would come later when we were in bed.

When he took his hand away, I whimpered.

He bent to suck a nipple into his mouth, releasing it with a pop, then stood and hauled me off the couch. "Get dressed."

"Do I have time for a shower?"

"Nope." He smacked my ass. "I want you to be sticky with me all night."

"Mateo." I rolled my eyes. "That is so ..."
My brain was too fried from studying and sex to think of the right word.

"Sexy." He bent to hand me my tee from where it had landed on my psychology textbook. "It's fucking sexy knowing that I'm all over you. And tonight, after we get dirty again, I'll wash it all off in the shower with your limbs together. Now get dressed."

I pulled my lips in to hide a smile, then reached for my discarded clothing.

After smoothing out my hair and attempting to cool my too-pink cheeks by fanning my face—I didn't need to go to family dinner looking freshly kissed—my name. —I took Mateo's hand and let him lead me to Anne and Harrison's home. The noise enveloped us as we walked through the door. Like always, the top of the house found everyone crowded in the kitchen.

ls “There she is,” Harrison announced with a smile. That grin spread a
d let gaze shifted to where Mateo still had my fingers firmly threaded in his
 Everyone stared.

skin. Uncle Vance stared.

d to So much for meeting him for lunch to explain.

couch The bubble that had been surrounding Mateo and me burst so loudly
 ears popped.

was on I tried to wiggle my hand free, heat spreading across my cheeks, but
 Mateo’s grip only tightened. I was so focused on my hand, I didn’t not
 until it was too late that he took hold of my chin, pinching it between h
ny index finger and thumb, to tilt my face up to his.

veen He kissed me, hard and firm, then let me go with a smug grin.

inside My eyes bugged out, darting past him to an entire kitchen of Edens.
 staring.

 This time when I wiggled my fingers, he let them go. But only so he
nine. use that arm to haul me into his side.

nents, “Peach, it’s not like they all don’t know why it took me thirty minut
’ase. collect you for dinner.”

 “Oh my God.” I turned crimson from head to toe. “I can’t believe yo
 said that.”

i he Griffin barked a laugh, attempting to hide it in his tumbler of whiskey

 “I think I need another beer for this dinner.” Vance stood from his st
 and went straight for the fridge.

ight.” Mateo chuckled, holding me closer.

om the My hand shot out like a whip, smacking him in the gut. “It’s not fun

 “Hey, don’t get mad at me for kissing you in front of everyone. You
 started it.”

r skin. “I did no—” *Shit*. Yes, I’d been the one to kiss him first. That night
 Willie’s. God, it seemed like eons ago.

 That smirk of his stretched to a dazzling, dreamy smile.

oths. I couldn’t help it. When he smiled like that, it was automatic for me
s by smile back.

fucked Vance came over, fresh beer in hand. He took a long gulp, staring at
use. he swallowed. The worry line was creased deep between his eyebrows
; we kiddo.”

 “Hi, Uncle Vance.”

 He motioned between the two of us. “It’s official. You’re together?”

s his “Yeah,” Mateo answered before I could reply.
I looked up at Mateo, finding his blue eyes waiting. “We’re together
He winked, then kissed my forehead.

Vance clapped Mateo on the shoulder. It looked friendly enough, but
Mateo winced so hard that I felt it too.

r my The first warning. It probably wouldn’t be Vance’s last. They might
brothers-in-law, but he was on my side first and foremost.

 “I’m getting a beer. What do you want?” Mateo asked me.

ice “Water.”

is He’d just left my side to get our drinks when the kids streamed out of
playroom and into the kitchen.

Still Allie came rushing over, arms raised in the air. Her cheeks were rosy
she’d been running full-out to keep up with her older cousins. “Ve-wa.

 “Here’s my Jellybean.” I settled her on my hip, then brushed an err
strand of hair off her forehead.

 “Fiss.” *Fish*. She smooshed my cheeks together.

es to It was our newest game. I made a fish face and kissed her with my f
lips, earning a giggle.

ou just “Gen.” *Again*.

 I did it again and again, until Anne announced dinner was almost re
and everyone shuffled to the dining room table to find a seat.

tool The table wasn’t made for this many people. There was hardly an in
between chairs but somehow, we made it all work. And for the first tin
the two years I’d been eating dinners with the Eden family, I sat beside

ny.” Mateo.

 When he dished his garden salad, he moved the tomatoes from his p
mine.

at

to

me as

“Hey,

,

“Yeah,” Mateo answered before I could reply.

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Vance clapped Mateo on the shoulder. It looked friendly enough, but Mateo winced so hard that I felt it too.

The first warning. It probably wouldn’t be Vance’s last. They might be brothers-in-law, but he was on my side first and foremost.

“I’m getting a beer. What do you want?” Mateo asked me.

“Water.”

He’d just left my side to get our drinks when the kids streamed out of the playroom and into the kitchen.

Allie came rushing over, arms raised in the air. Her cheeks were rosy, like she’d been running full-out to keep up with her older cousins. “Ve-wa. Up.”

“There’s my Jellybean.” I settled her on my hip, then brushed an errant strand of hair off her forehead.

“Fiss.” *Fish*. She smooshed my cheeks together.

It was our newest game. I made a fish face and kissed her with my fish lips, earning a giggle.

“Gen.” *Again*.

I did it again and again, until Anne announced dinner was almost ready and everyone shuffled to the dining room table to find a seat.

The table wasn’t made for this many people. There was hardly an inch between chairs but somehow, we made it all work. And for the first time in the two years I’d been eating dinners with the Eden family, I sat beside Mateo.

When he dished his garden salad, he moved the tomatoes from his plate to mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MATEO

The check on my kitchen counter was annoying me. It snared my attention for what felt like the billionth time since I'd left it by the coffee pot earlier. It was pale blue and printed with black ink. Standard. But for as many times as I'd looked at it today, it might as well have been neon yellow with three-dimensional letters and a flashing stop light.

Griffin had given it to me today when I'd gone to his place to finish rework of his corrals. When the last panel had been put into place, he'd come to me to come inside. Then he'd handed over that check.

My paycheck.

It certainly wasn't the first. He'd been paying me when he paid the other ranch hands. But today's check was the first I didn't want.

I hadn't filled out Eloise's direct deposit form either.

Working on the ranch was my job. A job I'd always enjoyed. Not loved. Enjoyed. It, along with the work I did at the hotel, paid the bills.

I wasn't a man who needed wealth to feel successful. I counted blessings, not pennies. My good fortune came from those I loved, especially the little girl asleep for her afternoon nap and the woman who had captured my heart in a matter of weeks.

But I still needed money. Allie would need to go to college one day. I wanted to love to take Vera on a trip somewhere. Maybe we'd fly to the desert this winter and escape the snow.

It should be enough. Working for my family's ranch, living to make Vera smile and build a future together should be enough.

It wasn't enough.

Vera's words from last week kept haunting me. Every time I looked at my paycheck, I heard her voice.

You were born to fly.

That woman knew me arguably better than I knew myself. She was time to finally make a move. But what? Crop-dusting was ... crop dusting. There wasn't a lot of need for it in this area of Montana because land was rugged. More trees than prairie. More cattle than wheat.

There was flying during forest fire season, but that would keep me away from home for months in a bad fire year. I couldn't be apart from Allie Vera for that long.

Maybe I could start a flight school in Quincy. I'd probably have one student a year, at most.

Or ... we moved.

I loved flying. No question. And if I had no attachments, I'd go back to Alaska and fly every day. But that wasn't where I wanted to raise Allie. I wouldn't move Vera. Not only because she was so intent on finding her father, but because she needed Montana. She needed Quincy. She needed Edens.

And if we did find Cormac Gallagher, then I really wasn't sure what to do.

We hadn't talked about Cormac since that day on Sable Peak. We hadn't gone hiking again. Vera had been busy studying, taking her two exams and working. When she came to the cabin every evening, the last thing I wanted was to weigh her down with anything heavy, so I hadn't asked about her father. We hadn't discussed the FBI agent either.

Swenson had left two days after talking to Vera at Eden Coffee. I'd asked Eloise to tell me when he'd checked out of the hotel. For now, I could push him out of my mind. But not Cormac.

Maybe the reason I hadn't brought it up to Vera was because I still wasn't sure what to make of it. What to think of Cormac. Of Vera's mother.

Norah. Her name was *Norah*. As far as I could remember, I'd never heard Vera say that name. In two years, I couldn't recall a single time when she'd spoken her sisters' names either.

And up until last week, she hadn't talked about Cormac.

That bastard had tried to strangle my sister. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to let that go. He could have killed her, whether he'd intended to or not. Whether he'd done it to protect Vera or not. He'd choked my sister.

How was I supposed to be okay with this? How was Lyla? Or Vance at that

The crunch of wheels on gravel tore me from my thoughts, and I was right. It took me out of the kitchen to the front door, opening it as Vance's truck parked in front of mine.

He was dressed for work in a button-down Quincy Police Department shirt, his badge and gun holstered on the belt of his jeans. He carried a bouquet of pink roses as he walked to the porch and climbed the stairs. "Hey." "Nice flowers."

"They're for Vera. Figured she'd probably enjoy them more if they were here than at the loft."

"Come on in." I jerked my chin for him to follow me inside, then closed the door behind us. "I was just thinking about you."

"That sounds dangerous." He set the vase down, then leaned against the counter, like it was the only thing keeping him upright.

"I was, uh, thinking about Cormac."

"Ah." Vance nodded. "How much did Vera tell you?"

"Enough. Not everything. But enough."

"Sorry." His shoulders drooped. "We probably should have come clean with the truth a while ago, but ..."

"You're protecting him too." What was it about Cormac Gallagher that inspired so much loyalty?

"We're protecting Vera. We're just trying to do what's best for her. If Cormac goes to prison, she'll be devastated."

Yeah, it would break her heart. And knowing her, if Cormac was arrested she'd go visit him every week. That was not the life I wanted for her.

"And Lyla?" I asked. "How does she feel about it?"

"Conflicted," Vance said. "We both are. I'll never forgive him for what he did to her. But ... it's complicated."

Complicated. As much as I hated that word, I understood. My feelings toward Madison would always be complicated. And that was it. They were just complicated.

There was no making sense of it. No matter how hard I tried, not everything was cut and dry, black and white. Sometimes, it was a goddamn muddy mess.

"What are the flowers for?" I asked.

Vance didn't answer. He stared off into space, a sheen of tears in his eyes. *Fuck.*

lked “It’s today,” I guessed. The anniversary of the night that had change
beside Vera’s life. Her sisters’ deaths.

Vance nodded.

nt I dragged a hand over my face. “She didn’t say anything.”

vase Vera had left for work this morning like she had all of the other mor
this week. She’d played with Allie over a cup of coffee, then kissed me
goodbye before heading into town. Last night, while we’d watched TV
were couch, she hadn’t mentioned a thing about today. She hadn’t hinted that
was significant.

osed “No, I doubt she would.” Vance sighed. “Last year, she pretended li
was just another day. Wouldn’t talk to me about anything. Would hard
: the at me. Year before that, she avoided me completely. She went hiking a
didn’t come back until after dark.”

“Looking for Cormac?”

“Probably.”

ean Damn it. Was she at work today? She’d promised not to go searchin
Cormac alone, but what if she’d done it anyway? I’d understand. Toda
days, I’d understand.

hat “She’s at work,” Vance said, reading my thoughts. “Drove by on my
out. Saw her through the windows.”

If “You didn’t want to deliver those flowers in person?”

rested, He shook his head. “I think she wants to pretend it never happened.
what she did all those years with Cormac. When I found them, he told
refused to talk about it. And when he explained it all, she wasn’t there.
left so she wouldn’t have to hear it.”

what he My heart twisted. The pain Vera must keep locked inside. The secre
How could she bear it?

gs “I’d better get back to work.” Vance shoved off the counter and wal
were toward the door.

But before he slipped out, I put a hand on his shoulder, giving it a sc
“I’m sorry.”

lamm “Me too.” He gave me a sad smile, then headed for his truck, wavin
backed out and drove away.

Vera wasn’t the only person who mourned those girls today. Did Co
s eyes. know what day it was?

If something happened to Allie, I—

d No. I couldn't even think about that. The grief Cormac must have fe
grief he'd always carry.

Instead of dragging Vera into the wilderness, he should have left her
behind where she could have gotten help. But he'd lost two daughters.

nings I really blame him for not wanting to lose another?

e *Damn.* Yeah, it was complicated.

r on the I stood on the porch, staring into the distance until long after the dus
at it settled from his tires.

How did I help Vera if I didn't know what had actually happened? V
ke it did I say?

ly look "Daddy." Allie's voice pulled me back inside as she came out of her
nd fists rubbing sleepy eyes.

"Hi, Sprout." I went and picked her up. "Did you have a good nap?"

She snuggled into my shoulder, eyelids still heavy. So we cuddled o
couch until she woke up enough to go with me outside to do some mor
g for on the firepit.

y of all It was dark by the time Vera's headlights flashed outside. Hours pas
closing time at Eden Coffee. But she'd had to do an assignment for one
y way classes and said she might just stay at the cafe after closing to knock it
before the weekend.

Had she stayed at the coffee shop? Or had she done something alone
That's tonight, something to honor her sisters?

me she "Hey." She came inside, as beautiful as ever. Tired, but no more tha
She'd other night following a long day at the coffee shop. If not for Vance, I
would have known about today.

ts. "Hi, darlin'." I shut off the TV and stood from the couch. When she
walked through the door to this house, she got a kiss. And even though
ked wasn't sure what to say, even after thinking about it for hours, she was
getting that kiss.

queeze. So I crossed the room, framed her face in my palms and kissed that
mouth.

g as he She smiled as she toed off her shoes, gripping my forearm to keep h
balance. That smile wavered when she glanced past my shoulder and s
ormac roses on the counter.

"Those are from Vance."

"Oh." It was her sad *oh*. The sound of realization that she couldn't k
everything hidden, not from me. Vera's eyes closed, her shoulders slur

lt. The “He told you. What today is.”

“Why didn’t you?”

She let me go and walked to the counter, reaching out to touch a blo
Could But she yanked her finger away before it could skim a petal.

“The thorns are on the stems, Peach.”

She stared at the flowers, and if I wasn’t standing here, I had a hunc
it had toss them in the trash.

“Want to talk?”

What “No.”

I sighed and walked up behind her, wrapping an arm around her sho
room, Then I kissed her hair. “Vera—”

“Where’s Allie?”

’ “Asleep.”

n the She tore herself out of my hold. “I’m going to go kiss her good nigh
e work Her silky hair, tied up in a ponytail, swished across her shoulders as
left for Allie’s room.

t I scrubbed both hands over my face. If only I knew what to say to g
e of herto open up. To just let it out. But she wasn’t just kissing my daughter g
out night. She was fortifying walls, adding another layer of bricks and cha

When she emerged, easing Allie’s door closed, her shoulders were p
chin lifted. Her hands might have well been raised into fists, ready to d
those walls.

n any “Vera.” I put a hand to my heart, then held it out, palm open. “I’m h
never “I ... can’t.” Her voice cracked. “I can’t talk about it. Please, Mateo
ask.”

“It kills me to know you’re hurting and trying so hard to hide it. You
I still have to. Not from me.”

She dropped her chin.

“What can I do?”

perfect “Help me keep it locked away.”

“Keep what locked away?”

er “All of it,” she whispered, lifting her gaze. In those pretty brown eye
aw the plea. *Don’t push.*

Then I wouldn’t push.

“I don’t want to be a hired hand or a maintenance man,” I blurted. It
leep cathartic to let it out. To voice the thought that felt like a betrayal to m
mped. family and a balm to my soul.

I didn't want to be a hired hand or a maintenance man. Or I didn't want to *only* be those things.

om. "What if I started a flight school?" This wasn't at all what I wanted about tonight, but for tonight, it would do. I'd leave those walls alone.

She blinked. "A flight school?"

h she'd "Yeah. There isn't one in Quincy. It would be small. There aren't many pilots in town, but right now, anyone wanting to learn has to travel to Missoula. I doubt I'll make much money. If any. Hell, I doubt I'll have students."

olders. I walked over to take her hand, then I pulled her around the house and off the lights.

"I'll still have to keep working on the ranch for Griffin and at the house for Eloise. But if I can drum up a student or two, it'd mean I'd get to fly."

t." Quincy was growing. People were leaving the larger cities in the Pacific Northwest to raise families in small towns that ran at a slower pace. The elementary school was at capacity and this year's graduating class was the largest in a decade.

ood Maybe a newcomer would want to learn how to fly. Maybe a million more. Two would move to town and need a private pilot to help them commute from Denver or Salt Lake on occasion. Maybe every couple of years, a high school student would dream of getting his or her wings.

ere." "What do you think?" I asked when the last light was off and we were standing outside the bedroom door.

. Don't Vera lifted our clasped hands until my knuckles were resting over her heart. "I love this idea."

I don't "Me too." There was plenty to think through, but it wasn't the first time I tossed around the idea. But it was the first time I could see myself making it happen.

