

FUNNY, SEXY, ENCHANTING ROMANCE
RT BOOK REVIEWS

A Reed Brothers Wedding at Lake Fisher

A REED BROTHERS NOVELLA

USA Today Bestselling Author

TAMMY FALKNER

**A REED BROTHERS
WEDDING AT LAKE
FISHER**

TAMMY FALKNER

Copyright © 2024 by Tammy Falkner

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is for all the readers who fell in love with the Reed brothers on page one.

When I first started writing TTT, it was supposed to be one book about a tattoo artist who meets a homeless girl in the city. It was supposed to be about just those two people, but then his four brothers walked onto the pages, and it turned into so much more. Thank you for sticking with me through 23 books. This series would never have become what it is without such great readers who fell in love with five brothers who own a tattoo shop, their random acts of kindness, and their friends. Thank you for reading, reviewing, and loving those Reeds as much as me! I am and will remain eternally grateful!

CONTENTS

1. [Gabby](#)
2. [Logan](#)
3. [Emily](#)
4. [Sam](#)
5. [Matt](#)
6. [Sky](#)
7. [Friday](#)
8. [Paul](#)
9. [Pete](#)
10. [Reagan](#)
11. [Peck](#)
12. [Seth](#)
13. [Mr. Jacobson](#)

[Also by Tammy Falkner](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Keep Reading for a Sneak Peek of LOST AF by Tammy Falkner](#)

1. [Hadley](#)
2. [Jason](#)
3. [Hadley](#)

GABBY

“What time is Seth supposed to get here, Gabby?” my mom asks, her voice soft but steady as she helps my youngest sister, Poppy Jane, eat lunch. The metal spoon scrapes gently against the edge of the bowl, the sound mingling with the hum of the cicadas outside. We’re only allowed to call her just that. Not Poppy, because nobody wants Pop to get a swelled head over how she may or may not have been his namesake.

I glance down at my watch, the giddiness of anticipation pulling at me. “Any minute now,” I say, marking off another item from my to-do list with a well-worn pencil. I can feel the tightness in my shoulders, a tension born from weeks of preparation for the wedding. My mom and I have been working tirelessly, trying to ensure everything would be perfect. The air smells like freshly cut grass, mingling with the heady scent of blooming wildflowers we arranged around the deck earlier that morning. The sound of a distant lawnmower hums from a distance. An orange cat walks across the banister behind me and clumsily falls, so I catch it in mid air, setting it on my shoulder. Calamity Jane is still clumsy. That is one thing that will never change.

Pop, of course, has taken charge of the catering. For him, it will be an excuse to drink beer and spend hours smoking meat while fiddling with his grill. I can already imagine the clouds of smoke rising in the distance, mixing with the warm scent of wood smoke that always brings a sense of comfort.

The Reeds will handle the heavy lifting on the big day—setting up chairs and equipment, all the while joking around

and making a show of it. They've done this before; they know how to turn an ordinary day into a special day. For now, the only task left is the flowers, simple but elegant, just as I've always wanted.

I glance out the window, momentarily distracted. The lake beyond the cabins lies still, the water glistening beneath the midday sun like glass dusted with gold. Tall oaks and pines frame the horizon, their dark, gnarled branches creating a perfect contrast against the shimmering water. The sunlight dances across the ripples, a soft breeze teasing the surface, making it look like it's twinkling. The moist air clings to my skin, but it's not uncomfortable—it's familiar, like an embrace from this place I've come to love.

“Do you remember what it felt like that first day we arrived at Lake Fisher?” I ask, my voice dropping to a murmur as nostalgia grips me. I was sixteen, uprooted in the middle of the night, unsure of what the future held. The headlights had cut through the darkness like a beacon, leading us to this quiet place where Mom had spent her childhood summers. But back then, it wasn't a vacation; it was an escape.

“I remember,” she says wistfully, the tone of her voice softening, as though she's been transported back to that night, too. “For me, it felt like a new beginning. A chance to come home.” Her fingers go still, hovering over the bowl for just a second before resuming their gentle motions. “My dad and Uncle Adam had set everything up with Pop before we even got here.”

I nod, recalling the little cabin we arrived at, cloaked in shadows and mystery. “I remember walking up those front steps, and Trixie dropped a basket of laundry. She flinched—she was so scared to make a mistake back then.”

A sigh escapes my mother, and for a moment, her hands pause. “I remember that too,” she says, her voice growing faint, filled with something close to regret. “I wish I'd done better back then.”

I instantly regret bringing it up. The memories hang in the air between us, heavy and bittersweet. Mom doesn't like to

talk much about those days, and I don't blame her. They were hard for all of us.

"You did better when you could," a voice calls from the hallway, and my stepdad, Jake, strolls around the corner. "Have you seen Pop anywhere? He's supposed to be here to help me get everyone checked into the cabins when the buses arrive." He scratches his ass through a pair of board shorts like a man completely at ease. He reaches into the fridge, takes out a carton of juice, and drinks straight from it without hesitation.

"That is disgusting," Mom says, not even trying to stop him anymore. We've all learned that unless you want to drink from where Jake's lips have been, you stay far away from the juice.

He grins at her, his eyes crinkling at the edges, and leans in to kiss her cheek. "Whatever," he says with a chuckle, his voice playful. Then he steps out the door, calling back, "If you see the old man, send him over to help check everyone into the cabins. Buses will be here any minute!"

I can hear the crunch of his sandals on the gravel outside as the door swings shut behind him, leaving the kitchen in silence once again.