It was her doing. Her encouragement.

es, a With my free hand, I tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and untucked it. Maybe I'd changed the subject for a few minutes, but that sadness was deep in her gaze.

: felt It hadn't been like that this morning. She'd hidden it well. But after a day, there was no masking it now. That agony in her gaze was like a knife cutting the heart.

y "I wish I could take it from you."

She swallowed hard. "I would never let you."

rant to No, she'd keep it all herself, thinking it would save me pain. Didn't
realize it hurt to see her hurt? Frustration swelled, escaping my chest a
to talk low, menacing growl. "Stubborn woman."

There was nothing to do about her secrets, not tonight. And if she w
to forget, to block it all out, then I'd play that game.

any I wrapped her in my arms and picked her up off her feet, lifting her l
enough so we were eye to eye.

e many She threaded her fingers through my hair, her nails scraping against
scalp as she brought them to my nape. "Thank you."

s I shut "Say it with a kiss."

Her mouth dropped to mine, kissing the corner of my lips. She pepp
tel for gentle, soft touches from side to side, until finally, that sweet tongue d
out for a taste.

cific I held her, feet off the floor, her chest crushed to mine, until I was d
ie letting her play. Then I carried her into the bedroom, closing the door b
the us before stripping her out of her tee and jeans.

When she was dressed only in her pale pink bra and panties, I tugge
naire orthe elastic band around her ponytail, spilling that coppery hair around l
te to shoulders. Then I pointed to the bed. "On your back."

school A smile tugged at her mouth before she brought her lower lip betwe
teeth. She obeyed, she always obeyed, and climbed onto the bed. Red a
re gold locks spread across the white quilt like flames.

er "Close your eyes." When they were closed, I stripped out of my T-s
and tossed it aside.

Vera's breathing turned ragged as the sound of my belt unbuckling a
ime I'd jeans being shoved to the floor filled the room.

ing it My cock sprang free, hard and aching to plunge inside her tight bod
tonight, we'd drag this out. We'd see how many orgasms I could coax
her before she passed out.

ked it. I moved to stand at the edge of the bed, taking her knees and pushin
still so apart. The sight of her on my bed never got old. I fisted my shaft, givir
firm stroke. Then I dropped to my knees and started worshiping her sk
a long my tongue, starting at her hips and working my way across her panties
nife to leaving them on to tease.

"Mateo." She squirmed, arching those hips toward my mouth.

I kissed the inside of her thigh, exactly where she was the most tickl
Her giggle was music to my ears. "Stop torturing me."

she “No.” I moved to the other leg while dragging a finger over the cent
s a her panties, earning a hiss. “Soaked. Always so wet for me.”

anted A whimper escaped as I pulled her panties aside, feasting my eyes o
glistening pink flesh.

high “First, I’m going to fuck you with my fingers. Then you’ll get my tc
And after you come twice, you can have my cock.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

my I slid a hand up her stomach to her bra, lifting a cup to expose a brea
Then I rolled her nipple and gave it a pinch.

She yelped but pushed into my touch, wanting it again.

ered This time as I pinched her, I slipped a finger inside her wet heat.

arted “Oh,” she gasped, her inner walls already fluttering. Damn it, she w
perfect. The way she responded to my touch, the sounds she made. Lik
one was made for me.

behind Like she was always meant to be mine.

I took my finger out and popped it into my mouth. “You taste so sw

d loose “Mateo, make me come. I need to come.”

her “Patience.” I kissed her hip, then slid two fingers in this time, worki
them in and out. I curled my hand to massage that spot inside that mad
en her shake while my palm flattened on her clit.

and “Baby.” Her breath hitched.

Fucking hell. She wasn’t the first woman to call me baby. But she’d
hirt last. “Say it again.”

and my “Baby.” She arched into my touch, and the moment her toes curled,
grinned, loving the hell out of orgasm number one.

y. But up and moved her deeper into the bed to settle in the cradle of her hips

from She panted, her skin covered in a sheen of sweat. The flush of her cl
had spread across her chest and breasts.

g them “You have never looked more beautiful.”

ig it a Her eyes fluttered open.

in with “I—” Loved her.

, I loved her.

ish. It was a fight, but I held back the words. Not today. Not with those p
roses on the kitchen counter. So instead of telling her how I felt, I show
her, loving her with every stroke that brought us together.

er of We tumbled over the abyss in tandem, falling farther and farther until we were nothing but tangled limbs and thundering hearts.

n that When we'd regained our breaths, I settled her into the crook of my shoulder.

ngue. Her leg was draped across mine, her breath whispering over the plane of my chest.

st. By rights, we should both be exhausted. But when I closed my eyes, it was impossible. Maybe because I could feel the tension in Vera's shoulder.

She was trying not to cry.

as *What happened that night?* It was on the tip of my tongue to beg for truth. For her. For me. I was flying in the dark here. How did I help her without a light? Especially when she wouldn't let me? *What happened*

ie she I swallowed that question and traded it for another. A question similar to the one that had given me a purpose on one of my darkest days. "What should we call it?"

eet." Her fingertips drew invisible swirls over my bare chest. "Call what?"

"The flight school. What should we call it?"

ng She rose up, tears swimming in those pretty eyes. Hair tumbling around her

e her I pushed it off her face, tracing the line of her cheek with my thumb. "I can't think up a name."

be the "Okay." She snuggled into my chest and returned to drawing patterns on my skin. "Let's start with the As."

I

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By rights, we should both be exhausted. But when I closed my eyes, sleep was impossible. Maybe because I could feel the tension in Vera's shoulders.

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What happened that night? It was on the tip of my tongue to beg for the truth. For her. For me. I was flying in the dark here. How did I help her without a light? Especially when she wouldn't let me? *What happened?*

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"The flight school. What should we call it?"

She rose up, tears swimming in those pretty eyes. Hair tumbling around us.

I pushed it off her face, tracing the line of her cheek with my thumb. "Help me think up a name."

"Okay." She snuggled into my chest and returned to drawing patterns on my skin. "Let's start with the As."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

VERA

I shut the lid to my laptop, took off my headphones and collapsed in chair. For the past hour, I'd been polishing my final paper for Pers Theory and Research. It was now uploaded and turned in to my professor. That was it for my semester. For the next three months, I was to enjoy the summer.

It was easier to breathe without the weight of school on my shoulder. The past five days had been stressful, balancing exams and studying and work and life.

The latter had suffered the most. Most nights, I'd come to Mateo's and he'd immediately taken this very chair, confiscating the dining room table as a workspace. He'd leave me in peace and keep Allie out of my hair, and when she was asleep, he'd retreat to the bedroom to read.

Usually by the time I snuck in after midnight, he'd be asleep, books tucked under his chest.

Even though it had been a grueling race to the end of the term, I'd really enjoyed my classes. I wanted to keep learning.

What would have happened if instead of burying our feelings for four years, Dad and I had had someone to talk to? Someone to confide in, like a therapist or counselor?

It had been impossible, given the situation. And even if I'd wanted to talk about it with Dad, which I hadn't, he'd been equally wrecked by that situation. But maybe I wouldn't be as closed off if I'd had a different outlet.

Maybe someday, I could be that outlet for others.

The sound of hammering came from outside. I stood from the table, stretching my tense shoulders, then slipped on a pair of tennis shoes to go out back.

April had come and gone in a rain-soaked blur, but the beginning of had been a ray of sunshine. The air smelled crisp, like clean pine and cut grass.

Mateo had taken Allie outside all afternoon so I could concentrate and finish my paper.

“Daddy!” Her shout carried through the air as I jogged down the porch steps and rounded the side of the house. She had something in her hand holding it up as she raced toward where he was working on the fireplace. Though considering how big he was making the circle of stone pavers, turning into more of a patio.

“Sprout.” He tore off his leather gloves and turned his hat backward and came running over to where he was working.

“Is a pretty rock?”

“That is a pretty rock.” He took it from her, inspecting all sides. “What should we do with it?”

She took it from him, wound up an arm and threw it as far as she could. It landed about five feet away. “Ah gone.”

He chuckled, shaking his head, then gave her a swat on the butt. “Give me another one.”

“Okay.” Off she raced, crouching as she picked through the grass.

Mateo stared at her with a soft smile, watching her for a moment with pure, endless love. Then he went back to work, pulling on his gloves before picking up a block to take toward what would be a circular retaining wall.

The muscles of his biceps strained at the sleeves of his T-shirt. The cotton clung to his shoulders and back, damp from sweat. His jeans, dusty and dirty, hugged the bulk of his thighs and molded to the curve of his hips.

I leaned against the corner of the cabin and enjoyed the view.

My view.

This was mine. He was mine.

I was keeping him forever.

The anniversary of that night was never easy. Usually the pain lingered days and days. Without him, it would have been unbearable. It never got easier. It never got lighter. The only thing that seemed to dull the pain was blocking it out. Letting that numbness take over. Pretending like it didn't exist.

I loved Mateo for trying to understand. I loved him for not pushing for more talk. I loved him for the distraction of a flight school and the name we

May hadn't chosen.
resh- I loved him.
For always.
nd Mateo worked to place the block, fitting it into the row he was asser
Once it was set, he stood tall and wiped his brow with the back of his a
rch "Are you going to stand there and drool or come help me?"
d, "Drool," I called.
He chuckled, twisting to flash me that blinding white smile. "Finish
it was paper?"
I raised both arms in the air. "Done!"
as she "That's my girl." He tore off those gloves and waved me over.
I ran for him, laughing as I launched myself into his arms and wrap
legs around his hips.
hat "Proud of you, Peach. You worked your ass off this week."
"I'm proud of me too." I kissed him, letting him spin us in a circle b
uld. It putting me on my feet. "This looks good."
"It's coming along." He took my hand, leading me around the space
o find He'd carved out a circular area and covered it in gray stones. "The
retaining wall on that side will double as seating. I'll put a smooth bloc
top. Then these open sections I'm going to build pergolas and hang sw
th "Love it." Leaning against his arm, I pictured us sitting together on t
efore swing, watching Allie race around the yard.
all. "I'm about done for today. We need groceries," he said. "I was goin
white take Allie into town to distract her while you were working."
isty "She's happy playing." The knees of her pants were dirty and wet. T
ass. pigtails he'd put into her hair had completely fallen out and now it was
sticking up at odd angles. "I'll go. You can finish up and relax."
"You sure?"
I nodded. "Yep."
"Okay, darlin'."
red for "Your dad calls your mom darlin'."
ot Mateo nodded. "He does."
was "I like it."
n't "Good." He bent to kiss my hair, then like he had for Allie, gave me
on the ass to send me on my way. "Oh, hey, Vera?"
me to "Yeah?" I turned.
still

“I keep some of my tools at the hotel for maintenance stuff, but I need to sharpen the blade on the lawn mower and don’t have my wrenches to take them off. Eloise was going to set them out. Would you stop by and grab them for me? Save me a trip.”

“No problem.” I blew him a kiss, then went to the house, scribbling a quick grocery list before grabbing my keys and setting off for town.

Main Street was busy for a Wednesday afternoon. Now that the rain had stopped, storefronts and window displays were being refreshed for the upcoming tourist season. The kitchen goods shop had a basket of petunias beside its front door. Though it was nothing compared to the traffic we’d seen this summer, the sidewalks were busier than I’d seen in months. There were buckets of tulips next to the carts inside the grocery store.

I picked up a bundle before quickly running through my list.

“Hey, Vera,” the cashier said as I piled items on the conveyor belt.

“Hi, Maxine. How are you?”

“Good. Tired. I got a puppy. He kept me up all night.” She’d been talking about getting a dog for months. “But he’s cute so I’ll forgive him. Want to see a picture?”

“Of course.” I put the last of my items on the belt, then moved closer. “He’s precious.”

Should we get a dog? Mateo was great with Anne and Harrison’s dog. Allie would be adorable with a puppy.

Maxine set her phone aside and began ringing up my foodstuffs, chatting as she bagged.

The normalcy of it hit me like a slap in the face. A good slap, if there was such a thing. Going to the store. Chatting with Maxine. Contemplating Normal.

This was normal.

At some point in the past two years, I’d stopped being new to Quinc. I’d stopped being a stranger. I’d stopped being that woman who’d lived as a survivalist in the woods for four years.

Normal. This was a normal day. Running errands. Doing yard work.

God, I loved normal. I wanted another ten normal days. Another hundred. A thousand. I didn’t want fame or fortune. I just wanted this.

To be the woman who I might have become if not for *before*. A normal life.

With Mateo. With Allie.

ed to And maybe, if I was lucky, with my dad.

ake it Mateo and I hadn't had time to go on a hike since I'd been so focus
n for school, but we were going out tomorrow. Maybe this time, with him al
I'd get lucky.

out a "Thanks, Maxine." I waved as I took my groceries and headed to the
 With them loaded, I made my way to The Eloise Inn, breathing in th
had of lemon and verbena from the candle burning on the coffee table in th
 sitting area. For the first time in months, there was no fire crackling in
ias grand room's stone hearth.

'd see Eloise smiled from her seat behind the mahogany reception counter
were crossed the lobby. "Hey."
 "Hi. I'm here to pick up Mateo's tools."
 "Oh, perfect." She bent to pull out a tool set from beneath the count
 "Thanks." I scanned the room, searching for Jasper and their daught
 "Are you here alone?"

alking "Yeah." She pouted. "Jasper stayed home with Ophelia today. I thin
it to getting a summer cold or something because she's got an awful cough.
 "Oh. Sorry."

r as Eloise shrugged. "It's okay. I've been finagling the summer schedul
 which takes forever. We're booked but it's been slow today. No needy
gs. guests. Not that I'm complaining. In a month, I won't have a minute to
 think."

itting I opened my mouth, about to ask if she'd filled the vacant housekeep
e was position, when a throat cleared from the direction of the elevators. My
 dropped as the man approached.

a pet. Agent Ian Swenson, walking with that cocky swagger, headed straig
me. "Miss Gallagher."

y. I'd "Agent Swenson." I forced a smile and lied through my teeth. "Nice
you again."

a He narrowed his gaze. "Is it?"
 Absolutely not.

 Ironic, that he was here today. Not thirty minutes had passed since I
ndred. mentally rejoicing my newfound normalcy.

 Of course it wouldn't last. Of course something would ruin it.

nal I'd never be normal. No matter how much time passed, I didn't get t
the woman I would have been before.

 Silly of me to think otherwise.

“I didn’t realize you were still in Quincy,” I said.

He’d left, right? I was sure he’d left. I hadn’t seen him in weeks. He come to the coffee shop again or tracked me down at home. I hadn’t seen the SUV in the parking lot.

“Just arrived,” he said, gesturing for the sitting area in front of the fireplace. “A moment?”

I didn’t want to give him a moment. What if I said no? “Sure.”

He headed for a couch, not even bothering to let me go first. The assistant just expected me to follow.

“Everything okay?” Eloise mouthed, concern etched on her pretty face. I nodded, steeling my spine as I joined Swenson.

He didn’t sit on the leather couch or one of the plush chairs, so I did either.

I stood opposite him, the coffee table between us, and did my best to fidget.

Why was he here? Again?

“Would you like to sit?” he asked.

“No, thanks.”

He studied me for a long moment with those boring hazel eyes. “I’m not the enemy, Miss Gallagher.”

“Then what are you?”

“Curious.”

Any other answer would have been better. “About what?”

“You.”

“Me,” I scoffed. “There’s nothing to be curious about, Agent Swenson. I work at a coffee shop. I take online college classes. I’m a safe driver and a mediocre cook. What you might find interesting about me is in the past trying to get on with my life. You being here makes that impossible. So forgive me if I don’t roll out the welcome mat. I don’t want you here.”

For the first time since I’d met him, his face softened. Without that intimidating edge, he looked human. Handsome, even. “That’s fair.”

I sighed, my shoulders relaxing away from my ears. “Okay. Can I go?”

“Not yet.” The softness disappeared so fast I wondered if I’d imagined it. He stared at me without blinking, like he didn’t want to miss a second reaction to whatever it was he’d come here to say.

My insides knotted.

“Miss Gallagher, we have reason to believe your father is dead.”

My gasp echoed to the lobby's wooden rafters.

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My gasp echoed to the lobby's wooden rafters.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MATEO

“So this is why you’ve been so quiet while I was working.” I put my hands on my hips and stared at my daughter. Allie smiled up at me, eyes dancing, from the puddle she was sitting in. Her hands were caked in dirt as she held them up, fingers splayed. “Wook it mud.”

“I’m looking at the mud, Sprout.” It was on her hands, her arms, her face, her cheeks. Those clothes were going to be a bitch to get clean, but if parenthood had taught me anything, it was how to use stain remover.

“You need a bath.”

Her grin dropped and her eyes widened, then she shoved to her feet and ran away. “No baf.”

Why was it she let Vera put her in the tub without protest, but I still endure this fight?

I gave her a head start, then I chased her through the meadow, letting her think she was outpacing me for a bit. When I caught her, I tossed her in the air, drowning in that precious giggle as she came falling down.

“No baf.” She kicked and wiggled in my hold, but I tucked her under my arm like she was a football and stalked for the house. The squirming stopped and she held out her hands like she was an airplane.

I shifted my grip, holding her with a hand on her belly and the other on her knees, and flew her toward the house just as the sound of a car door slamming. We rounded the corner, all smiles, until I saw Vera standing beside the Honda.

The color was drained from her face and if not for the hand braced against the side of the car, she looked ready to collapse.

It was instant, the way my heart lurched. Her suffering was mine. As I quickly setting Allie on her feet, I ran to Vera and took her shoulders in

hands. “What’s wrong?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and fell into my chest, nose buried in my shirt to draw in a long breath. “I’m okay. I just ... let’s go inside and take a shower.”

“No, tell me—”

“Ve-wa!” Allie interrupted us to proudly showcase the mess she’d made. “Mud.”

Vera managed a smile as she crouched down to touch my daughter’s face. “Look at you, Jellybean. Should we go wash up?”

“No.” Allie scrunched up her nose and raced the other direction. Mama she’d be a pill for us both today.

planted “Talk to me.” I dropped to a knee beside Vera. “I’m worried.”

“Inside.” She stared at Allie for a long moment, then shoved to her feet. “Let’s get the groceries.”

“Fuck the groceries.” I shot to my feet. “What the hell is going on?”

When she looked up at me, the tears swimming in her eyes ripped from my chest. “I went to the hotel. That FBI agent, Swenson, was the one who told me he’s back?”

“He’s back?” Why the hell hadn’t Eloise told me he’d checked in? “Where the hell is he here?”

She swallowed hard. “My dad.”

and ran *Fuck.* My stomach dropped. “They found him.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Allie, don’t touch that.”

My gaze whipped toward the house, where Allie was rifling through my tool box I’d left on the porch. The last thing I needed was for her to pop

g her eye out with a screwdriver. So I jogged over, taking it from her despite the wail of a protest, then closed the box and swept her up.

into the “Leave the groceries,” I called over my shoulder, taking Allie up the stairs. “I’ll get them in a minute.”

r my No shock, she didn’t listen.

opped After I’d stripped a squirming and screeching Allie out of her filthy clothes and put her in the bath, Vera had unloaded everything from the car and was

on her putting the last box of cereal in the pantry off the laundry room.

ammed. “Damn, but you are stubborn, woman.” I frowned and clasped my hands over hers, hauling her to the bathroom where Allie was splashing around in the bubbles and playing with her plastic boats.

in the Vera sighed and sat on the tile floor, knees hugged, with her back to the wall and her head buried in her hands.

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n my

I took the space beside her, keeping close so our arms touched. And though I was about to come loose at the seams, I waited. One minute. Two minutes. Three.

Stubborn didn't even begin to cover Vera's will. It was iron. She'd trade but only when she was ready. So I put a hand on her knee, traced circles on my thumb, and waited.

"Swenson said they believe my dad is dead."

"What?" My jaw dropped. "How?"

"There was a young hiker in Yosemite who got swept up in a river and died. When the park authorities went to recover the woman's body, they found an old pack on the riverbanks. It was Dad's. His old driver's license was inside. They think he might have, um ... drowned."

The way her voice cracked on that word, *drowned*, tore through my chest. That was how her sisters had died. And Swenson had delivered that news to my hearth today while she'd been wholly unprepared, running errands.

"Swenson is a motherfucker," I clipped.

Allie's face turned to us from the bathtub, and I cringed. Before she was in preschool, I really needed to clean up my language.

"He shouldn't have talked to you today," I gritted out. "Not like that."

"Nope."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing really." Vera shrugged. "I was at the hotel, picking up those keys from Eloise. He was coming off the elevator so it was a coincidence I saw him. But I have to think he would have tracked me down at the coffee shop or maybe come to the ranch. I don't know. He asked for a minute on the porch, talked with him in the lobby. When he told me about the pack, I sat on the couch, sort of ... numb."

And alone. She'd been alone. "I should have been there with you."

"How could you have known?"

Swenson was a smarmy bastard. First the surprise visit weeks ago at the coffee shop. Now this. "Next time you see him, you turn and walk away," he said. "Call me or Vance. But I don't want you talking to him alone again." Vera.

"Okay."

the "Promise me."

"Promise."

even Two The pressure in my chest eased. “What else did he say? Did they find anything else of your dad’s?” Like his body?

I hated to even ask, to push for details, but if all they’d found was a backpack that didn’t exactly mean Cormac was dead.

es with “No. Just the pack and wallet.” Vera rested her temple against my shoulder.

Swenson had nothing. No proof. What the fuck was the point of this

nd see if Vera knew of Cormac’s whereabouts.

ey “Yep.”

ense What a motherfucker.

chest. “Dad isn’t dead.” There was so much resolve in her voice, that iron sharpening to a blade. If by sheer mental force Vera could keep Cormac alive, she’d do it.

started “Why would he go to Yosemite?” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I can’t figure it out. There are too many people. We always avoided the national parks whenever possible because they’re so busy. But Swenson showed me a picture of the pack and asked me to confirm it was Dad’s.” Green and black. There was a tear in the strap that he’d fixed with duct tape. “Dad didn’t go anywhere without it.”

“Then he did go to Yosemite.”

se tools “Yes? I can’t see him giving it to someone else. So it had to be him. even none of it makes sense. Going south was never the plan. He always wanted to get across the border to Canada. Maybe he planted it there? To make the police think he was staying in California?”

the “Maybe. But there’s no way for him to know about Swenson being in his case.”

the “No. Except it wouldn’t matter. It’s true that every year we stayed at Dad’s. Dad relaxed more and more. But he never dropped his guard. He always assumed that people were still searching for him.”

ay,” I A safe assumption, especially with Swenson in the mix. “Did Swenson find it when they’d found it?”

in, Vera shook her head. “No.”

Cormac could have taken that pack there two years ago, after Vera had left. He could have pitched it thinking no one would ever find it.

Or, he’d left it intentionally, expecting someone to find it much, much sooner than now. Maybe after Vera had gone with Vance, Cormac had

d wanted to give the illusion of distance. She'd been in Idaho. So he'd go to California.

"What else did Swenson say?"

"Nothing, really. All he told me was that they think Dad might have *Drowned*. "And then he showed me pictures. That was about the extended visit."

visit? Swenson could have made a phone call, not taken a trip to Montana.
ing to could have sent those pictures through email. "Do you think Swenson actually believes he's dead?"

"No." She replied instantly, no hesitation. "Like you said, he came here to get my reaction. Maybe to remind me that he's not going to forget about Dad."

ic The arrogant bastard probably wanted to break a cold case, earn some notoriety. Whatever the hell motivated Agent Swenson, I didn't really care. "I fuck. I just wanted him gone and to stay gone.

Swenson probably wasn't the kind of man to look the other way, even if he knew the truth.

is. Weeks ago, I would have loved nothing more than to see Cormac rot in prison for the rest of his life. But after Vera had told me the truth, after I'd considered it over and over and over again, I simply wanted Cormac to be forgotten. And maybe for Vera to have some sort of closure where her husband was concerned.

nted to "I saw him," she whispered.

ie "Who? Swenson?"

"Dad." Vera looked up at me. "I thought I saw him. It was a while ago. I wasn't sure if I was just making it up in my head because it happened so fast. But I think I might have seen him."

way, "Where?"

ys "Sable Peak. Not far from where we were a couple weeks ago."

"But he didn't approach you?"

son say "No. He was there. Then gone. Faster than I could blink. I thought I was imagining it. But maybe ... What if it was him?"

Then Cormac had seen Vera, and he'd stayed away. Why? Why would he have left. He could have talked to her? Hug her? Show himself? That made no sense. Maybe through the past two years in the wilderness, the bastard had started to lose his damn mind.

one to “He looked awful. I’m worried he’s going to lose his mind out there alone. Or maybe he’ll just give up. I don’t know. But we need to find h
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“Thank you.” Her eyes were so sad. “It’s nice not to be alone in this.”

My heart pinched, and *fuck*, it hurt. I hauled her into my chest, letting her bury her nose in my neck as I held her tight. “I got you, Peach.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

VERA

Mateo's low chuckle made me pause.
"What?" I threw the question over my shoulder.
"Where's the fire?"

I stopped and turned. "Huh?"

Mateo had stopped too, hands on hips, on the path behind me. "You practically sprinting up this mountain, darlin'."

"Oh." My muscles were warm but not burning. My heart rate was elevated but my lungs weren't straining to keep up. "This is just ... how I hike."

Mateo's eyes softened as he stepped closer, looking down at me from under the brim of his hat. "You're the fastest hiker I've ever known. When I followed you up here that morning you snuck out, it was everything I could do to keep up. You move like a ghost through these woods. It's incredible. But we're not exactly going for a sneak attack, Peach. We're hoping to be noticed."

"Oh."

He was right. Stealth was not the goal.

But this was how Dad had taught me to hike. To move without a sound, to blend into nature's noises so my own would go unnoticed. Light feet. Silent muscles. Silent mouths. Especially if we were anywhere near a hiking trail like the one beneath my feet.

The only time we were loud was when we were deep in the woods and the forests were thick and progress slow. Those days, we'd talk or whistle. Sometimes Dad would sing so that we were making enough noise to spook nearby predators, like bears or mountain lions, who wouldn't react well to being surprised.

"I'll slow down," I told Mateo.

"Lead on." With a wink, he swatted my ass.

I set out again, this time deliberately slowing my steps. When I lifted to clear a stick, I quickly changed the movement and stomped on it instead.

The snap made me cringe. For four years I'd dodged branches and twigs. That crunch felt wrong down to my bones.

We'd veered off Sable Peak's trailhead two miles ago, following no particular path as we wandered through the wilderness. I'd shared my plan with Mateo earlier this week, and we'd agreed on this section to tackle first. To stick around Sable Peak until it was done. After that, I wasn't sure where to go next.

There were too many mountains. Too many places for Dad to hide. If we'd have to enlist Vance's help after all. Vance had been trained for a lot of things, but at the moment, I wanted that to be our last resort.

Vance was building his career as a Quincy cop. If we found Dad, it would mean new secrets. New lies. I didn't want to ask Vance to lie for me again. "Vera."

Behind me, Mateo was lagging. I'd been going too fast again. "Shit. Sorry."

He chuckled. "Let me take the lead for a bit."

"Okay." I waited for him to catch up and pass me, then fell in step behind him. At least the view was nice.

He was wearing a pair of his faded Wranglers, the denim clinging to the curve of his butt and legs. There was something about the back pocket of those jeans. Now that I could, I slid my hands into his pockets whenever possible.

"I can feel your eyes on my ass." He twisted and shot me a wicked grin. I giggled. "Guilty."

"To be fair, I was staring at yours all morning." He stopped, waiting for me to reach his side. Then he bent down to brush a kiss to my mouth. "You okay?"

I lifted a shoulder. "I'm glad you're here with me."

"We'll find him." The confidence in his voice was catching.

We would find him.

Our morning had started early. We'd dropped Allie off at Eloise and Jasper's A-frame house to spend the day playing. Then, like I'd done the last time Swenson had been in Quincy, we'd driven by The Eloise Inn before heading to the mountains—Swenson's car was in the lot and the light trail room was on.

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d a foot Still, I'd checked the mirrors countless times as we'd driven to the
thead. trailhead, but Mateo's truck was the only one in sight as we'd parked,
wigs. Swenson was following us, he'd need to be a hell of a hiker.

Mateo might tease me about racing up the mountain, but his pace would
outmatch almost anyone's.

maps "What do you think would have happened if Vance hadn't found you
next. Mateo asked as we kept walking.

where "I don't know." I'd asked myself that same question a thousand times.

Life out here had gotten both easier and harder. Easier because we'd
Maybe routine. A home of sorts. Harder because ... it was a hard life. Food was
his sortguaranteed. Winters were brutal. Squatting to pee wasn't exactly glamorous.

It had become more and more difficult to summon the strength to keep
would with Dad. With every passing month, my energy had waned.

gain. "Living out here always felt temporary," I told Mateo. "Those years
we were constantly on the move, it was running. Adrenaline was a big
motivator in the beginning. I never expected it to last forever. I thought
some point, we'd stop. But Dad just kept going. Kept running. He didn't stop
until I got sick."

ehind Maybe that was why I'd gotten sick. The idea of moving on, of endless
endless miles, had shut my body down.

o the "It got easier when we came to Montana." I tilted my gaze to the trees
s of and the blue sky peeking past their limbs.

er These mountains had been my refuge. This was where I'd finally ...
breathed. For the first time since that night, this was where I'd outwardly
grin. mourned.

This forest had caught my countless tears. The moments I'd had to cry
; until I while Dad was hunting or setting snares and traps, I'd let the lid of that
u crack open, just a little. And I'd let myself grieve for my sisters.

Maybe I'd never talk about them again, but I'd cried rivers for Elsie
Hadley. These trees had drunk the tears. The azure-blue sky had swallowed
my cries. While I'd mourned two beautiful souls, these mountains had
left my side.

l "This was home. We made a home," I said. "But it wasn't home. It was
he last temporary too. Eventually, I knew we'd run out of money. Not that we
re much, but there were just certain supplies from town I'd get each month
o his pick up certain foods whenever Dad worried we weren't getting enough.

our diet. It all cost money. Every trip to town was a risk. Down deep, I and if it couldn't last."

And it didn't. Vance had caught me on a trip to Quincy.

I'd run from him that day. It had been out of fear for Dad that I'd ran the opposite direction when I'd recognized his face. But my first reaction?" before the panic had set in, had been this crippling relief that it was over. That we could stop running.

That I could live again.

"I think Dad knew I was fading. It was his idea that I go back with Vance. Mateo slowed to a stop, waiting for me to step up beside him. "Can you something?"

"Always."

"Part of me is terrified that when we find your father, you'll stay with him." The air rushed from his lungs, like he'd been holding that secret weeks.

"No. Even if we find him, I won't stay." I missed Dad so much it hurt. This wasn't the life for me. "Dad loves it out here. This is where he belongs now. What happened ... it broke him. Broke us."

Mateo's hand took mine. "Not you."

I was broken, whether he thought so or not. Irrevocably broken, like No. But a part of me had shattered that night and no amount of time or would ever repair what had been destroyed. All I could hope for was enough strength to move forward. To balance the broken with unbroken and find peace.

All this time, I'd been worried about normal.

But my definition of normal was wrong, wasn't it? Normal didn't mean became the woman I would have been if not for that night.

Maybe my version of normal meant finding peace with a very not-normal past.

Maybe if I'd had a therapist or counselor years ago, it wouldn't have taken me so long to come to that realization.

"I've been thinking about school," I said.

"Yeah?"

"I've been enjoying my psychology classes. When I registered at the beginning of the semester, I was hoping maybe it would help me understand what was wrong with my parents. But the more I learn, the more I want to keep learning. Maybe

knew could become a social worker or a counselor or ... I don't know. It was thought."

"I like that idea." Mateo used our clasped hands to tug me into his arms. "Whatever you decide, you know I'm in your corner."

"I know." I smiled against the thermal shirt that pulled tight across my broad chest. "It's a lot of school. I might not be able to take them all on."

"We'll make it work." Mateo kissed my hair and let me go. But he kept his hand in mine as we continued to hike, picking our way past trees as we searched our surroundings.

We hadn't put a limit on how long we'd stay out today, but as the sun passed directly overhead, the disappointment in another unproductive journey settled like a gray cloud. Another hour at most, and we'd need to head to the truck.

That hour passed too quickly. The forest wasn't as thick here, and the leaves swished against the hem of my jeans, the taller stalks brushing my calves. White and yellow wildflowers dotted the field of green. It was hard to appreciate its beauty today with that cloud hanging over my head.

"We should probably turn around," I said.

Mateo let go of my hand and took a step forward, like he hadn't heard. "Mateo."

He lifted a finger to his lips.

I clamped my mouth shut and craned my ears, listening for anything. My eyes swept from left to right. There was no one. No sound.

He jerked his chin for me to follow as he took off into the field, walking fast I had to jog every other step to keep up.

Mateo's gaze roved from side to side, searching. The minute he spotted whatever it was he'd been looking for he changed paths, marching straight toward a row of bushes in the distance. His body blocked my view until we were just ten feet away.

I saw the gap in the bushes first. The small hole and narrow, trodden path in the grass. Dad had taught me to identify bunny trails where rabbits would leave the safety of the thicket to feed on wild carrot and sweet cicely.

So focused on the trail, it wasn't until I was standing directly beside the gap that I spotted a fluff of white and tan, stark against the greenery.

A rabbit.

My heart climbed into my throat as Mateo bent to inspect the dead animal. A thin wire was looped around its neck.

s just a I knew that wire.

Two years ago, before I'd left, I'd bought Dad three new rolls of the malleable, thin gauge wire for his snares. Mateo had found his snare line "How?"

Mateo glanced up. "I heard it scream."

Rabbits often let out a scream of terror and panic before they died. I'd kept my that made my heart twist so violently I'd stopped going with Dad when he checked his snare line.

There had to be more. My gaze darted around, searching for more traps and wires.

Twenty feet from where Mateo was still kneeling, a shrub had been nibbled recently. I slowed, crouching to find a gap in the grass.