"Do you think they'll ever stop arguing?" I ask, more to myself than to her.

She snorts. "Maybe when one of them is dead." She glances out the window, following Jake's path with her eyes. "When Pop had his stroke, Jake dropped everything and came straight back here. He didn't have much to stay in New York for, not after the mess with his ex-wife. That's how we ended up here again that summer."

"Do you regret it?" I ask, catching the faraway look in her eyes. "Coming back here, I mean."

For a moment, she doesn't answer, staring out at the lake, lost in thought. Then she blinks, jerking herself back to the present. "The only regret I have is that your dad won't be here to walk you down the aisle."

Before I can say anything, the crunchy sound of heavy tires rolling over gravel reaches my ears. I turn to see a cloud of dust rising in the distance as the buses arrive, their airbrakes hissing as they come to a stop in front of the cabins.

“Did they bring everybody again this time?” Mom asks, her eyes wide with curiosity.

I nod, feeling a nervous flutter in my chest. “Seth said they’d all be here—the whole crew. They’re staying the week leading up to the wedding while they do charity events and then a few extra days for rest and relaxation.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with them filming the wedding for TV?” she asks, her brow furrowed with concern. “It seems awfully intrusive.”

“It won’t be about me and Seth, not really,” I say with a shrug. “It’ll be more about the Reeds. They came and interviewed us for a few minutes last week. They’re talking about Seth changing his last name to Reed.”

Mom chuckles softly, pretending to swoon. “My daughter, a Reed! My god, I’m proud.”

Mom’s eyes light up, and she leans in closer, completely captivated. “Have you spent much time with them?” she asks, her voice tinged with curiosity and a hint of envy.

I shrug, feeling the faint warmth of familiarity settle in. “We go over there about once a week. Seth pretends to get his hair done, but it’s really just an excuse to be around everyone. I usually tag along. When we drop by, there’s almost always an extra Reed or two hanging around—sometimes just a kid or two.” I shrug again, but this time with a small smile. “They’re just normal people. They live big lives on the show, but off-camera, they’re just Reeds—five brothers who own a tattoo shop in Manhattan, their wives, and their friends. And trust me, they have a lot of friends. God, they’re everywhere.”

I pause, thinking about the personalities that make up the family. “Logan’s the quiet one—thoughtful, introspective, but he’s got this sharp, unexpected humor. Matt’s kind of solemn but ridiculously kind. Paul? He’s in charge. When he speaks,

everyone listens. Sam and Pete are all about shenanigans. And Edward, who is like the honorary brother, is always there and always solid.”

Mom taps her pen against my wedding list, her eyes calculating the next task. “Have you and Seth talked about the money you’ll get from filming the wedding?”

“We’re donating all of it,” I say without hesitation.

She looks up, a mix of surprise and pride in her eyes. “Have you decided where?”

I nod, swallowing back a sudden lump in my throat. “To the domestic violence shelters here in town. That’s how we ended up here, after all.”

Mom blinks hard, her eyes glistening. “That’s a wonderful idea,” she says, her voice watery.

“And some to the local food banks. We’re spreading it around, but it’s all staying local. That was important to me. Oh, and a portion is going to Shy’s outreach group. You know, the guy who runs the convenience store on the corner? Paul said he once gave the Reeds a turkey dinner for Thanksgiving and wouldn’t let them pay for it. Paul said, ‘Kindness begets kindness.’”

Mom raises an eyebrow. “He said that? Exactly like that?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “No, it was more like, ‘If someone’s fucking kind to us, we can be fucking kind back.’ Generosity’s a big deal to them, Mom. They help people who help others.”

She smirks at me, a sly look crossing her face. “So, did you discuss your sleeping arrangements with Jake? Will Seth be joining us in the big house? Or is he staying in one of the cabins with Sky and Matt?”

I snort. “You know Seth and I live together at school, right?”

She points to herself dramatically. “Oh, I’m fully aware you two live together and probably have loads of sex, Gabby. But I doubt Jake ever thinks about that.”

I grimace. “God, I hope he doesn’t think about it.”

Mom throws a dishrag at me, but I catch it before it hits my face. “I didn’t mean it like that, and you know it. Shut up.”

“Anyway!” I say loudly, desperate to change the subject. “I’ll talk to Seth about where he wants to sleep. Should I run it by Jake first, just to make sure?”

Mom shrugs. “That’s up to you.”

“I’ll sort it out,” I say, feeling a flicker of nerves. I head to the door and peer outside. “Looks like Pop and Jake are at it again,” I say with a sigh.

Mom rolls her eyes. “What else is new?”

“Uh oh.” I squint, noticing the escalating tension. “Pop just took Jake’s clipboard. And now he’s whacking him over the head with it.”

Mom rushes to the window. “I’d break them up, but Jake probably deserves it.”

“Probably,” I agree with a laugh. I step outside, feeling the heat of the afternoon sun on my skin. The buses have arrived, and I spot Trixie and Alex already sprinting off with Paul and Matt’s kids. Jake and Pop are still squabbling, but at least Jake has managed to wrestle his clipboard back.

“Do you know where everybody’s going?” I ask, thinking I can help pass out keys and get everyone settled.

“To hell if they don’t get their act together,” Pop grumbles, smoothing the hair over his bald spot.

“You go to hell,” Jake retorts without missing a beat.

“Do you hear how he talks to me, Gabby?” Pop complains with a mock look of hurt on his face.

“You’d give him no respect otherwise,” I remind him.

He rocks his head back and forth as though he’s thinking about it.