The wire was nearly invisible, but I'd built enough snares to pick it up in the grass against the foliage. Its loop was about the size of Dad's palm. He'd tied it to a nearby shrub, positioning the loop about four finger widths off the ground. A stick had been shoved into the earth below the snare's loop, something I'd liked to do to ensure the animals didn't duck under the wire but instead jumped through it. Then the wire would kink around the rabbit's neck and he couldn't get loose.

"It's him," I said as Mateo came to stand by my side.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

I shifted the pack off my shoulders, unzipping the front pocket to retrieve the note I'd written in the kitchen this morning.

It should have been easy, leaving it on the grass for my father to find. He stared at the words for a long moment, doubting what I'd written.

Stop hiding from me.

Everything would change when he found this note.

Because if nothing changed, if he ignored it, it would break my heart.

My path would

Mateo

animal.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MATEO

That son of a bitch Cormac Gallagher was breaking Vera's heart. "Want me to fly another loop?" I asked Vera. "No." She glanced out her window, peering toward the terrain below the plane. There was nothing but trees and fields and rugged Mountain beauty. "Let's just go home."

"All right." I banked the plane and put us on a heading for Quincy's airfield.

There was no way to spot anyone from up here. The forest was too thick to spot a shelter. The weather had warmed enough in early June that, even though the nighttime temperatures were chilly, there was no need for Cormac to have a fire burning during the day. And other than a plume of smoke, there'd be no way to see one man through the trees. I should have warned her this would be pointless.

But when Vera had asked to fly around Sable Peak, I hadn't been able to tell her no.

It had been a month since we'd found that snare line. Since she'd left the note.

Cormac had taken it. And ignored it.

We'd gone hiking ten times since. The first trip had been three days after she'd left her message. The snares had vanished. We'd scoured the area searching for other signs that Cormac was around. But rather than face his daughter, rather than show her he cared, he'd disappeared.

Clearly, Cormac had abandoned the spot where he'd been living, but on foot, there was only so much ground we could cover. Hence today's flight. We'd left Alaina with my parents and come to the airfield at sunrise to a couple of hours.

I was giving this two more weeks. Then, regardless of how much Vera resisted, I was putting an end to the madness.

Every time we came home empty-handed, some of the spark would come from her eyes. More than once, I'd seen her fighting tears on the drive home. She'd retreated this past month, pulling deeper and deeper into herself.

Her arms wrapped around her middle. Her shoulders curled inward in the straps of her harness.

"Sorry." I put my hand on her thigh.

"Thanks for trying." She shrugged and kept her gaze aimed outside the window as the plane flew past Sable Peak.

The highest ridge was still capped in white. The small mountain lake shimmered bright aqua beneath the morning sun, a circle of blue against the sea of evergreen.

When the peak and mountains were behind us, as we flew over the plains that surrounded Quincy, Vera shifted to face forward, her hands clasped in her lap. Her disappointment was louder than the plane's engine.

A lone tear streaked down her cheek. She caught it, but not fast enough for me to miss it.

Fuck the two weeks I'd planned. This was enough. We were ending today. Cormac didn't deserve her.

What the hell kind of man would do this to his daughter? Did he think he was saving her? Setting her free? How could he have spent so many years with her but not know her at all?

Vera's loyalty knew no bounds. She'd torture herself for his absence until the end of her days.

"Want to take the controls?" I asked, needing to do something to make her feel better. "Fly for a bit?"

"That's okay."

"Are you sure? You could do some steep turns or maneuvers, something fun. We could go buzz the cabin or Mom and Dad's house."

"Let's just finish up at the hangar. I kind of want to clean the loft tonight. You can just drop me off when you pick up Allie."

The loft didn't need to be cleaned. She was hardly there these days other than to grab clothes. At most, there was a bit of dust. But this was Vera wanting to run. To hide from me so she could deal with the emotions alone.

"Quincy traffic," I announced into the common traffic advisory frequency. "Cirrus Four Zero Six Delta Whiskey. Ten miles south. Inbound for a

era stop.”

She wanted to clean? Fine. Then we’d both clean. And if she didn’t fade my help, then I’d camp out on her sectional and pore through the piles s home.paperwork for the flight school.

As a certified instructor, I could train student pilots, but to actually s into the flight school, there were different rules and requirements from the FAA. I spent the past month establishing a business and getting the necessary insurance. Then I’d spent countless hours developing training curriculum as we I’d missed teaching too. I hadn’t realized how much until I’d sat wit for our few study sessions. The last time I’d had a student pilot under r e was a wing had been in college. Vera might have groaned at the ground scho material, but I’d missed those books. I’d missed breaking down the bas and explaining the aerodynamics.

It would take months, maybe longer, to put the flight school’s plan open together for approval. There was no rush to start, but I didn’t want to w ine. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was doing exactly what I was igh for supposed to be doing. That I was moving in the right direction.

That feeling was more than just the flight school. It was Allie. It was this Life was good. Now if I could only take away the sadness hiding behir Vera’s sunglasses.

She stayed quiet as we landed and taxied to the hangar. The drive to nk he ranch was equally as silent. When we stopped at Mom and Dad’s, she ears surprised me by staying in the truck while I went in to get Allie. I’d ex e until to find her gone when we came out.

“Thought you wanted to clean.”

ike this “I’ll do it later.” She knew I wasn’t going to leave her alone.

By the time we made it to the cabin, Vera had curled herself into a b hing the passenger seat. Did she even realize how far away she’d huddled to the door? The instant I parked, she blew outside, hurrying for the hous

Allie had drifted off on the ride home, and since it was her naptime, day. carefully lifted her out of her seat and carried her inside, taking her stra bed. With the sound machine cranked to drown out any noise, I closed othor door and came out to find Vera in the kitchen.

a Keys in hand.

lone. “I think I’m—”

uency. “No.” I planted my hands on my hips. “You’re not going anywhere. full

“Mateo, I’m in a bad mood. Let me go deal with it somewhere else I want it ruins your day too.”

of Instead of talking to me, she was going to run.

Not today.

start a “Put the keys down, darlin’.”

A. I’d She sighed. “Please.”

“Keys down.” Either she dropped those keys or I’d blockade the fuck door.

h Vera It took a moment, but she tossed them onto the counter. Without the ny hold, it looked like she didn’t know what to do with her hands. She lift ol them, dropped them. Lifted them again, her fingers splayed in the air, u sics they dove into her hair, pulling at the red strands. “I don’t want to be h

That stung. But it wasn’t about me.

Vera didn’t know how to talk through the big emotions. She’d spent wait. many years hiding from them, burying them.

There wasn’t a lot I could do. But I could love her. I could be here.

“Why don’t you want to be here?”

s Vera. “Because I’m ... mad.” Her voice cracked. “Sad. Frustrated. Angry. id name it, Mateo. That’s how I feel. It’s too much, and I want to scream.

“So scream.”

the She huffed. “Just let me go and I’ll—”

“Deal with it on your own? No. We’ve got things to discuss.”

pected “What things?”

“For starters, we’re done searching for your father.” Cormac had blc chance at a reunion with his daughter.

Her body stiffened. “I’m not quitting.”

all in “You are.”

oward “You don’t get to dictate—”

e. “I won’t let him keep hurting you. I will not.”

I “He’s my father, Mateo.”

aight to “Then he should fucking act like it.” I wasn’t shouting. Yet. But I w the damn close. “It’s breaking your heart. What do you expect me to do? S by and watch it happen?”

Her chin started to quiver. “There has to be a reason for what he’s d He must think it’s for my own good or something, I don’t know. But I’ afraid he’s not in a good mindset. He attacked Lyla, Mateo. He *hurt* he

before not thinking clearly. What if he's spiraled even more? I just need to find him and talk to him."

"No." I raked a hand through my hair. "Damn it. No. He found that and he stayed away. He doesn't want to talk."

"It might not have been him."

"Vera," I deadpanned.

king Her expression shuttered, like a wall slammed down in front of her face.

m to "Every time we go up, it takes a piece of you." I gave her a sad smile. "I'm scared you'll give and give until there's nothing left."

ed Tears flooded her eyes. "He's my dad. He's my family."

until "I—" My brain screeched to a halt.

ere." She said it. She meant it. She was hell-bent on finding Cormac because she considered him her family. But if she didn't find him, if she never saw her father again, she knew she had our family, right?

too She knew she wasn't alone, didn't she?

You this roof. My frustration vanished. In its place, this crushing regret that maybe she hadn't done or said enough so she'd see just how much family she had under

" I loved her. More than my own life. Allie loved her. We were her family. With or without her father.

"You did Allie's bath last night."

She swallowed hard and wiped at the corners of her eyes. "Yeah. So she rarely throws a fit for you. You tell her it's time for a bath, and she'll

own his thinks that's the best idea in the world. Because it's you. You're her favorite. Every time she says it, she might as well be calling you Mommy."

Vera's mouth parted.

"I didn't think she'd ever have that. A mother. I didn't even want to myself dream she could. But she does. It's you. You are her family. You're hers." I crossed the room and took her face in my hands, holding those beautiful chocolate eyes. "And you're mine. We are your family."

as A tear cascaded down her cheek.

stand I caught it with my thumb. "I love you, Vera. I fucking love you. I will never leave you. And I won't let you go."

oing. It took a moment for my words to creep past those walls, but the moment they made it, the light that transformed her face was the most beautiful I've ever seen.

id him “I love you.” The words had barely made it out of her mouth before jumped, launching herself into my arms to crush her mouth to mine.

note, I swept her into my arms, slanting my mouth over hers. If all I accomplished for the rest of my life was to kiss Vera every morning and every night, I’d consider it a life well lived.

face. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and her legs around my clinging to me as I deepened the kiss and walked us into the bedroom.

e. “I’m I shut the door. She hopped down to flip the lock. Then we stripped our clothes, fumbling and frenzied, without fanfare, until she was in me again and her soft, smooth skin was warm against mine.

use she Our mouths collided, teeth clashing and lips frantic, as I laid her on bed. My cock nudged against her core, aching to slide into her tight he

her I held off, bracing my body above hers as my elbows bracketed her face. “I love you.”

Her eyes were like chocolate pools, the gold flecks dancing in the light. I it streamed through the bedroom windows. “I love you too.”

under Thank fuck she’d kissed me that night at Willie’s.

I took her mouth, savoring the kiss as her body rocked against mine. mily. Tonight, I’d take my time. I’d draw out her pleasure for hours. But right there was no telling how long Allie would sleep, and I wasn’t waiting. slow, deliberate thrust, I slid inside.

?” *Heaven.* “You feel so good.”

l she She clawed at my shoulders, her back arching off the bed as she stre e-wa. around my length. “Mateo. Move, baby. Please.”

All my life, I’d live for the sound of my name while I was buried inside her.

let I withdrew and slammed inside again, earning a hitch in her breath.

ou are Her grip on my shoulders only tightened as my fingers dove into her. With it threaded in my fists, I pistoned in and out, faster and faster.

“I love you,” I breathed. With every thrust of my hips, I whispered it in her ear like a prayer.

von’t “Yes,” she whimpered as her pussy clenched around me. God, that first orgasm. It always came fast. Hard. It usually came without much warning, sometimes surprising us both.

sight Vera’s cries echoed off the walls, her body quaking beneath mine.

Pulse after pulse, she shattered. God, the sounds. The feel of her body pressure at the base of my spine was almost unbearable. I gritted my teeth

she wanting to draw it out for just another minute, another second, but the she clenched was too incredible.

I came on a groan, muffling it in a pillow as I poured inside her. Every muscle in my body tensed and trembled, my mind going blank as white stole my sight. I'd lost count of the times I'd come inside Vera's body.

But this orgasm was different. This was the release that tore me into shreds, and when the pieces came floating together, nothing would ever be the same again. From this moment on, it was us.

Her legs wrapped around my hips as we both collapsed, boneless and panting. The stars behind my eyes finally faded, and when I cracked my eyes open, lifting up to stare down at Vera, I found her gaze waiting.

The hair at her temples was damp with sweat. Her cheeks were flushed. Her lips were rosy and damp.

Never before had she looked more beautiful.

Never would I love a woman more.

"How's the weather, Peach?"

"Better than I expected," she whispered. "It started overcast and gray."

"And now?"

She smiled. "Clear and a million."

With a

stretched

side

of her hair.

stuck into

her first

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wanting to draw it out for just another minute, another second, but the way she clenched was too incredible.

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"And now?"

She smiled. "Clear and a million."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

VERA

“This is everything?” Vance asked as he took the backpack from the trunk of my Honda.

“It’s only a weekend camping trip.” I’d lived for four years about as much.

He chuckled as he carried it to his truck, opening the tailgate. Beneath the smooth black cover, there was barely room for my backpack. “Tell the wife.”

“Hey.” Lyla scolded as she came through Eden Coffee’s back door to the alley. “I heard that. Babies come with stuff, Vance.”

“You’re right, Blue,” he said. “Anything else you want to pack up?”

“No, I think—shoot. The cookies. Be right back.”

As she disappeared into the cafe, Vance and I shared a look.

“What is all this?” I asked as he stowed my backpack.

“Well, my backpack is in there somewhere. But we’ve also got Trey’s portable crib. Enough baby food for a month. Three bottles of sunscreen. Two coolers. And this morning, I had to sit on her biggest suitcase so she could get it up.”

“Then I know who to go to if I forgot anything.”

He slammed the tailgate shut. “When I teased her about it, she told me it was a fraction of what her parents were bringing.”

“Yeah, Anne’s been prepping for this trip all week.” I moved for the backseat, but before I could climb inside, Lyla came rushing out with a plastic container of cookies and waved me away. “I’ll sit back there with Trey. You can ride shotgun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.” She smiled and popped the lid to the container, letting me and Vance each take a chocolate chip cookie before we all climbed in the truck.

Vance hit the ignition button. "Ready?"

"Let the Eden family campout begin," Lyla said.

He reversed away from the coffee shop, leaving my car behind, and down Main.

This weekend marked the inaugural family camping trip. Attendance mandatory. Anne and Harrison had threatened to cease any and all future babysitting if people didn't show up for this trip.

Even without the idle threats, no one had balked at the idea of a wee getaway.

Talia had taken the weekend off from the hospital. Eloise had ensured staff had the hotel covered. The ranch hands could survive a weekend from the Griffins. Knuckles was being run by Knox's sous chef. And Lyla had handed the reins of Eden Coffee to Crystal.

Even though it was tourist season and everyone was swamped, Anne and Harrison had insisted on just one weekend.

One break from work. One weekend as a family.

Everyone else had already left Quincy. Mateo had promised Anne and Harrison he'd help get the campsite ready, so while he and Allie had headed up early, I'd stayed in town to work and ride up with Vance and Lyla.

"So where are we going?" I asked.

"Some new spot Dad discovered," Lyla answered from beside Trey's seat. "He said it was about an hour from here. Why we're not just camping at the ranch like we did as kids I have no idea. But he's excited and he'll plan it all out. Do you have the directions?"

Vance plucked a sticky note from the dash. "Got 'em."

Lyla yawned, reclining in her seat.

Five miles later, as we sped down the highway, Vance glanced into the rearview and smiled. "They're out."

When I looked to the back, Lyla was resting on Trey's car seat, both of us asleep.

"I'm glad you rode with us today," he said. "I've missed you, kiddo."

"Missed you too." I saw him at least once a week at the coffee shop, but our regular lunches had dwindled this year. He was busy with Lyla and I had Mateo and Allie. Time alone had become sporadic.

"So ... I hear you've got a new address."

My cheeks flushed. "As of yesterday."

The loft was no longer my home.

ruck.

It had been two weeks since Mateo had told me he loved me, and there were moments when I still didn't quite believe it was real. It would probably take that and longer for our living arrangement to sink in.

Mateo and I hadn't talked about me moving into the cabin. He'd just left it upon himself to pack my stuff from the loft.

I'd come home from work on Monday night to find the dining room crowded with everything I'd had in my bathroom. Lotions and curling irons and makeup and nail polishes. Everything had been strewn on the table because he'd wanted me to claim whatever space in his—our—bathroom I wanted.

Tuesday, I came home to find my clothes on his—our—bed.

Maybe it was too soon to live together. Maybe not. I wasn't going to overthink it. I liked that we shared a home.

So on Wednesday, when I hadn't had to work, we'd gone to the loft together and finished packing. Then yesterday, I'd spent the evening dusting and cleaning and saying goodbye to the first home I'd built on my own.

I was going to miss that loft.

"Are you happy?" Vance asked.

"More than I ever thought possible."

He stretched a hand over, placing it on my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For treating you like you're fragile."

"Oh." It came from a good place. Vance worried. In Dad's absence, he'd stepped in to fill that role. But yes, he treated me like I was going to break.

"Mateo doesn't. And that's part of why you love him."

I nodded. "Yes."

"Then I'm glad. For you both."

"Thanks." I smiled at him just as a yawn tugged at my mouth.

"Tired?"

"Yeah. It was an early morning and Allie had a bad night. She woke up twice and finally just crawled in bed with us."