I chuckle. “You wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Pop grins. “True. So, where’s your fiancé?”

“No idea.” I turn to Jake. “Hey, Jake, where’s Seth on the housing list?” I ask. I wink at Pop. He winks back.

Jake jerks his head up. “What do you mean?”

“Where is Seth sleeping?” I ask more clearly.

He glances up, his brow furrowing. “I figured he’d sleep with you.” He gives me an absent gesture, a flutter of his hand. “He had better be sleeping with you, or else he’s going to be on the couch at Sky and Matt’s cabin because we’re out of beds.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “That was easier than expected.”

Pop laughs, nudging me. “Did you think he’d put up a fight to protect your virtue?”

I snort. “Pretty sure virtue went out of style when women stopped being considered property.”

Pop thumps my nose playfully. “I’d have gotten three horses for someone as cute as you back in the day.” He pretends to look me over. “Maybe four if you’d ever learned to do the damn dishes.” He scruffs the top of my head with his big old bear paw, but then he sobers. “Be glad those days are over.”

“Duly noted,” I say with a grin, but the worry I had fades away. “Honestly, I thought Jake might not be cool with Seth staying in my room since we’re not married yet.”

Pop shrugs. “Marriage is just paperwork. The real work happens outside of it.”

I feign surprise. “Are you telling me marriage is hard work, Pop?”

He chuckles, patting my back. “Every damn day.”

I finally spot Seth stepping off the bus, a baby strapped to his chest and another holding his hand. He grins when he sees me, but his shirt is stained with baby drool and something else that’s definitely wet. “I think this one just peed on me,” he says, sniffing his shoulder. “And another one puked on me an hour ago.”

I laugh, the sound of it light and carefree. “Rough trip?”

He kisses me, quick and soft. “Worth it.” He shifts the baby, looking utterly unbothered by the mess. He shakes Pop’s hand. “Good to see you again, Mr. Jacobson.”

Pop claps him on the back, nodding toward the lake. “Go take a dip. The best remedy for whatever ails you.”

I grin. “Pop’s right. Want to go for a swim?”

Seth glances back at the chaos. “I wish, but Sky put me in charge while she’s getting everyone sorted.”

Pop rolls his eyes and reaches for the baby. “Oh, give it here. Come to Pop.” The baby giggles as Pop scoops him up. “Oh, you’re a wet little rascal, aren’t you? Which one are you?”

“No idea,” Seth admits, looking a little lost. “There’s just so many.”

“That one’s mine,” Edward says, strolling over. He takes the baby, offering an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that, Mr. Jacobson.”

Pop laughs. “Nothing a little lake water won’t fix. What do you say, Gabby? Ready for a race?”

I shoot off, sprinting toward the dock. Pop’s slower than he used to be, but he still manages to beat me to the water. We hit the lake with a splash, and soon enough, the other Reed brothers follow suit, diving in like kids at summer camp. Seth surfaces beside me, shaking water from his hair.

“Welcome to Lake Fisher,” I say as he pulls me close and kisses me, the lake water swishing against my skin as he draws me close.

“What the hell are you doing, Pop?” Jake yells from the dock, clipboard in hand. “You’re supposed to be working!”

“Get your panties out of a twist and join us!” Pop calls back. “And lose the stick up your ass before you jump in.”

Pop dives under, tugging at my ankle as he goes, pulling me under, too. I resurface, sputtering, only to see Jake set his

clipboard and his phone on the dock and cannonball in, sending a tidal wave over all of us.

Pop grins as he wipes the water from his face. “Taught him everything he knows.”

Jake, splashing Pop, grabs him in a headlock. I dodge their flying elbows, laughing as I wade back to shore, the sand soft and squishy beneath my feet. My clothes cling to me, but I’m not bothered. Seth’s shorts are stuck in his butt crack, and he pulls them out with a determined tug, making me laugh.

Seth doesn’t see the Reed brothers sneaking up behind him, but I do. They hoist him up, and he squeals, half-laughing, half-protesting, before they toss him back into the lake.

I sit on the sand, watching the brothers dunk and wrestle each other while Sam climbs onto Pete’s shoulders and dives off.

Then, they switch places. Mom sits down next to me. “Are you sure you want to marry into this family?” she asks quietly.

I point to Jake and Pop, who are right in the thick of things. “It’s not so different from the family I already have. Just more of it,” I admit. I gently knock her shoulder with mine.

I’m ready. So ready for this.

LOGAN

Nobody told me that catfishing meant sitting under a sky full of stars, the lake shimmering in the moonlight, while a fire crackles behind you, sending warmth up your back as you sip on a cold beer. The younger kids are all tucked safely in their beds, tucked out after a long afternoon at the lake. The older kids are here with us, their excitement matching the stillness of the night.

“I’m not touching that,” Hayley says, scrunching her nose at something Jacob holds out—something called “stinky bait.” She looks at it like it’s going to eat her before she can even use it to try to catch a fish. “No,” she says firmly.

“If you want to fish, you have to bait your own hook,” Trixie, the oldest of Emily’s little sisters, says. “It’s the rule.” She rummages through a bag, pulls out a hot dog, and holds it up. “You can use this,” she suggests, “but you won’t catch as many as you would with the stinky bait.”

“I don’t want to touch the stinky stuff,” Hayley declares, folding her arms.

Paul chuckles, resting his hand on top of her head. “You don’t have to touch anything you don’t want to, but you’ve been warned—no stinky bait, fewer fish.” Her face scrunches up as she reluctantly pinches off a bit of the bait, which looks like clay but smells far worse and baits the hook with it.

“Need some help?” Paul asks.

“No, I got it,” she says confidently, though her first cast plunks into the water just a few feet away.

“Try again,” Paul encourages her.

This time, the line sails out about 20 feet, creating ripples on the glassy lake surface as the weight plunks into the water. Hayley sets the hook just like Mr. Jacobson taught them earlier, part of his ten-minute crash course on casting, reeling, and the finer points like never tying the line to your toe unless you want to risk losing it when a fish bites.

Hayley settles into her folding chair, her feet dipping into the cool water, staring at the quiet lake where Jacob caught a catfish half an hour ago. Since then, she’s been sulking, determined to catch one of her own.

Trixie feeds the hot dog that Hayley turned down to her great big dog with a shrug. He has been lying at her feet all night.

I cast my line, and it lands with a less-than-impressive plop right in front of me. Paul chuckles as Kit, who’s perched on the edge of a smaller chair right next to me, giggles. “You think that’s funny?” I ask her, grinning. “Let’s see you do better.”

Kit doesn’t hesitate. She baits her hook with the stinky bait—no complaints—then swings the rod back, sending the weighted hook soaring toward the middle of the lake. “Good job,” I say, proud of her.

A tap on my shoulder makes me turn. Paul holds a flashlight to his mouth, mouthing something. I squint, trying to read his lips. It’s hard to pick up voices when everyone is murmuring and trying to be quiet. And it’s really hard to read lips in the dark. He shines the light again and asks if I want a beer. I nod, taking one as I tighten my fishing line that has gone slack.

Hoppy and Matty are sitting beside Kit and me, their fishing poles steady in the water, waiting for a bite. Hoppy, usually unable to sit still for long, is unusually calm tonight, mesmerized by the rhythmic lapping of the lake against the shore.

Mr. Jacobson had made a promise earlier that anything the kids caught would be cooked for dinner tomorrow night, and they all took that challenge seriously.

Suddenly, Mr. Jacobson winks at me and says, “Kit, can you hold this for a minute?” He passes her his rod, and she’s now holding two—her own and his. Then, his pole jerks in her hand, and she squeals with excitement, trying to give it back to him.

Mr. Jacobson, now leisurely rummaging in the cooler, glances over casually. “Reel it in for me, will you? My hands are full,” he says.

I take Kit’s rod as she jumps up, pulling with all her might until a shiny-skinned catfish flops onto the shore.

“What do I do now?” she asks, her voice breathless with excitement.

Mr. Jacobson strolls over, removes the fish from the hook, and ties it to a string that already holds Jacob’s fish, which he has anchored to the shore. “Good catch,” he says, tossing the fish back into the water to keep them fresh. “Next time, I’m keeping my rod,” he adds with a laugh.

And so the night unfolds—one by one, the adults pass their poles to the kids just as the fish bite, watching them reel in their catches, their faces lit up with joy. Even Gabby hands her rod to Seth, who’s never caught a fish like this before, and he reels it in with pride. By midnight, the yawns begin to spread, and soon, even the adults start to fade.

“Time for old men to head to bed,” Mr. Jacobson announces, reeling in his line. One by one, we follow his lead. All the kids caught at least one fish and some even more. When the last of the rods and gear are stowed away and the fish packed in ice, we head back up the hill. Mr. Jacobson putters off on his little red golf cart. Jake hops in with him at the last minute, and Alex and Trixie hitch a ride on the back. Trixie’s great big dog lumbers along behind.

As we walk, Kit looks up at me. “Why do the fish need to be cleaned? They just came out of the lake.”

I laugh. “Not that kind of clean.”

“We have to prepare them so we can eat them,” Sam explains, the chef of the group and probably the only one of us who’s ever “cleaned” a fish. “Catfish are tricky. You have to peel the skin off.”

“Gross,” Kit says, wrinkling her nose.

“So cool,” Jacob says at the same time.

The kids race ahead, leaving the six of us—Paul, Matt, Sam, Pete, Edward, and me—standing at the water’s edge. The moonlight shimmers on the lake’s surface, casting a silvery glow on everything. The gentle rustle of leaves and the soft sound of the water make the moment feel powerful and soft at the same time.

“I don’t want to clean the fish,” Paul admits with a sheepish grin. “But I definitely want to eat them. Is that weird?”

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” Edward says.

Sam, shining his flashlight at his face so I can read his lips, takes in a deep breath of the cool night air. “This place is magic,” he says, his voice filled with awe. “We should do this every year.”

Paul finishes his beer with a loud burp, and Pete laughs.

“I’m heading to the cabin,” Edward says, stretching. “The baby will be up soon, and I want to get a few quiet moments with her in that big rocking chair on the porch before Avery wakes up to feed her.” He walks off in the darkness, chatting with Penny as they walk away. Edward adopted Penny a few months ago, but so far, she still calls him Edward. I have a feeling it doesn’t bother him. He’s her dad in every sense of the word.

As we walk up the hill, I spot Gabby and Seth walking hand in hand in front of us, the moonlight casting long shadows behind them. “Do you think he’s ready to get married?” I ask Matt.

“He’s ready,” Matt says, a certainty in his voice.

“What makes you say that?” I ask. They’re so young, with their whole lives ahead of them.

“He told me last week that he feels like he’s a better man when he’s with her. That was enough for me,” Matt replies, grinning. “I think we’re out of Reeds to marry off after this one,” he adds with a chuckle.