"The nights when Trey sleeps with us are the worst." He groaned. "I always manage to dig his feet into my back."

"Allie had hers in my face." I yawned again. "I gave up trying to sleep around three."

"You're good for her."

ere "I love her." She was mine.
obably "Take a nap too," he said when I yawned for the third time.
"I'm okay."
t taken "Vera." He shot me a flat look. "Sleep."
"We haven't gotten to talk much."
table "We have all weekend."
irons I shifted in my seat, leaning against the door. "Thirty minutes. Wake
e before we get there."
om that "You bet." He plucked a sticky note from the console, rereading Ha
directions.

While I'd spent my week packing up the loft, Anne and Harrison ha
worked tirelessly to load up their fifth-wheel camper. Meanwhile, ever
else would be sleeping in tents. Maybe I could convince Mateo to sleep
outside one night beneath the stars.

eeep Dad and I used to sleep beneath the stars. We'd spend hours pointing
constellations before drifting off to sleep. Did he still do that? Did he h
hand in the air and trace them out with a fingertip?

Mateo and I hadn't gone hiking again. For my heart's sake, the brea
been necessary. But down deep, it felt unfinished. I wasn't ready to sto
looking for Dad, no matter how much Mateo insisted.

Part of me wanted to talk to Vance about it and get his thoughts. Bu
afraid he'd agree with Mateo. So I closed my eyes and let the whir of t
Vance pavement lull me to sleep.

to I jolted awake as we came to a stop. Gone was the highway. Instead
were parked beside Mateo's truck against a grove of trees. "We're here
already?"

"You were out," Vance said. "I didn't have the heart to wake you."

I blinked sleep from my eyes. "Sorry."

"Don't be." He hopped out, going to the back to help Lyla.

up harness.
"Ready for your first camping trip?" she asked Trey as she unbuckle

He The sound of laughter and talking reached my ears. When I opened
door, I was hit with the scents of pine and grass and ... water.

ep you doing?"
"You made it." Harrison came to my side and hauled me into a hug.

"Good," I breathed, still foggy from the nap. "Where's Mateo?"

"Swimming in the lake with Allie."

A lake? My heart stopped. “W-what?”

“Where’s your stuff? I’ll take it to your tent.” Harrison went to the tent oblivious to the wash of panic coursing through my veins.

A lake. No one had mentioned a lake. They’d only talked about the campsite at Alder. Mateo had packed his fly-fishing rod and he’d told me to bring a swimsuit but I’d assumed it was for a river.

“Where are we?” My voice rattled.

“Alder Campground.” Harrison smiled and grabbed my bag. “Is this your bag?”

I managed a nod.

“Come on.” He threw an arm around my shoulders, leading me to the campsite.

The site they’d picked was an open expanse large enough for the fifty tents and all of our vehicles. Tents had been set up throughout the space with everyone choosing a different spot beneath the shade of the surrounding trees.

The firepit was already circled by collapsible chairs and coolers. A stack of wood was piled nearby. An umbrella with towels and blankets was set up over a patch of grass for the kids to play beneath.

Talia was putting sunscreen on Jude. Memphis had baby Annie strapped to her chest and was talking with Winn and Eloise.

And beyond it all, the guys were in the water with the kids.

My heart beat so loudly in my ears I could barely hear their laughter.

A lake. It was just a lake. *Breathe.*

“Daddy!” Drake came racing past us wearing a life jacket. His blonde hair the same shade as Memphis’s, flopped as he ran straight for the water, where Knox was waiting.

The water.

A lake.

I couldn’t fill my lungs. I couldn’t breathe.

“Want something to drink?” Harrison asked, setting my backpack by the campfire and opening a cooler. “Water or pop? I picked up your favorite cream soda.”

“How?” A lake. We were at a lake. The kids were swimming in a lake.

“Vera?” Harrison stood. “What is it?”

I took a step forward, then another.

Mateo was standing close to the shoreline wearing nothing but low-cut swim trunks, a pair of mirrored sunglasses and that dazzling smile. The water lapped at his calves.

Allie was beside him, dressed in a frilly lavender swimsuit and splashing in the rippled waves. Her sunglasses were purple and heart shaped.

She wasn't wearing a life jacket. Why wasn't she wearing a life jacket? She could drown. She could drown in that water. She could die in that water.

I took another step, the panic rising so fast it nearly suffocated. "Mateo!" He didn't hear me. He was talking to his brothers.

"Mateo." His attention shifted, and when he saw me, that smile widened.

"Get her out of the water." He shifted his sunglasses into his hair. "What?"

"Get her out of the water." She was in the water. She was in that lake and she couldn't swim.

She couldn't swim and she was in the lake without a lifejacket. I took another step forward, my knees nearly buckling. "Get her out. Get her out of that water."

"Peach."

"Get her out of that lake, Mateo!" My voice ricocheted. Talking ceased. The laughter died, even from the kids.

Everyone turned to look at me.

But I didn't move. I didn't breathe. Not until Mateo bent and snatched Allie, ignoring her protests as he hauled her out of the water.

"Vera." Vance's hand landed on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off. Then I ran.

by the
te

Mateo was standing close to the shoreline wearing nothing but low-slung black swim trunks, a pair of mirrored sunglasses and that dazzling smile. The water lapped at his calves.

Allie was beside him, dressed in a frilly lavender swimsuit and splashing in the rippled waves. Her sunglasses were purple and heart shaped.

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Everyone turned to look at me.

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"Vera." Vance's hand landed on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

Then I ran.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MATEO

“Daddy! No!” Allie kicked and screamed.
“Mom,” I hollered.
She already had her arms outstretched to take Allie. “I’ll catch her.”

I handed off my daughter, then tore off after Vera, but in my soaked flops, I’d never catch her. So I kicked off the sandals and bolted for my car, snagging the tennis shoes I’d had on earlier. By the time I had them on, Vera was nowhere in sight. “Fuck.”

But Vance was chasing after her. I’d caught sight of him before he’d disappeared past a cluster of trees. Foster, Jasper and Dad were hot on his heels. Griffin and Knox, who hadn’t stopped to change their shoes, joined the chase.

I outran them all, passing them without a word as I sprinted to find her. When I caught up to Vance, my lungs and legs burning, he just pointed ahead to where a flash of red-orange streaked in the distance.

“Vera!”

She ignored my shout and kept running, faster than I’d ever seen her run. Like if she were quick enough, she could escape the past.

She ran.

I let her run.

But she was done running alone.

I pushed my body harder, faster, and when I finally caught up, I didn’t let her go. Every fiber of my being wanted to grab her and put this to an end. Except she wasn’t done yet. She needed to keep going.

So I settled in behind her, keeping pace.

She ran.

And I followed.

By the time her strides slowed, I was sweating and breathless. Her run became a jog, then a walk. Then she buried her face in her hands and the tears that escaped her palms tore through my heart.

“Peach.” I wrapped her up, hauling her into my chest.

“Let me go.” A sob broke from her mouth as she tried to wrench her arms free.

I held on tighter. “I love you.”

She fought me again, squirming and jerking, trying to wiggle loose. I could fight all she wanted.

I wasn’t letting her go.

“I got you.”

Her shoulders began to shake and the protest leached from her body.

“I love you.” Nothing else mattered. On the hardest days of her life, I was here to remind her that I loved her.

“Mateo.” Another sob cracked clear, then she sagged against me.

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1’t stop

“I’m here. I’m not letting go.”

“It hurts.” She sobbed without stopping this time, the cries cleaving my chest into pieces.

“I know, darlin’.” I held her tighter, a lump forming in my throat. Her chest hurt. My pain.

“It’s open.”

“What’s open?”

She cried harder. “The box. It’s open and it hurts.”

Oh, God. This was killing her. For too long, she’d kept it all locked away.

“Let it out.”

“I c-can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” I buried my nose in her hair. “Give it to me.”

“She killed them.” Her entire body went slack, so I turned her in my arms and cradled her against my shoulder as we dropped to our knees. “She killed them. Hadley and Elsie. She killed my sisters. She tried to kill me.”

Her mother.

It was what I’d assumed, but to hear it from her lips was like having a knife slice into my bare back, cutting to the bone.

Was this the first time she’d spoken the truth? She’d never told anyone before, had she? She’d just locked it away. She’d run from the truth.

Pain, rage, lit my blood into a wildfire, but I didn’t so much as move. I kept my arms locked around Vera, knowing we hadn’t even started yet.

un It took her a while to stop crying. The forest moved around us, obliv
he wail the magnitude of this moment. Birds flew and chirped. Trees swayed a
 pine cones clacked against branches as they fell.

 And I just held Vera, feeling eyes on my back.

body Dad. My brothers. They wouldn't approach. They'd keep their dista
 and give us this moment. But they were close, ready to help me pick h
 when the time came.

She "I was on the swim team," Vera whispered with a hitch. "I was a go
 swimmer. We lived on a lake. I loved to swim. We had a boat. Dad tau
 to waterski. And he'd take us to a quiet spot so we could jump in and s
 The lake. That was the trigger. She'd seen Allie in the lake.

 A lake, like the one where she'd lived. Where her sisters had drown
I'd be *Fuck*. Why hadn't I thought of that?

 "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry, Vera. I shouldn't have brought you
I should have taken one look at that lake when we'd arrived this morni
 turned this camping trip around.

me in She nuzzled deeper, like if she crawled into my chest, that would ma
 all go away.

er pain. If I could take it from her, I would in a blink.

 "She was acting strange when we got home from school that day."

She. Not Mom. *She*.

 "I've never seen anyone high like that. I didn't hang out with the kic
smoked pot but I'd seen them high before. This was different. Not just
up. weed. And it was more than just being drunk, but I wasn't sure. I didn'
 drink. Ever. Not just because Dad was a cop and he taught us about be
 responsible, but because I didn't like getting in trouble."

 A good girl. My good girl.

arms I hated her mother for putting her through this. I hated her father for
killed this fester. Six fucking years this had lived inside her and she'd dealt w
 all on her own.

 "She was drinking wine." Vera shuddered as more wounds ripped o
a whip "At four o'clock in the afternoon. I thought she was just drunk. She dic
 drink like that. At least not normally. But there'd been something wron
one thather. Twice I'd come home and she was drunk. Not slurring or out of it,
 almost ... hungover. I tried to hide it from Hadley and Elsie."

 Maybe her mother had started drinking the minute her kids had left
 school. And sobered up by the time they'd made it home. Or by the tin

rious to Cormac, an adult who knew what drunk and high looked like, had made
nd home.

“I didn’t tell Dad.” Her voice cracked. “Why didn’t I tell Dad?”

The guilt that came with that question was about as hard to stomach
nce pain. “This isn’t your fault.”

er up “I should have told him. Before.”

Before her mother attempted murder.

od “Dad was at some coaches meeting at the school,” she said. “Concu
ight us training, I think, for the volunteers. She was acting off, so I told Hadley
swim.” Elsie to go upstairs and do their homework until he got home. There was
thunderstorm. It was loud and the rain was hard.”

ed. I was right. That was why she’d gotten scared the night of the storm
ago. Because there’d been a storm that night.

1 here.” “She got frantic. Every time there was thunder, she’d pull at her hair
ng and start talking to herself. It scared me. Every time I tried to talk to her, ca
down, she’d look at me like I was a stranger. She didn’t have a clue that
ake it her daughter. I was about to call Dad and have him come home but she
screamed. She screamed so loud, Mateo. I had to cover my ears.”

Fucking hell. Her mother had gone off the deep end, and she’d had to
witness it all.

“She ran outside. Right into the storm. It was still early. Gray. The s
ls who blocked out the sun but it wasn’t dark yet. She ran for the dock and cli
from on the boat, untying it before I could stop her. I tried to get her to stop.
’t did.”

ing Vera’s body began to tremble and she burrowed deeper.

I stroked her hair, holding her so impossibly tight that my muscles lock
in place. They’d be stiff when I finally let go.

letting “I wish I could go back to that moment.” A fresh wave of tears soak
with it skin. “I would do anything to keep my sisters off that boat.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured.

pen. “She took off. Drove away from the dock so fast it threw me to the f
ln’t Elsie almost tipped over the edge but Hadley caught her. The waves w
ig with impossible. The water just kept coming into the boat, crashing over the
, but and she was out of control, going faster and swerving in all directions.
finally managed to get to my feet and pull her away from the steering v
for was going to drive us home but then she said something about swimmi
ne lessons. I didn’t understand.”

le it Vera pulled away from my chest, staring up at me with so much regret in those beautiful eyes I wanted to scream.

It wasn't fair that she'd endured this. It wasn't fucking fair.

as her "Swimming lessons?"

She nodded, her chin quivering. "She took Hadley's arm and pushed me over the edge of the boat. A wave rocked us hard and then my sister was just gone."

ssion I closed my eyes. "Christ."

y and "I dove in after her, and it was so cold. It made it hard to breathe and I had to take me a minute to snap out of it. But I swam for Hadley as fast as I could, to keep my head above the waves. They were too big. It was too cold. A few weeks turned back to look at the boat and Elsie was gone. I was going to swim and find her too but she drove away. She ... left us." Her face crumpled and she left us."

alm her Sitting on my lap, cradled in my arms, Vera broke to pieces.

at I was The sobs that wracked her chest shook her entire body. They were endless. n she Each time I thought they'd stop, a fresh wave would hit and start the air over again.

o Was that how it had been that night? Wave after wave slamming her back toward the depths.

term "I lost them," she cried, clinging to me. "I lost them, Mateo. I couldn't find Hadley. I tried to find Elsie but she was gone. I lost them."

We all "This is not on you, Vera."

"I should have found them. I was their big sister. I was on the swim team. I should have saved them."

ocked "Look at me." I took her face, pulling it away from my shoulder. "You can't not lose them."

ed my She squeezed her eyes shut. "I left them. I thought they'd swim for long enough so when I couldn't see them, that's what I did. I kicked off my shoes because it's hard to swim in shoes. They probably didn't think to take off their shoes. How did they?"

ere ... "I don't know, darlin'." I kissed her forehead, catching tears with my fingers. e hull, thumbs.

I *Fuck you, Norah Gallagher.* For what she'd done to her daughter, I would have been grateful if that woman had landed in an especially hot corner of hell.

ing "I thought I'd find them." Vera's breath hitched. "I stayed on the dock for hours, letting it rain and waiting for them to make it. The boat was gone."

ret in thought she might have sunk it. I wanted her to sink it.”

To sink with it.

“Then Dad was there. He was soaking wet. I’ve never seen him so s
But he was alone, and I knew ... we were alone.” She crumpled again,
l her to curling so tightly she fit like a ball in my lap. “They were so scared. Th
st ... died scared. Because I didn’t save them.”

My heart broke. Over and over and over again.

“I’m sorry, Vera. I’m so sorry.”

d took She cried for so long I started to worry she’d never stop. But eventu
. trying the shaking in her shoulders stopped, and with it, the tears. Her body si
I against mine, not even having the strength to sit upright. Too much hea
n back and it was shutting her down.

d. “She I shifted and picked her up, cradling her against my chest as I walke
nearby tree. Then I sat at its trunk, using it as a backrest even though th
dug into my bare skin. It was nothing compared to what Vera had endu
ndless. alone.

nguish The strength she’d had at seventeen to swim home. To keep swimm
not give up. *Damn.* I’d never hurt so much for another person and been
proud at the same time.

I held her, unmoving, until she eventually leaned away to meet my g
n’t find “She was an addict.” The life had drained from Vera’s voice. It was
and dull. “I never talked to Dad about it. He tried, in the beginning. Bu
him out. I just ... couldn’t.”

team. I “Understandable.” I tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, then untuc
“When Vance and Lyla found me, Dad told them the truth. They dic
ou did know I was listening, but I was outside our shelter, eavesdropping. I he
every word.”

ome, She inhaled a long, deep breath. It was the first time she’d filled her
ecause in hours. The breath to start another story.

shoes, One more story.

Her father’s.

y “Dad met her at a bar in Alaska. Whenever they told us the story, he
he took one look at her and left his friends in the dust. Proposed to her
hoped next day. Love at first sight. That’s what I believed for most of my life

“Not anymore?”

ck for She stared at me, her eyes softening. “Not for them.”

ie. I

But for her. She'd loved me from first sight. For the rest of my life, I regret not being able to say the same.

cared. "How did they actually meet?" I asked.

ney "In that bar. He went to the bathroom and found her passed out with a heroin needle stuck in her arm."

"Heroin?"

Vera nodded. "He took her to the hospital. The next day, he went to check on her. He said once she was out of rehab to give him a call, and he'd buy her a chocolate chip cookie and a vanilla cookies-and-cream milkshake."

lumped "Did he?"

artache "Yeah. They started dating. She got pregnant with me, so they got married."