“There’s a whole new batch coming up soon enough,” I remind him.

Matt groans. “I’m not ready to even think about that yet.” He pauses as we near his cabin, then asks, “Do you ever wish you’d done anything differently?”

I think about it, the night air cool on my skin, and shake my head. “Not a thing.”

He smiles, gives my shoulder a light punch, and heads inside.

When I get to my cabin, Kit is already talking softly with Emily in the kitchen. I usher Kit to bed, tucking her in for the night. Emily’s still moving around quietly when I find her again, her face lit by the soft kitchen light. “Did she wake you?” I whisper.

“I was half-awake anyway,” she murmurs, smiling as I kiss her shoulder. “You smell like fish.” Her nose wrinkles. “And something stinky,” she says with a playful shove. “Go shower, then come back.”

I take the fastest shower of my life, and when I climb into bed, she curls into me, her leg draped over mine.

“I want to hear all about fishing tomorrow,” she says sleepily.

Or at least I think that’s what she said—the moonlight through the blinds is just enough to catch her lips moving as I drift off, the peaceful feel of the lake still resonating in my soul.

EMILY

I wake up the next morning to the sound of tiny feet tiptoeing across the wooden floor of the small cabin. I look over at Logan. Of course, he's sleeping soundly because he can't hear a thing. It was startling when we first started sharing a bed—kind of freeing that I could make all the noise I wanted without having to worry about waking him. He takes his processor off, and then nothing can disturb him. When we're at home, he has an appliance that connects to his watch set to pick up baby cries, and it will vibrate and alert him if one of the kids wakes up. He doesn't have it on now. It usually picks up the sounds from the baby monitor.

I hear Kit shush the smaller kids. I glance at the window. The sun is barely up. I get up, though, get dressed quickly, and pull my hair up into a messy bun on top of my head. I slip on a pair of flip-flops and walk into the living room to find all my kids staring longingly out the front window toward the lake.

“What are you all doing?” I ask quietly, even though I know Logan is the only one sleeping, and I won't disturb him.

Kit has our youngest, Jimi, perched on her hip. He hops up and down and points out the window. I walk over and look out to find a big red tractor rolling slowly down the lane. It's pulling a row of small train cars, but only when I look closer do I see that they're not train cars at all. They look like the oil barrels you might find behind restaurants in the city, only they have been cut to turn them into train cars. The edges have been reinforced and made safe, seats have been added, and they have been painted in bright colors. Each one has wheels, and

the front of each one has a hitch to connect it to the one before it.

“Can we go see, Mom?” Kit asks. I don’t know when she moved from calling me Mommy to calling me Mom, and I’m not sure I like it.

I open the door and incline my head, and they all shoot past me in one big whoosh. They run with their little feet bare. I don’t think any of them have had shoes on since we got here. Gabby says that’s normal at the lake. When they get close to the tractor, Mr. Jacobson stops and glares at them, and I see them all take a step back. The man is a formidable presence on a good day, much less an early morning.

“Why are you up?” he asks brusquely. He gets off the tractor and walks toward the little cars, checking the straps and seat belts.

“They wanted to see the tractor, I think,” I say. To be honest, Mr. Jacobson intimidates me. He’s a mix of fierceness and softness, and I never can tell which one I’m going to get. “I’ll take them back to the cabin if they’re bothering you.”

“I could use a tester. Never pulled this thing before,” Mr. Jacobson says gruffly, his voice little more than a rumble.

All the kids look at me, their faces glowing with excitement. “Can we?” Kit asks.

I look at Mr. Jacobson. “You want to take them for a ride?” I ask.

“Well, it won’t help me any if they just sit and stare at it,” he remarks absently.

“Pop,” I hear Jake warn. “Don’t be a dick,” he hisses at him.

I hadn’t even seen Jake on the other side of the tractor.

“Don’t call me a dick, and I won’t be a dick,” Mr. Jacobson tosses back.

I hear Jake growl, which makes me laugh.

“Well, are you getting in or what?” Mr. Jacobson asks.

All the kids scramble to get into the carts, and Kit carries Jimi with her, buckling him into a tiny baby seat next to her. Suddenly, Katie's smallest kids run up, too. They climb into the other carts until all the carts are filled with two to three kids each.

When they're all buckled, Mr. Jacobson says, "All aboard!" Then he blows a train whistle, engages the gears on the tractor, and off they go. He heads down a long path.

Katie walks up next to me. "Don't let him fool you. He's been dying to take that thing out ever since he bought it. One of his friends made it just for him. My kids have been itching to ride it, but Pop made them wait until this morning." She laughs. "I think it was just as hard for Pop to wait." She glances down at her watch. "They'll be about thirty minutes if you have something you want to do." She waggles her eyebrows at me. "Or somebody," she mutters with a laugh.

My face gets hot. "What about the kids?" I ask.

Just then, I see Jake running after the train cars. He runs, cursing up a storm, which makes all the kids giggle. He hops into the last train car just before it disappears out of sight.

"Jake's with them," she says. "They'll be fine. They're probably going to go down to the old haunted house, around to the cemetery, and then back around to the old section of the lake that we don't use anymore. That's where the ducks hang out in the mornings. They might even get to see a deer or two and maybe a wild turkey."

"I probably should have gone with them." I nibble on a fingernail as I stare toward where they disappeared.

"Pop may look like a grump, but he loves the kids. Teenagers, not so much, but he loves the little ones. They'll be fine." She glances down at her watch again. "You're down to twenty-eight minutes," she says with a grin.