Dad thought everything was fine, but he came home from work one day to find me in a bathtub when I was nine months old and she was passed out drunk on vodka in the bathtub. She'd left me in my crib for hours with a dirty diaper and no food.

ired The mental image was jarring. Maybe because Allie was so young. I still see her at that age. I could hear her crying from her crib, arms

ing. To outstretched, when she'd wake up from a nap and want me to come rescue her.

gaze. "Apparently, they got her on some medication for postpartum depression. They moved to Idaho so they wouldn't have those long, dark winters in Alaska."

it I shut I'd lived through one of those winters and it was brutal. Montana might be cold six or more months out of the year, but at least the sun was usually shining.

ln't "According to Dad, her family was toxic. I don't remember them being around. Dad refused to let them be around us after we moved. We never went back to Alaska, even though that's where his parents lived. They came to Idaho to visit us until they died. Dad used his inheritance to buy us that house on the lake and get the boat."

Every added detail was like another tiny cut. Another dash of salt on an open wound. Did Cormac regret every decision he'd ever made? My heart softened for her father. In his shoes, I would have blamed one person.

the "Myself."

." "They waited awhile before having Elsie and Hadley. Dad wanted to make sure she was okay. That she'd be a good mother." Venom dripped from Vera's voice. "She was a good mother. She'd leave me notes in my lunchbox. She'd braid my hair and talk to me about the boys I liked. She'd braid

I'd whenever I was close. She'd kiss my temple and tell me she loved me moon and back. I loved her too."

Loved. Not love. Vera's love for Norah had drowned with her sister
a "A friend of hers from Alaska came to visit. They went to lunch. Dad didn't go along. He told Vance he didn't think much about it. But that have been the turning point for her to start using again."

reck on Cormac hadn't noticed? I held that question inside. I had a lot of bla
r her a put on that man. For my sister. For Vera. But a friend of mine from col
had been addicted to meth. I hadn't known about it until he'd gotten ar
for breaking into his grandparents' house to steal some jewelry and pa
married. for drug money.

y Addicts were good at hiding their vices.

i the "Dad came home that night and found her alone," Vera said.

'ood." So Norah had made it home with the boat while her daughters had b
I could drowning in the lake and Vera had been swimming for her life.

"Dad asked her what was going on, and she kept talking about swim
scue lessons. She thought he was a lifeguard and asked him to get her kids f
the pool. He went outside, found the boat on the shore, not tied up. Aft
ssion. put it all together, he strangled her."

n I flinched.

The way she said it, so cold and detached.

ight be Her father had murdered her mother, and Vera spoke about it like th
y that it was. Did she ever resent him for that? No. Probably not. Not aft
Norah had done.

cause "Dad went looking for us. Ran the boat almost out of gas. I was on t
back to dock when he got back."

o to And then he'd swept her away from the world. He'd hidden her and
n the world think she was dead. That he was a man who'd murdered his fam

Would I have done any different? Would I have taken Vera away fr
i an horror? He would have gone to prison. At seventeen, she would have b
eart left as a ward of the state. That, or sent to live with family. Possibly No
toxic parents from Alaska.

Did she have other family? Vance seemed to be her only link to the
o make and he wasn't a real uncle, just a friend.

n Then there would have been the media attention. A tragic case like t
ich reporters would have been crawling all over her. They sure as hell had
ug me she'd appeared years later, not dead. They would have suffocated her.

to the Maybe Cormac had done the right thing taking her away after all.
s. “Mateo?” Her face was splotchy, her eyes red and puffy. She was st
beautiful, even tear soaked and jagged.

id “Yeah?” I ran my knuckles down her cheek.

must “Will it always hurt?”

“I don’t know, Peach.”

me to She leaned her head on my shoulder, her hand coming to my heart li
llege could feel it twisting. “I think yes.”

rested Yes. It would probably always hurt. But she wouldn’t be hurting alo
wn it anymore.

We stayed against that tree for hours, just holding on to each other. I
when Vera shifted to stand, we climbed to our feet and made our way l
camp.

een Every tent, including ours, had been packed up. Jasper was putting t
cooler in his rig before slamming the tailgate shut. The other vehicles v
iming loaded, and my parents’ fifth wheel was hooked to their truck.

rom The moment Dad spotted us, he walked over with the keys to my tru
er he his hand. “Allie is riding with us. We’re moving campgrounds.”

Thank fuck. Not a chance I was making Vera stay by this lake. “Wh
to?”

He reached out and ran a thumb across Vera’s cheek, giving her a sr
e truth father’s smile. “The Eden Ranch.”

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“Mateo?” Her face was splotchy, her eyes red and puffy. She was still beautiful, even tear soaked and jagged.

“Yeah?” I ran my knuckles down her cheek.

“Will it always hurt?”

“I don’t know, Peach.”

She leaned her head on my shoulder, her hand coming to my heart like she could feel it twisting. “I think yes.”

Yes. It would probably always hurt. But she wouldn’t be hurting alone, not anymore.

We stayed against that tree for hours, just holding on to each other. Finally, when Vera shifted to stand, we climbed to our feet and made our way back to camp.

Every tent, including ours, had been packed up. Jasper was putting the last cooler in his rig before slamming the tailgate shut. The other vehicles were loaded, and my parents’ fifth wheel was hooked to their truck.

The moment Dad spotted us, he walked over with the keys to my truck in his hand. “Allie is riding with us. We’re moving campgrounds.”

Thank fuck. Not a chance I was making Vera stay by this lake. “Where to?”

He reached out and ran a thumb across Vera’s cheek, giving her a smile. A father’s smile. “The Eden Ranch.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

VERA

The alarm clock on Mateo's nightstand glowed blue. Five twenty in the morning. I'd been watching him sleep for over an hour.

It was an effort not to touch him. Not to run my fingertip down the straight line of his nose. Not to put my palm on his chiseled jaw to feel coarse hair against my skin. Not to brush his soft lips with my own.

His hair was a mess, dark and disheveled against the white pillow. His chest rose and fell with each slumbering breath. His arm was outstretched, draped across my waist to keep me close.

Every morning this week I'd woken up before dawn and had spent the early morning hours memorizing his face. Sleep had been sporadic, at best, since the camping trip. My brain couldn't seem to shut down. Confiding in Mateo had been a relief and a torment.

The box down deep was empty now. The lid had sprung open and everything I'd worked so hard to keep locked away was free to fly away. Except those memories hadn't fluttered into the ether. They hovered close, buzzing in my ear. No amount of swatting seemed to chase them away.

At least I wasn't swatting alone.

Mateo was now the keeper of my truths. As hard as I'd tried to hold everything inside, it felt right that he knew. We hadn't talked about it and I wasn't ready. The cuts were still too fresh. But if—when—that time came, he'd be there.

The Edens, Harrison especially, felt awful about the camping trip. No one had realized it would be a lake to trigger those memories.

Not Mateo.

Not Vance or Lyla.

Not even me.

In the years Dad and I had spent in hiding, we'd never gone to a lake once. When I'd needed to bathe, it had been in streams or rivers. For five years, Dad had kept me away from lakes.

Either because he knew I couldn't handle it.

Or because he couldn't.

But seeing Allie in that water ...

It had been the catalyst. Or maybe time had simply run out, and whether we'd been by a lake or a pool or in downtown Quincy without a drop of water in sight, that was always going to be the moment when I broke a

At least I'd been around people who loved me.

That first night camping, after we'd moved sites to the ranch, had been awkward. Everyone had tried to move forward, to wear bright smiles for my benefit, but I'd been too raw and embarrassed to appreciate them. So I'd cuddled with Allie in a camp chair until she'd fallen asleep and we'd retreated to our tent.

But the next morning, after sleeping in Mateo's arms in our sleeping bag, I'd snuck out early.

Anne had been up already, sipping coffee alone. She'd pulled me into her arms and kissed my hair. She'd told me she loved me. And she'd hugged me tight.

It was a mother's hug.

Mine was gone. So I was keeping Mateo's for myself.

With the dawn of a new day, camping had actually been fun. We'd played cornhole and horseshoes. We'd hiked with the kids and let Allie pick wildflowers. We'd laughed around the campfire, telling stories for hours.

Then we'd come home. We'd gone back to normal.

A new normal.

A weight had been lifted from my heart. It wasn't gone, but it was lighter because Mateo was carrying part of it now.

I should be able to sleep. I should be able to rest. Except something was plaguing me. Something that felt unfinished. And it wasn't until this morning, watching Mateo sleep, that I finally realized what I had to do

It took twenty more minutes before he stirred. His eyes opened slowly when he met my gaze, a lazy grin spread across his face. The arm draped over me hauled me close so our bodies were pressed together.

"Morning, Peach." He buried his nose in my hair and slid his hand down my side, lifting my thigh over his until we were tangled together beneath

e. Not sheets.

our I snuggled into his chest, breathing in the spicy scent of his skin. “M
He hummed.

“I need to do something today.”

He leaned back to stare down at me. “What?”

I sucked in a fortifying breath because he wasn’t going to like this. “
ther Sable Peak.”

of He blinked, surprised for a moment, then that jaw set in a hard line.

part. “Wait.” I clutched his neck when he shifted to get out of bed. “Pleas
me out.”

en “Vera,” he growled but stopped moving.

or my “Dad and I never talked about it. I couldn’t. But now ... there are th
’d just say. Things I want to tell him and I can’t find him. I don’t know if I’ll
find him again. But I want to try. One last time.”

Mateo’s eyes softened as he sighed. “He doesn’t want to be found.”

g bag, “Maybe not. But if I quit now, I’ll always wonder.” This hike was n
my heart than anything.

to her “He blames himself,” I told Mateo. “When I was eavesdropping on
ed me and Vance and Lyla, he blamed himself for not noticing she was spiral
and using and drinking. I think a part of me blamed him too, I don’t kn

Should Dad have noticed? I had as much guilt for not telling him ab
drinking as he did for loving her blindly.

played “It’s not his fault,” I whispered. “It’s not mine either.”

rs. “No, it’s not.” Mateo’s hand came to my face, pushing the hair off n
temple.

“In my head, I know it wasn’t my fault. But I’ll always feel guilty. I
always wish it had ended differently. It helped, talking to you. He does
gher have anyone.”

“Darlin’, we have looked and looked.”

kept “We didn’t go to that lake.”

Mateo propped up on an elbow. “You think that’s where he’s been?”

ly and me to a lake. I didn’t even realize it. Looking back ... he avoided them
ed completely, like he knew it could set me off.”

low jaw. “Huh.” He fell back onto his pillow, staring at the ceiling as he rubb

ith the

I didn't need Mateo's permission. But I loved him enough to let him
lateo?" part of my decision.

"And if he's not there?" he asked.

"Then it's done." For my heart, for Mateo's sanity, this had to be do

He wore a frown as he whipped the sheets from his legs and got out
'Hike swiping his phone from his nightstand. He swiped across the screen, th
pressed it to his ear. "Hey, Mom. Any chance you could babysit Allie

"No." today?"

I hadn't asked him to come along, but I'd known he would anyway.

When he glanced to the bed, I sat up and mouthed, "I love you."

He winked. Then he got dressed so we could get an early start.

ings to

ever

WITH MATEO ON MY HEELS, I set a fast pace up the ten-mile Sabl
trail. We were sticking to the path today, and without having to wade t
ore for underbrush and weave around trees, we'd make good time to the lake.

My muscles were warm, and with every breath of clean air I pulled i
Dad lungs, I felt more and more at peace with this decision.

Today was the last day I'd come to Sable Peak. Whether we found I
ing not, I wouldn't come up here again.

Mateo and I would find new places to explore. We'd hike the mount
out her around the cabin or discover places on the ranch. But I was saying goo
to Sable Peak. And I wouldn't return to the spot where Dad and I had l
ny either.

It was time to move on. With Mateo and Allie.

'll "Vera?"

I turned, finding him close. "Yeah?"

"What were they like? Your sisters?"

"Hadley and Elsie." It still felt strange to speak their names. It still c
a jolt of pain. But I didn't want to hide them, not anymore. Especially :
" Mateo.

er took "They were beautiful. Their hair was a shade darker than mine, but v
l the same eyes. They looked so much alike it was hard to tell them apar
unless you knew them. They played tricks on people sometimes, just to
ed his with them. After Vance became Dad's new partner, he came over for c
few times. They messed with him for months until he finally realized v
was Hadley and who was Elsie."

“How’d he figure it out?”

“Their nicknames.” I slowed, glancing back at Mateo. “Dad went all with the ruse except he always called them by their correct nicknames. He called Elsie Sprout. And he called Hadley—”

“Jellybean.”

I nodded.

“Vera.” He stopped moving. “You didn’t tell me about the nickname you would have picked another one.”

“I know.” I gave him a sad smile. “But I like that you call Allie Sprout. And I thought it was fitting that I could call her Jellybean.”

He closed the distance between us, staring down at me from beneath the brim of his baseball hat. He’d dressed in a plain gray T-shirt today, the hem stretched across his wide chest.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and tucked my hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “My sisters would have loved you. They were witty, loud and sweet and snarky. Elsie would have wanted to have a big belt buckle just like yours and a pair of boots so she could call herself a cowgirl. Hadley would have asked you to teach her how to ride. They both would have begged Dad to get them horses.”

Mateo tugged on the end of my ponytail. “What else?”

“Hadley wanted to become an actress. Elsie wanted to write a book about dragon riders. They had these huge imaginations. Everything was over the top drama. They were always together. And they never learned how to be quiet. It used to drive me crazy. I’d close the door to my room, and two seconds later, they’d burst into my room to tell me a story or gossip or raid my closet for their latest costume.”

I could still see their faces in my mind, but I couldn’t hear their voices anymore.

“I miss their noise.”

“I’m sorry.”

My nose started to sting, but I sniffed it and any threat of tears away. “We had to go too long without talking about them.”

“I’m here,” Mateo said. “Anytime.”

Maybe if I talked about my sisters enough, I’d hear their voices, their laughter, again. Maybe if I stopped avoiding their memories, they’d get brighter, not fade away.

ong “Vance had them cremated. He scattered their ashes in a meadow. V
He we went back to Idaho after I left Dad, it was too snowy, so we didn’t
But I think ... I think I’d like to.” I already knew his answer, but I asked
anyway. “Would you go with me?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

es. I “You don’t have to thank me, Peach. We go together. From here to
to the ends of the earth.”

out. How did he always know the right thing to say? We weren’t going to
ends of the earth today. Just to a lake. So I took his hand, laced our fingers
together and climbed the trail.

the It took two hours for us to make it to the top of the mountain. The lake
cotton another mile on a narrow path that wound through the woods.

ack The trail wasn’t as worn this far up and in one place, a tree had fallen
ty and forcing us to go around. But then the scents of pine and earth changed
bucklesomething lighter. Fresher.

ladley The track led us straight to the water’s edge. The lake was only as big
football field, three times longer than it was wide. It was crystal clear and
smooth as glass. A breeze kicked up a tiny ripple on the surface.

It was breathtaking. Terrifying, but beautiful.

about My pulse quickened as fear began to take hold, but then Mateo’s hand
-the- clamped around my elbow.

knock. I sagged into his side, stealing some of his strength. “I’m okay.”

nds “Vera.” The edge to his voice made me stand tall.

closet “What?” I followed his gaze across the water.

To the man standing on the opposite shore.

es Dad.

I gasped.

Was that really him? If not for Mateo’s grip, I would have thought I
conjured him from a dream.

“We But it hadn’t been my imagination all those weeks ago. His beard was
unruly, scraggly red.

We’d found him. Finally. I’d found him.

ir He was alive.

t Dad stood, shocked, staring back. Even from this distance, I watched
color drain from his face. His scar looked too pink. His hair too gray. His
frame too thin. Exactly how it had been that day I’d spotted him weeks

When visit. ed
He'd known I'd been searching. He'd watched me come for him.
And he'd left anyway.
I took a step forward, toward the water.
My movement seemed to jerk him out of his stupor. He pressed a hand to his heart, his face falling.
He was going to leave me. Again.

Idaho
"No." My voice, loud and strong, carried across the lake. "Don't you go from me."
"Go, Vera. Forget about me." There was a crack in his voice, but Gergers felt good to hear him. To see him.
He was alive. Two years, and the fears I'd refused to acknowledge for a lake was He was alive.
And he was leaving me. Again.

n,
to
Dad turned toward the forest.
"Stop!"
His shoulders fell. His feet stopped. But he didn't turn back.

ig as a
nd as
I'd spent four years following him through the wilderness, and he'd been wearing his pack. It was strange to see him without it. It made him vulnerable. Smaller. Weaker.
But still strong enough to walk away.

nd
"Don't go," I yelled. "Please, Dad."
He turned his profile to us with a sad, hopeless smile and shouted, "Your life, Vera. Stop trying to find me."
"Never."
He twisted enough to take me in, head to toe.
A long, final look at his daughter.
There was no way we'd catch him. If he bolted into those trees, I'd never see him again. He'd outpace us no matter how fast we were. By the time we'd rounded the end of the lake, he'd be long gone.
And even if I could convince Mateo to come out here again, it would be as that pointless. Dad would leave Montana forever.
I took a step toward the water. Then another.
"Vera." Mateo was at my side, that grip on my elbow holding firm.
"He's leaving me."

d the
his
ago.
The look on Mateo's face was devastating. It was full of anguish and my pain. Because he knew Dad was leaving me. And he knew this was the last goodbye.

Unless ...

I didn't let myself think. I didn't let the fear take hold. If Dad did run, there was only one way to catch up.

and to With a quick shrug, I slipped out of Mateo's grip and dropped my backpack to the ground. Water splashed onto the hem of my jeans as I took that first step into the frigid water. The second brought it to my knees.

u run The cold. God, it was so cold.

"Vera!" Dad's panicked voice boomed off the trees.

od, it I locked my gaze with his, seeing the same fear on his face that I projected on mine.

aded. Maybe he'd kept me away from lakes. Maybe he could stand them if he was alone.

But to see his daughter in this water?

He froze.

Tears filled my eyes and streaked down my cheeks. My heart pounded hard and fast against my sternum it was impossible to breathe, but I managed always to suck down an inhale.

n seem Then I dove.

The water was like ice. It soaked my clothes and the weight began to pull me down to the shallows.

I kicked my legs, taking two hard strokes with my arms.

Live *Swim, Vera. Swim.*

It was that night all over again. I kicked my legs harder, pulled my arms faster.

Swim. Swim. Swim.

never There were no waves. There was no boat. The lake wasn't deep and there was no storm. But the panic was crippling. It clawed at my throat, refusing to let any air come inside. I slipped, sinking a little, and choked on a gulp of water.

d be I kicked harder, thrashing as the panic took hold of my movements, making them frantic and wild. Oh, God. What was I thinking? I couldn't swim. I couldn't be in this lake.

"Swim, Vera."

It wasn't my voice. It was Mateo's.

d pain, His arm clamped around my bicep, hauling me up as he swam at my side.

s our I dragged in a breath, forcing air to my lungs. Then I gripped his forearm, using him to steady my strokes.

“Swim,” he ordered.

n, there So I swam. We swam together to my father, standing waist-deep on opposite shore, ready to dive into this lake and rescue his daughter.

took The second I found my footing on the slippery rocks, he rushed to c me, hauling me out of the water.

“Vera.” He pushed the wet hair off my face. “Oh, God, Vera. What you thinking?”

obably I let the tears fall and the sobs choke loose. “Don’t leave me.” He hauled me into his chest, hugging me so tightly it was hard to br “This isn’t what I want.”

f he “But it’s what she wants.” Mateo was breathing hard as he stood by sides, his hands planted on his dripping jeans. “And that’s all that matt

Dad shifted me to the side but didn’t let me go.

Mateo held out a hand. “Mateo Eden.”

ed so Dad glanced down at me, looking between the two of us. Then he bl anaged a long breath, a breath that seemed like two years in the making, and sl Mateo’s hand. “Cormac Gallagher.”

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“Swim,” he ordered.

So I swam. We swam together to my father, standing waist-deep on the opposite shore, ready to dive into this lake and rescue his daughter.

The second I found my footing on the slippery rocks, he rushed to catch me, hauling me out of the water.

“Vera.” He pushed the wet hair off my face. “Oh, God, Vera. What were you thinking?”

I let the tears fall and the sobs choke loose. “Don’t leave me.”

He hauled me into his chest, hugging me so tightly it was hard to breathe. “This isn’t what I want.”

“But it’s what she wants.” Mateo was breathing hard as he stood by our sides, his hands planted on his dripping jeans. “And that’s all that matters.”

Dad shifted me to the side but didn’t let me go.

Mateo held out a hand. “Mateo Eden.”

Dad glanced down at me, looking between the two of us. Then he blew out a long breath, a breath that seemed like two years in the making, and shook Mateo’s hand. “Cormac Gallagher.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MATEO

“**W**hat are you doing with all this lumber?” Griffin asked and I stared at the back of my truck. It was loaded with the two by fours and treated posts I’d just picked up from the hardware store in town after lunch.

“Building.” Had I known Griffin would be waiting for me when I got home, I would have come up with a better lie.

“No shit,” he deadpanned. “*What* are you building?”

“A firepit. Vera likes s’mores.”

His gaze narrowed. “Thought you finished that firepit.”

Yeah, I’d finished it last week. But he didn’t need to know that. “Had an idea for some enhancements.”

“Enhancements.” My brother narrowed his gaze. Like Mom, Griffin always been good at sniffing out bullshit.

“Enhancements.” If enhancements for the firepit meant a shelter built miles up the mountain for Vera’s father.

It had been a month since we’d found Cormac at Sable Peak, and no one in town knew he was currently living on Eden Ranch property.

And as risky as this arrangement was, it was what Vera wanted. She needed to see her father. Cormac needed to see his daughter.

He’d looked like hell when we’d found him by the lake. Too thin. Too frazzled. Too hopeless. But just a month of being closer to Vera, he’d gained some weight and even shaved that nasty beard with a razor she’d put in the truck with the supplies.

If it made her worry less about him, then we’d chance this secret.

Griffin might run the ranch and own a sizeable chunk of the land, but I’d decided the fewer people who knew the truth, the better. We weren’t even telling Vance and Lyla.

Besides, Cormac was on my property. The acreage around this cabin mine to do with as I pleased, including hide a fugitive.

“Thought you were working on the treehouse today?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I am,” he grumbled. “But that project is turning into a nightmare.”

“It was your idea.”

His mouth pursed into a flat line. “Now you sound like Winn.”

I chuckled. “Would you like some help? Is that why you came up here?”

He kicked a rock with his boot. “Yes. Are you busy?”

“Not today.” I smacked him on the shoulder. “Let me call Mom and make sure she’s good to keep Allie for a few more hours.”

“She is.” Griffin smirked. “I already called her.”

I rolled my eyes and, with a smile, grabbed my phone and gloves from the truck. I left the keys on the console before climbing in Griffin’s truck and driving down the mountain to his place.

We spent five hours on the treehouse, finishing the deck’s railings and the stairs. By the time we were done, it actually looked like a treehouse.

It had been Griff’s idea to build it for Hudson and Emma. He wanted the kids to have a spot to escape, and what better hideaway than a treehouse in a small evergreen grove off their backyard?

But when the Edens did construction, we didn’t fuck around. He’d spent countless hours researching tabs and braces for the structure, something that would allow the trees to grow and the house to float between them on rainy days.

The house had a tin shed roof and the siding was reclaimed barnwood, giving it a rustic look as it blended in with the surroundings.

“Maybe I’ll build one of these for Allie,” I told him as we stood on the ground, surveying our handiwork.

“Good idea. Whenever that is, consider me busy. Ask Knox for help if you need it,” he teased.

I laughed and dug my phone from my pocket when it buzzed.

Picked up Allie & we’re heading home xo

“Vera?” Griff asked.

“Yeah. She’s on her way home.”

“Want to stick around for a beer? Winn mentioned something about grilling burgers. I think Eloise and Jasper were going to come out. Have them come here instead.”

1 was "All right. Want me to text Lyla and Talia?"

"Sure. I'll call Knox."

ging That was how all of the impromptu barbecues started with our family. Someone offered a beer. There were usually cheeseburgers. And we were more than family. We were friends.

Mom and Dad declined, wanting a night alone. So my siblings and I invaded Griffin's house.

re?" Years ago, not long after he'd met Winn, these gatherings would last a night with at least one of us crashing in a guest bed. But now that we have kids, we were waving good night by eight to head home.

"Did Eloise really date a guy who shoved a cucumber down his pants at the grocery store?" Vera asked as we drove home.

om the "Yep." It was one of many stories we'd shared tonight, and I wanted to learn them all. To fit so completely into our family that it filled her life.

o ride She'd always miss her sisters. But maybe with time, it wouldn't cut as deep.

nd She glanced through the rearview mirror at Allie buckled in her car seat. My daughter's yawn was loud and long.

d the "She's totally going to fall asleep before we get home." Vera frowned. "But she really needs a bath before bed."

se in a The kids had all played in the sandbox tonight after dinner. There was dust streaked on Allie's face and her legs were dusty.

pent "Maybe she'll make it," I said.

g that "Not a chance." Vera was right. When we parked outside of the cabi- windy "Not a chance." Vera was right. When we parked outside of the cabi- nd, beside my truck, Allie was sleeping with her head hung forward and her mouth open, her body only upright because of her car seat's harness. "He waking her up."

he "I'll bring her in. You get the bath started." I leaned across the cab, dropping a quick kiss on the corner of her mouth, then unbuckled.

if you Allie whined the minute I hauled her from the car, and when she tried to fall asleep on my shoulder, I jostled her to stay awake.

"Time for a bath."

"No." She kicked and squirmed, but I pulled off her shoes as we were dropping them on the floor when we were inside. The sound of running water echoed from the bathroom.

re Vera Vera was kneeling by the tub when we made it to the door.

Allie reached for her. "Ve-wa."

“Mommy,” I corrected, my voice low enough that Vera couldn’t hear the water sloshing. The days of *Ve-wa* were gone. “That’s Mommy.”

y. Allie rested her head against my shoulder, her dark little eyebrows close
ere together. “Mommy.”

It clicked, faster than I thought it would. Probably because my girl, at
two, was smart. She knew how lucky we were to have Vera in our lives.

Someday, I’d tell her about Madison. When she was older and I knew
t all to say, I’d explain that Vera wasn’t her biological mother. But in every
ll had way, in every way that mattered, Vera was her mother.

With a kiss on Allie’s forehead, I set her down and started stripping
ts at clothes.

“Ready?” Vera opened her arms, picking up Allie to set her in the tub
l Vera water was still running, bubbles still building.

near. Allie was groggy, her eyes heavy. When Vera picked up the cup to fill
so with water for her hair, Allie simply tilted her head back and closed her
eyes.

I leaned against the doorframe and dug my phone from my pocket, took
seat. a quick picture of them together. Then I found a towel and got the lotion
from the counter, both at the ready when bath time was over. Vera had Allie
wash and the drain pulled when I brought in a clean diaper and pajamas.

ed. “I’ll take her,” I said after Allie’s hair was combed.

as dirt “Okay.” Vera stood on her toes to kiss my cheek, then slipped past into
the living room while I carried our daughter to her bed.

Five minutes later, with Allie already asleep, Vera was standing in the
in open front door, staring into the night.

er “Your truck is gone.”

I hate I wrapped my arms around her, resting my chin on her head. “He’ll
back.”

“Tonight’s note.” She held up a slip of paper that had been folded in half.
It was the receipt from my lumber order. “It’s for you.”

ed to I snagged it. My name was scratched on the front. When I flipped it
over, in the upper corner was a single word.

Good.

lked, I grinned and crumpled the paper.

g water These notes were how we communicated with Cormac. Vera would
write a note for him every day beneath a rock tucked under the front porch with
a pen. He’d slip in at night beneath the cover of darkness, read it and write
back.

ar with Sometimes he missed a day or two. But for the most part, she was al
communicate with her father every day. And if he needed something, h
oming leave a list.

 Last week, it had been for lumber.

even at Tonight, he'd drive my truck to the end of a two-lane, dead-end roac
s. no one had used for years. From there, he'd unload the boards and carr
w whatpiece over two miles to the small hut he was building.

7 other The location was remote enough that a random hiker wouldn't stum
upon his place. The spot he'd chosen was backed up against a rock clif
off her the only way to access the land was from the ranch.

 Since I had no intention of letting anyone on my private property, C
ib. The should be safe. At least for the time being.

 The arrangement was new. Nerves were running high and he'd refus
fill it let Vera or myself come to his shelter more than once. That visit had b
r eyes. simply so we'd know where to find him, but he'd given explicit instruc
aking afor us to stay away.

. from Beyond that, he'd only seen Vera once since we'd found him at the
: He'd snuck down in the dead of night a couple weeks ago, and they'd
nas. the firepit and talked for an hour.

 Cormac had told her about Yosemite. He'd gone there right after Ve
is for left with Vance. He'd planned to get away and give her some distance,
knowing the media and authorities would be in a frenzy for a girl belie
he dead but found alive.

 He'd wanted to be as far away from Idaho and Montana as he could
manage in a short time, so rather than risk crossing the border to Cana
bring it he'd headed south. As I'd guessed, he'd left the pack behind intentiona
hoping someone would find it, presume he was dead and give him a br

half. Maybe that ploy would have worked on the former FBI agent assign
Cormac's case. Unfortunately for us all, Swenson was a serious pain in
open, ass.

 When Vera had told Cormac about Swenson, it had spooked Corma
enough that he insisted on limited contact. Notes only.

 Hopefully in time, we could all relax. Not entirely. But a little.

leave a Agent Swenson had left Montana after he'd ambushed Vera in the h
th a lobby. With luck, we'd never see him again, but I had a hunch he'd be

ite her My theory was that Swenson would poke around every so often, bre
in and out of Quincy like he owned the town, simply to ruffle Vera's fi

le to —the asshole.

ie'd So far, his visits had been tame. But I suspected if she gave him even the slightest inkling that she was in contact with Cormac, Swenson would become more diligent. Maybe he'd start coming to the house. Following her around.

l that We were going to do our best not to give him that inkling.

y each Even if that meant Vera communicated with her father in scribbles.

“I don't understand this note,” Vera said. “What did you write him?”

ble “That I was going to marry you.”

if, and She jerked in my arms, her head whipping up to mine. “W-what?”

I shifted to dig in my pocket and pull out the ring I'd hidden in Allie's box. Taking her hand in mine, I slipped it on her ring finger. “It was Mom's.”

Vera's hand trembled as she stared at the solitaire diamond. It wasn't flashy. Just a simple jewel on a golden band.

sed to It wasn't flashy. Just a simple jewel on a golden band.
een “Dad upgraded her ring for their ten-year anniversary. When I told her I was marrying you, she gave me this. She won't be offended if you don't wear it.”

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“You're really asking me to marry you?”

ra had “There's no question here, Peach. We're getting married.”

“And you call me stubborn.”

ved I winked. “Would it make you feel better if you said yes?”

“Does it mean something when you wink?”

I'd been winking at Vera for years. It meant something. It always had. “What do you think?”

illy, The light danced in those pretty eyes as she launched herself into my arms.

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I shifted to dig in my pocket and pull out the ring I'd hidden in Allie's toy box. Taking her hand in mine, I slipped it on her ring finger. "It was Mom's."

Vera's hand trembled as she stared at the solitaire diamond. It wasn't big. It wasn't flashy. Just a simple jewel on a golden band.

"Dad upgraded her ring for their ten-year anniversary. When I told her I was marrying you, she gave me this. She won't be offended if you don't like —"

"I love it." She twisted in my arms.

"I love you." I framed her face in my hands, dropping a kiss to her mouth.

"You're really asking me to marry you?"

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The light danced in those pretty eyes as she launched herself into my arms. Then she leaned in close, her mouth hovering over mine with a smile. "I think yes."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

VERA

Five years later ...

“Got your flashlight?” Dad asked.

I held it up. “Yep.”

“Better get back to camp. It’s already dark.”

“Okay.” I threw my arms around his shoulders, hugging him as tight as possible with my massive belly between us. At eight months pregnant, my arms were becoming tricky. “Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, Vera.” He kissed my hair. “Never forget how much I love you.”

“Never.” I held him for another moment, then let go.

In the five years since Mateo and I had found Dad on Sable Peak, it had gotten easier to walk away. There was always a lingering fear that someone would ruin the peace we’d found.

Maybe Agent Swenson. He came to town every year, sometimes twice. He’d ask questions and be a general nuisance, but otherwise, his visits were like a huge waste of time. Luckily, he usually found me at Eden Coffee Shop twice had he visited our home. But with each unannounced ambush, it put us on alert.

Dad would stay close to his home in the mountains—his “chalet” as he referred to it because that sounded fancier than shanty. And I’d spend my nights looking over my shoulder.

But the nerves would eventually pass, and we’d settle into our routine again, and Dad would visit me at home late at night.

Tonight, home was the camper Mateo and I had bought before this year’s annual Eden family camping trip, because not a chance I was sleeping on the ground while I was this pregnant. The spot we’d chosen for this year’s

campout was close to the cabin, in case something happened with the tent so Dad had snuck down to meet me for a hug.

He met me a lot these days, at least three times a week. Last week, he came every day. His visits had increased with the size of my belly.

We usually sat on a swing at the firepit, talking for an hour. I'd tell him about Mateo and Allie. He'd ask questions about my college classes. When I'd finished my last course this spring, he'd whittled a graduation cap out of wood as my gift. The night of my baby shower, he'd brought me a set of woodland creatures, each intricately carved, to put in the nursery.

It was rare that we talked about my sisters. Even rarer that we talked about my mother, though he shared the story of how they'd really met. I knew already, but I'd let him tell me anyway. He'd confessed about her struggle with addiction and explained her upbringing with abusive, alcoholic parents.

Only once had we discussed that night. I told him exactly what I'd seen with Mateo. I cried hard, reliving that nightmare. For each tear I'd shed, he had wept two.

It had been important to me that he know I didn't blame him for that. But no matter what I said, he'd always carry that guilt. So we stuck to safe topics about school, the future and the Edens.

I was an Eden now. Two months after we'd gotten engaged, we'd married in a small ceremony in a fall meadow on the ranch. My wedding ring was a bit tight on my swollen fingers, but I hadn't taken it off since Mateo had given it to me.