"If you insist," I say.

It's rare to get a moment alone with Logan. We love having kids—along with everybody else's kids—but we also like a quiet moment alone.

I go back inside, slip my flip-flops off at the door, and take off my clothes. When I'm naked, I get into bed with Logan, sliding close. He reaches for me instinctually. "Why are you cold?" he asks. He opens his eyes so he can see me sign. "I was outside with the kids," I say. "They went for a train ride with Mr. Jacobson." I scoot a little closer and kiss his naked shoulder. He pulls my leg over his hip. "We have about twenty-six minutes before they'll be back."

"It'll only take me five," he says. He grabs my butt to jerk me closer, feeling around when he realizes that I don't have anything on.

I tap his shoulder so he'll look up. "But what about me?" I ask.

"Okay, you can have five minutes too," he says. He shucks off his boxers, and then he rolls me onto my back, and his head dips below the covers. We use the twenty-six minutes very productively, mostly with me clutching the sheets and begging him to hurry up, to not stop, and then to please ease up just a little. When he settles his hips between my thighs, I'm so sensitive that I can't keep from coming apart again.

I heard the crunch of tractor tires on gravel and the low blow of the train whistle. I lift off my elbows where I've been resting on his chest. "Where are you going?" he asks.

"The kids are back," I say. He shoves me back toward the bed without a word.

"I'll get them," he says, as he puts on a pair of shorts and pulls a t-shirt over his head. I watch as his tattoos disappear. "You take a break. Or a shower. I might have gotten you messy." He grins, puts his processor on, and goes out the front door.

I lie there, staring at the ceiling. It all started that one night when I was cold. We ate pie, and he spoke to me. And my life has been nothing but warm ever since.

Instead of lying there, I get up, shower, put on a swimsuit, and get ready to start the day.

SAM

When Seth invited us to the wedding, and Mr. Jacobson closed his campground just for us, we all decided to give back to the community as a thank you. Each of us picked an activity. I chose cooking for the community, but Pete picked animals. He originally wanted to do something with the youth since that's his thing, but he didn't want to form relationships that he couldn't commit to, and since we're so far from home, he felt like it wouldn't be a good idea. The local animal shelter is overrun with dogs, like a lot of shelters around here, and they asked for help getting some of the pups adopted, so Pete grabbed on to that idea. Our mission today? Take some adorable pictures with puppies. It's not exactly a hardship.

Pete and Reagan already have a dog and a cat at home, which is plenty for them. She gives him a serious look as he kisses her goodbye. "Don't come home with any pets unless you can help it," she warns.

"We don't need any pets either," Peck reminds me with a glare.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" I ask, hoping she might change her mind. Friday's going because... puppies! Seth and Gabby are coming too since this week is all about them. We're leaving the kids behind, though, because if they came... well, let's say we'd all end up with a new family member or two.

Peck shakes her head and leans back in her chair, her eyes half-closed. "I-I want to sit in the sun and enjoy the peace and

quiet,” she says, soaking in the tranquility we never get back in New York. Out here, instead of honking horns and screeching tires, we have humming bugs, ducks that quack as you walk by them, and the soft rustling of leaves in the trees.

“Have fun!” Peck calls after us as we pile into the van. Star and Finny are sitting next to her. The kids are already wading in the water while they wait for someone to tell them they can jump in.

In the van, I settle into the leather seat, its scent mixing with the faint smell of freshly mowed grass and fall. I glance at Pete, grinning. “Want to bet how many dogs we’ll end up bringing home?”

He makes a zero with his fingers and holds it up confidently. “None,” he declares.

Friday smacks his hand away. “If I want to come back with a puppy, there’s nothing you jackasses can do to stop me.” She’s dressed in full Friday fashion: a vintage dress covered in pink and black skulls, a short poofy skirt, stockings that look more like cobwebs than fabric, and chunky combat boots. Somehow, she makes it work effortlessly.

“Nice boots,” I say. “They remind me of the ones Em was wearing when Logan brought her home that first night—kicking and screaming.”

Friday winks. “Thanks, they’re my ‘kicking ass and taking names’ boots.” She pulls out a clipboard and clears her throat dramatically. “Here’s the plan: Pete and Sam, you’re on doggie baths.” Pete groans, but he already looks resigned to the task. “Paul and Matt, you’ll be in the kitty cuddle room. Your job is to make the cats look super adoptable.”

Paul raises a brow. He snorts. “Fine. I like pussies.” It’s not often that we don’t have kids around, so it’s somewhat startling to hear him say that.

Friday stares at him until he mutters, “What? I do.”

“I know you do, but we don’t have to talk about it right now,” she says with a hard stare. Then she starts to bark orders in true Friday style. “Seth and Gabby, you’re walking dogs.

Try to look romantic while you do it, will you? Give the people what they want. A little love-sick action.”

Seth salutes. “Yes, ma’am.”

Edward leans forward, looking both eager and slightly worried. “What about me? What’s my assignment?”

Friday grins, flipping to the last page of her clipboard. “You, my friend, are on poop patrol.”

Edward’s face falls. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” She slaps the clipboard shut with a flourish. “Somebody’s got to clean up after all these furry little beauties, and today, that someone is you. Unless you want to trade with Sam or Pete.”

“I’d rather shovel shit than bathe dogs,” he admits.

At the shelter, the chaos begins almost immediately. Pete and I are ambushed by a golden retriever mix with the boundless energy of a caffeine-fueled rocket. He’s mid-bath, but this dog is having none of it. Water splashes everywhere, soaking Pete, who looks like he’s been wrestling a wet, wriggling tiger. Soap suds cling to his hair and clothes, dripping into his eyes. “Why is he still wet?” Pete yells over the deafening barks echoing off the cement walls.

“Because he keeps shaking!” I shout back, struggling to control a hose that seems to have a mind of its own. Water sprays wildly, reminding me of the time a firefighter dropped a fire hose on our street, and it took three people to catch it as it slithered wildly across the ground. “It’s like Niagara Falls in here!”

Friday starts snapping pictures on her phone. I feel the buzz of my own phone in my pocket and pull it out to find that she’s tagged me in a post. The caption reads, “Who looks better in bubbles? Sam or the golden mix that’s available for adoption?” The picture shows both of us covered head to toe in bubbles. The dog looks adorable. His tongue is hanging out, and his eyes are bright and mischievous. Me? Not so much. She has included a link so people can donate to the shelter.

“People are arriving,” Friday calls out as someone approaches her with a question.

Our goal is to get folks to the shelter so they can see the animals and, ideally, fall in love—not so much about us today. I wander from kennel to kennel, taking the time to go through each dog’s card and running my fingers down the faded edges of the glossy documents. The harsh smell of disinfection and moist fur mixes with the sound of dogs barking and gentle, pitiful whimpers.

Then, in the back corner, away from the chaos, I spot him—a mid-sized dog with dull, matted fur and sad, weary eyes. He’s curled up on a small mat, barely lifting his head as I approach. I pick up his card and read it. His owner passed away, and he was surrendered 72 days ago by the owner’s son, who didn’t want him. The words sting more than I expected.

“When he got here, he was really social. He loved people,” a quiet voice says from behind me. I turn to see a shelter worker who is wearing a polo with the shelter’s logo on it. She watches the dog with the eye of a person who has seen too many bad endings.

“How old is he?” I ask, my voice barely audible over the echo of barking dogs in the neighboring kennels.

“He’s only five,” she replies, sadness lining her words. “But the noise here is stressing him out. His health is deteriorating because of the stress. He’s just not thriving.” She clicks her tongue softly. “My boss says if we don’t find a home for him soon, we’ll have to make a tough decision.”

I look at the dog, who is completely ignoring my presence. His kennel is spotless, but he looks tired—like he’s given up. “Why hasn’t anyone wanted him?”

She shrugs, her shoulders heavy with defeat. “He sheds. He’s not a puppy. He doesn’t come to the cage door like the others. He’s just... tired. People want a dog that’s excited to see them, and he’s not even trying anymore.”

“Can I go in with him?” I ask, feeling a tug at my heart.

“Sure,” she says, unlocking the gate. I step inside, and the dog barely glances at me. His eyes are dim, his spirit clearly battered by months of neglect. I sit down beside him, leaning against the cold, concrete wall of the kennel. I don’t reach for him or try to pet him; I just talk.

“I don’t want a dog,” I tell him quietly.

He glances up at me with a look that seems to say, “Good, because I don’t want an owner.”

“But I’d like to help you find a good home.”

“His name is Chance,” the attendant says from the other side of the gate. Her eyes are bright, and I swear she blinks back a tear as she watches us.

“Chance, huh?” I murmur, looking at him. “Is that your name? You need one of those, don’t you, boy?”

For the first time, he lifts his head, and our eyes meet. I can almost feel the weight of his past—the pain of losing his family and being left behind. This kennel, noisy and cold, is a far cry from the warm, quiet home he probably once knew. I imagine him curled up on a rug in front of a fireplace, and I guess that lying on concrete is nothing like his home.

I pull a treat from my pocket and hold it out. He sniffs it but doesn’t take it, blowing out a heavy breath before laying his head back down. I lie down next to him, right next to his bed, feeling the hard concrete under my back. It’s clean, and after an hour of wrestling that golden retriever, the state of the floor of the kennel is the least of my worries. We sit in silence. I know that if I move too fast or try too hard, he won’t react the way I hope.

Minutes pass, and then I feel a cold, wet nose nudge my hand. I scratch under his chin, and he inches closer, just enough for me to cover his head with my hand and give him a good rub. I gently scruff the top of his head, and slowly, he nestles into my side, tucking himself under my arm as if he might think I’m trustworthy. His eyes flicker up to mine, hopeful but wary.

“You want to go home with me?” I ask, a smile tugging at my lips.

He sneezes right in my face, and I laugh, wiping it away with my sleeve. From behind me, I hear the distinct clomp of Friday’s combat boots on the concrete. “Hey, Friday!” I call out.

She approaches the kennel cautiously. “What are you doing in there, Sam?” she asks, her tone amused but wary.

“Just bonding,” I say with a shrug.

She snaps a picture of me and Chance.

“Post it with the caption, ‘Somebody give Chance a chance, please.’”

Chance, feeling braver, climbs halfway onto my lap, resting his head on my chest. He sighs deeply, his breath warm against my neck.

“Done!” Friday announces, her voice softening as she watches us.

I stay with Chance for the next hour, just petting him, letting him feel what little comfort I can give. Then, the kennel door rattles. “Sorry to interrupt, but someone wants to meet Chance. I don’t want him to miss his opportunity.”

“Can I come with him?” I ask, reluctant to let go.

“Of course.”