Vance had walked me down an aisle of wild grasses to an archway wreathed in flowers. My dress had a lace bodice with long sleeves. The skirt had dipped low, revealing my spine and shoulder blades before the skirt flared out in a swish of silk.

Allie had been my flower girl, dressed in a burnt orange fluffy tulle and white lace shirt. She'd done remarkably well at dropping petals on the path, soaking in the attention of her grandparents, aunts and uncles.

She'd turned around at the end of the aisle and yelled, "You go, Mom!"

Three months after the wedding, the final paperwork to approve my adoption had come through.

There were days when it still didn't feel real, but then I'd kiss Mateo and send up a silent thanks to the angels who'd kept me going. Who'd kept me alive. All so I could be here, walking along a forest trail with my flashlight illuminating the way to a campground brimming with laughter.

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oaby, Everyone thought I'd snuck away to rest. Though I was sure Vance
what I was actually doing.

ie'd He'd spotted Dad on an autumn hike a couple years ago. Or rather, I
had let Vance spot him. We didn't talk much about it. Secrecy had kept
him Dad's whereabouts safe, so we'd agreed the less we said the better. But
When sometimes, I'd come home and find Vance's truck parked at the cabin
out of Vance nowhere in sight.

of When I reached the clearing cramped with seven campers—every car
had upgraded from tents—I glanced over my shoulder.

l about Dad stood in the shadows, twenty feet away, always keeping watch
w it make sure I made it home.

ngles I blew him a kiss, then waddled toward our camper.

arents. Mateo shoved off the side where he'd been waiting since I went to see
hared hello to Dad. "Hey, Peach."

d, Dad "Hi." I walked straight into his arms, burying my nose in his T-shirt
flannel he'd been wearing over it was so warm that I'd stolen it earlier
t night. sleeves were rolled up three times and the hem fell nearly to my knees.
safe I leaned away, my chin on his sternum as I stared into the sky. "What
miss?"

arried "Foster and Jasper are sharing old UFC stories. Remind me never to
was a fight with either of them."

id I laughed. "Because you fight so often."
"For you, I'd fight them all."

 I tipped my head back farther. "I love you."

e back "Love you too. Want to go back to the fire?"

rt As our family's laughter and stories filled the night air, I smiled up at
heavens. Out here, with no city lights to interfere, the Milky Way swirled
skirt through twinkling diamond stars.

. the "Let's hide out here for a few more minutes. Make a wish on a shooting
star."

ummy." "You get the wishes."
"You don't have any?"
"They already came true." He spun me so my back was pressed against
o and chest, his hands splayed on my belly.

t me We were having a boy. Mateo had wanted to name him Jake, but I'd
light my heels in and insisted he was Mateo Jr.
Matty.

knew Allie was practically vibrating with excitement to be a big sister. She
been helping me get everything ready by folding onesies and baby blar

Dad Now that school was over, I was nesting.

t I'd graduated with my bachelor's degree in social work this spring. '
t online offerings had only gotten me so far, and for the past three years,
and been taking classes at the university in Missoula.

ouple The four-hour-round-trip drive from Quincy would have been impos
had I needed to make it every day. Luckily, my husband was a damn g
pilot.

to I'd been able to limit my classes to two or three days a week, and or
days, Mateo would fly me to Missoula, drop me off for school, then re
every afternoon to bring me home.

ay On the days when the weather was bad, we either drove or I stayed l
Every one of my professors had been understanding, and since I'd wor
my tail off to get good grades, they'd accommodated my absences.

. The The job hunt would start when I was ready, but for now, I was enjoy
. The last month of my pregnancy. Besides, with Mateo's schedule getting b
. last month of my pregnancy. Besides, with Mateo's schedule getting b
at did I wanted to stay home and spend more time with the kids.

Mateo's flight school had been more popular than either of us could
pick a imagined. He flew almost every day with at least one student, sometim
more. He was in the process of building another hangar at the airfield f
Cessna he'd bought, a less complicated plane than his Cirrus and more
affordable for his younger students.

Three Quincy High kids were becoming pilots, two seniors and one
The hangar was his second big construction project of the year. We'
at the added on two bedrooms to the cabin and a bathroom.

led It was exciting and busy and ... normal.

"It's more than I expected."

ting "What? Camping?"

"A normal life."

Mateo's arms tightened as he leaned down for a kiss. Then he stood
again, both of us staring up at the stars.

inst his They offered light. Hope.

They stared down at us without a cloud in sight.

l dug Maybe my sisters were up there. Allie knew about them. So did Mat
Whenever a memory crossed my mind, I gave it voice. Five years, and
them the way I saw Mateo and Allie.

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ockets. This life of ours was clear and a million.

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Not a cloud in sight.
This life of ours was clear and a million.

Epilogue

MATEO

T*en years later ...*

“Mom.” Alaina rushed to Vera’s side, eyes as wide as her smile. She bent to whisper something in her mother’s ear.

Vera stood straighter at whatever Allie said, then searched through the crowd beneath the massive white tent.

“Who are we looking at?”

They both ignored me, having one of their silent conversations with a thousand words passing between them.

And whatever was happening went right over my head.

Allie gave Vera a pleading look.

Vera nodded. It was that insistent nod that said I wasn’t going to like it. Allie was about to tell me.

Hell. It was probably about a boy.

“Daddy, I, um, sort of invited a date.”

Was she trying to ruin the party? “A date.”

“Yeah.” She chewed on her lower lip.

“Who?” I crossed my arms over my chest, scanning faces.

Vera had warned me that Allie had a new crush. Apparently some kid she’d met weeks ago at Eden Coffee.

Allie worked for Lyla every summer and this guy had come in one morning, new to Quincy, for breakfast. According to my wife, he stopped to see Allie a few times a week. But if he was at my parents’ anniversary party as a *date*, then we were way past some flirting at the coffee shop.

“He’s standing beside Papa. Light blue shirt. Jeans.”

The boy was easy to spot. Though “boy” wasn’t the right term. You man. “No. Absolutely not. He’s way too old.”

“Mateo.” Vera elbowed me in the ribs as she smiled at Allie. A conspirator’s smile. “He’s cute.”

“Peach,” I scoffed. I didn’t give a shit if the kid was cute. I cared about his birthday. That was not a boy from Quincy High.

“Give him some credit,” Vera said. “Coming to this party is the equivalent to walking into the lion’s den.” Not only was I here, but so was every one of Allie’s uncles.

“Fair point,” I muttered.

“Dad, please be nice.” Allie looked up at me with those pleading blue eyes. “I invited him here for a reason. If he isn’t man enough to handle our father, then he’s not the guy for me.”

I was proud of my daughter every day. But some days, I had so much more pride than I could handle.

Damn it. I was going to have to be nice. “How old is he?”

he Allie gave me an exaggerated frown. “Twenty.”

And she was seventeen.

“For fuck’s sake.” I pinched the bridge of my nose.

a Vera tucked her hand into the back pocket of my jeans. “We’ll be over there. We’ll meet him in a bit.”

“Okay.” Allie kissed Vera’s cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

e what “Alaina.” I stopped her before she could disappear. “Don’t sneak off. Don’t trust him.”

That earned me an eye roll from both mother and daughter.

Vera and I watched as she made her way to the boy.

When he spotted her, the smile he gave Allie was blinding. He was totally hooked on my daughter, wasn’t he? Probably a good thing that there were three hundred people separating us at the moment. I had the urge to throw him out of this tent.

id I groaned. “And I was having such a good night.”

Vera giggled, leaning into my side. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I hate this.”

ped in “I know you do.”

ry My little girl wasn’t a little girl anymore. This wasn’t her first date, but something about this felt different. Like that twenty-year-old was pulling me farther and farther out of my grasp.

ng “Hey, Vera.” A woman she worked with came over, giving her a huge

It had taken Vera years to get her master's degree and become a licensed social worker, but she said that every new case, every new struggling person out his to help, especially kids, made the long hours and late nights studying at a dining room table worth it.

Maybe if her mother had had help earlier in life, Norah Gallagher's life would have had a different ending. Maybe if someone had recognized signs that her parents were abusing her, they could have helped her find a different path.

Every now and then, Vera would bring up her mother, but she tried to keep her family, not to go too far down the road of *what if*. She focused on helping other families. Giving back to Quincy.

"Mateo." A group of guys I knew from high school waved me over to join their conversation. We reminisced for a few minutes, then talked about the ranch, and when I glanced over my shoulder to find Vera, she was gone. Wait. Did she go meet the boy without me?

"Better go find my wife," I said. "Thanks for coming out tonight."

With a nod, I weaved through the crush, seeking out that pretty red head. Nearly the entire town had come out to the ranch for the evening. Mom and Dad's anniversary was the party of the year.

The tent spanned the parking area in front of the barn and stables. The live band was playing country music from the stage at the opposite end of the tent. The caterer had cleared away the buffet, but the bar was surrounded by adults and the cake table mobbed with kids.

Two boys were getting what had to be their third piece of cake. Matty turned, carrying a piece of double chocolate. When he spotted me, his smile dropped. He leaned in to say something in his little brother's ear. Probably a warning that Dad was coming.

When Braydon turned and spotted me, he just giggled. There was frosting on the tip of his nose.

They loved wedding cake. They were my sons, after all.

"This is your last piece," I said when I made it to the table.

"Okay." Matty nodded.

Braydon chased after him to a nearby table filled with their cousins. At least the pieces were small. I snatched a plate of my own, shoving the slice in my mouth in a single bite. Good thing they didn't know it was my fourth.

nsed Matty was nine and Braydon was seven. Where one went, the other
erson never far behind. They were more than brothers. They were best friend
t the Braydon, we'd named after my uncle. We'd used Briggs's middle name.

story When Vera was pregnant, we'd told Uncle Briggs about the namesake
the one of his lucid days. Anymore, the dementia kept him from recognizing
d a anyone but Dad. Regardless, I tried to visit him every other week. Usually
went alone, but sometimes Vera would tag along. Other days, Allie would

hard She had one more year of high school left, then she'd be going to Er
r Riddle in Arizona. Allie had her heart set on becoming an aerospace engineer
and had already completed her certification as a private pilot.

I'd taught her to fly.

to join The hole that she'd leave behind when she left for college was already
t the big. I was ignoring it for now. We had another year.

e. And that boy she'd invited to the party had better not break her heart
fuck it all up.

Where the hell were they?

hair. It took a minute, but I finally found them talking to a group of Allie's
om school friends. But no Vera.

he live I was just about to change direction, head toward the dance floor, when
he swish of red caught my eye.

ed by Vera had a hand to her mouth, covering a yawn, as she slipped past the
tent's open walls and into the night.

If we were at home, she'd be going outside to visit Cormac at the firehouse.
But tonight, she was probably going to get caffeine.

l me, It was midnight and we'd been here since seven this morning getting
ear. everything set up. The party showed no signs of stopping—the band was
playing until one. She probably wanted a cup of coffee.

osting The bar was not serving coffee.

I rushed toward the nearest opening, then jogged to catch Vera, wrapped
my arms around her before she reached the porch stairs at Mom and Dad's.
"Where do you think you're going?"

"Sneaking out. I need coffee if I'm going to make it all night."

At "Want company?"

whole "Always." She leaned up and kissed the underside of my jaw, then took
my hand and tugged me into the house.

I'd expected it to be empty, but voices drifted from inside. "Guess we
weren't the only ones ready to ditch the party."

was When we walked down the hallway, we found our family in the kitchen.
ls. The coffee pot was brewing.

ame. “Seems we all had the same idea.” Knox grabbed another mug from
ke on cupboard. “Coffee?”

ng “Please.” Vera yawned again, and I pulled out a stool for her to sit b
ally I Lyla.

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nbry- he?”

ngineer “Yes,” I muttered.

 Knox slid Vera’s mug across the island just as Mom and Dad, walking
hand in hand, found their children in the kitchen.

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 “The kids are still out there,” I said.

t and The next generation of Edens could handle it.

 “Ugh.” Griffin dragged a hand over his face. “I don’t trust Hudson to
away from the bar. We should probably go back out there and supervise

’s high “Probably.” Harrison sighed.

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party.

 Mom and Dad.

the Griffin and Winn.

 Knox and Memphis.

epit. Foster and Talia.

 Jasper and Eloise.

g Vance and Lyla.

as Vera and me.

 Some of us hadn’t started with the last name Eden. Some of us had
changed it with marriage. But every person in this house claimed it.

pping We were the Edens.

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7e

When we walked down the hallway, we found our family in the kitchen. The coffee pot was brewing.

“Seems we all had the same idea.” Knox grabbed another mug from the cupboard. “Coffee?”

“Please.” Vera yawned again, and I pulled out a stool for her to sit beside Lyla.

“Who’s the guy with Allie?” Vance asked. “He’s a little old for her, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” I muttered.

Knox slid Vera’s mug across the island just as Mom and Dad, walking hand in hand, found their children in the kitchen.

“So none of us are at the party?” Anne laughed. “We’re terrible hosts.”

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Mom and Dad.

Griffin and Winn.

Knox and Memphis.

Foster and Talia.

Jasper and Eloise.

Vance and Lyla.

Vera and me.

Some of us hadn’t started with the last name Eden. Some of us had changed it with marriage. But every person in this house claimed it.

We were the Edens.

Bonus Epilogue

HARRISON

“Congratulations.” Covie, our retired mayor and Winn’s grandfather, clapped me on the shoulder.

“Thanks for coming.” I shook his hand, then waved as I escorted his wife, Janice, toward the exit.

I stifled a yawn, checking my watch. Midnight.

Tonight was an anniversary party for Anne and me. The kids had wanted to celebrate and do something special this year, so we’d gone all out, inviting most of Quincy out to the ranch.

Sure, this party was fun. It was good to see folks, like Covie, who I’d meet as often for lunch at Knuckles as I used to. But I didn’t need a big gathering to celebrate my marriage.

Just sharing life with Anne was reward enough.

The tent was crammed with laughing, happy guests. The band was playing my favorite classic country. Songs I’d loved since the eighties. There was much food and plenty of cake.

But up until midnight, it had just been a party.

Now it was our anniversary. And it was time to find my girl.

I searched the crowd of faces for the prettiest.

Anne was laughing with a group of ladies from her book club. She’d always loved books, but lately, she’d been reading voraciously and rarely left the house without her Kindle. Lucky for me, whatever she was reading was damn spicy.

Not that we hadn’t had a lot of fun in the bedroom throughout our marriage. But this year, it felt like we were kids again. Like we were in our twenties, desperate to make love and babies. Or maybe we were both s

taking advantage of the years we had left, not wanting to waste a moment together. My dick still worked. My wife still liked it.

I strode to Anne, slipping an arm around her shoulders. “Ladies, might I steal my beautiful bride?”

As they nodded, I eased her away, bending to kiss her temple. “Having fun?”

“Yes.” Anne looked up at me, her bright blue eyes twinkling. “You?”

“Yep. But I was thinking we could sneak away for a minute.” I wagged my eyebrows. “Let’s go have a quickie.”

Her cheeks flushed as she checked over her shoulder. “Harrison, this is a party. We can’t leave.”

“We’re not leaving. We’re just going to fool around for a few minutes. Then we’ll be right back.” Maybe. A few minutes might not be enough.

She worried her lip between her teeth. “You can’t mess up my hair.”

“Deal.” I let go of her shoulders to clamp my hand over hers. Then I dragged my wife to our house.

Familiar voices greeted us as we stepped through the front door. My inviting children and grandchildren were my pride and joy. But this wasn’t the time I’d hoped to give my wife an orgasm only to be blocked by my pr

didn’t “So much for foolin’ around,” I muttered. “Maybe we need to start locking the door.”

“Stop.” Anne smacked me in the gut with her free hand, then tugged me down the hall.

All six kids were in the kitchen. And all six stood beside the loves of my life. My other six kids.

They might not have been born Edens, but they were mine all the same.

“So none of us are at the party?” Anne laughed. “We’re terrible hosts.”

“The kids are still out there,” Mateo said.

“Ugh.” Griffin dragged a hand over his face. “I don’t trust Hudson to stay away from the bar. We should probably go back out there and supervise.”

ely left “Probably.” I sighed.

; was Did we have to go back to the party? Now that I was inside, I kind of wanted to stay.

I wasn’t alone in that.

1 our No one in the kitchen moved.

imply So I tucked Anne into my side, letting the love in this room fill my heart.

ent God, we were lucky. To have these kids. To know that they'd found
love I shared with Anne.

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God, we were lucky. To have these kids. To know that they'd found the love I shared with Anne.

"This is better than a party," Anne said, quiet enough for only me to hear. "Don't you think?"

"Yes, it is." I bent to give her a kiss. "Happy anniversary, darlin'."

Acknowledgments

Thank you for reading *Sable Peak*. It doesn't quite seem real that my time with the Edens is over. This series will always hold a special place in my heart.

Massive thanks to Elizabeth Nover. To Georgana Grinstead, who I couldn't live without. To Logan Chisholm and Vicki Valente. Thank you Julie Deaton and Judy Zweifel. To Sarah Hansen. To Bill, Will and Na. Each of you contributes something special to these books, and I am so very grateful.

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