I attach a leash to Chance’s collar, and he follows me, his steps slow and unsteady, like he’s forgotten what it feels like to walk beside someone who cares about him. We enter the meeting room, where a woman and a quiet teenager are sitting. She speaks softly to the teen. The boy looks around nervously, his eyes darting everywhere but at us. I can tell right away he’s struggling in this new space—maybe he’s on the spectrum, maybe just shy—but there’s something familiar in the way he avoids eye contact.

The woman smiles at me, hopeful but reserved. “I saw your post. We’ve been looking for the perfect dog for our son.

He needs a companion—someone quiet, like him. I read that Chance is calm, and we were hoping it might work.”

The boy sits down and waits, quietly observing Chance. After a moment, he pulls a book from his backpack and starts reading aloud, his voice soft and steady. Chance watches him, ears perking slightly, and then, slowly, the dog inches closer. Within half an hour, the boy is resting against Chance, who’s curled up beside him, content to be his pillow as the boy reads.

“We want him,” the woman says, her voice clear and strong.

My eyes sting, and I blink back, the tears threatening to spill. “Good. He deserves this.”

“How much is the adoption fee?” she asks.

The attendant tells her, and she winces.

“He has been sponsored,” I blurt out. “Someone already paid his adoption fee.” It’s me, but still. “And he comes with food for a year.”

She smiles. “Really?” She blinks, surprised. “It’s just that we’re paying for PT and OT, and all the therapies are so expensive,” she rushes to explain.

I won’t be taking a dog home today, but someone will be taking Chance, and I couldn’t be happier to pay for the adoption fee and the food.

I sit with Chance and the boy while the mom does the paperwork. There’s no doubt in my mind that this boy deserves this dog, and this dog deserves this boy. After watching them together, I know it will work out.

“I’m so glad you climbed into that kennel,” the attendant says as I watch them walk across the parking lot. The dog looks eagerly up at the boy, ready for a new adventure.

“Me too,” I say. “Thank you for letting me.”

“We’ve almost cleared the shelter in the last two hours,” she says. “People came to see you guys at work, but they took dogs and cats home. We even adopted out two ferrets and a

chicken.” We sponsored all the adoptions today. Not just Chance.

I blow on my knuckles and pretend to rub them on my shirt. “All in a day’s work.”

Edward yells from where he’s still scooping poop inside the fenced area. “If you’re done over there, come help me with this shit!” he says.

I chuckle. “Be right there.”

As I walk through the shelter, I see Paul and Friday scrubbing cat cages. The shelter manager has taken over Friday’s picture-taking duties. Friday has a waterproof apron over her dress. Matt and Logan are cleaning kennels, and Seth has a kitten suckling on his shirt, which he doesn’t seem to mind.

I go and take over scooping poop from Edward so he can have some time with the few animals that are left. He gladly hands over his shovel and pail.

Before the end of the day, the shelter manager tells us she wants us to take pictures of ourselves with a group of puppies that just got surrendered. They want to use the photos for their yearly calendar. We all peel off our shirts—except for Friday, of course—and then we let puppies crawl all over us for about an hour. When we’re done, even Friday looks a little worse for wear, but it was worth it.

I already did my good deed for today. I gave someone a Chance.

MATT

Everything was going well until Sam critiqued the way Mr. Jacobson battered his fish. Then all hell broke loose, Mr. Jacobson went after him with a water hose, and Sam was banned from the cooking area. Mr. Jacobson suggested he join Jake wherever he'd run off to so he could be as useless as his son. "Like tits on a boar-hog, the both of you," he mutters.

"Do you know what that means?" Sam asks as he walks past me, trying to avoid Mr. Jacobson, who is all set to spray him again.

"No idea."

Gabby laughs from where she's shaking the fish we'd all cleaned that morning—and cleaning catfish is no joke—in a special mix of breading and spices, the contents of which Mr. Jacobson refused to share with Sam. It felt like it took us hours to clean those fish. Some of the kids helped. Some didn't. But we had enough for a meal after Mr. Jacobson sent Jake to the corner store to get some frozen catfish fillets from Shy, who runs the small market everyone shops at while visiting the lake, just to supplement our catch.

The kids have been waiting to eat it ever since we made them leave the lake. Their skin is pink from too much sun, their eyes are red from swimming, and none of them have shoes on.

I look around. This place is just... different. Life moves a little slower here. You get a chance to enjoy the breeze without

a car horn or a blaring radio jolting you out of it. Sky walks up.

“Why did I just pass a pissed-off Sam walking up the path?” she asks as she steps up next to me. My job is to watch the hushpuppies as they fry. Mr. Jacobson had set up a few vats of oil and fryers—one for fish, one for hushpuppies, and one for fries. “Sam muttered something about grumpy old men who wouldn’t know good fish batter if it bit them on the ass.”

“He critiqued Mr. Jacobson’s cooking,” I whisper to her.

She makes an O with her mouth, which makes me want to kiss her. “That doesn’t sound like a very good idea. Is that why he was wet?”

Mr. Jacobson, who must have been halfway listening, holds up his water hose. “I’ll get him again if he tries to tell me how to cook.” Sky holds up her hands like she’s surrendering to the cops. He grumbles as he continues to fry fish.

“How was your day?” she asks me.

“Paul and I got to play with pussies,” I say close to her ear.

She rolls her eyes. “The day you play with a pussy that’s not mine is the day you die, Matt, and you know it.”

I pretend to frown and shake a finger at her. “You’ve been spending too much time with Friday.”

She laughs. “I know. Isn’t it great?”

Our small kids are all playing in a small, fenced area Mr. Jacobson set up just because we have so many kids under the age of three who are toddling around. He hired babysitters to herd them around and keep them entertained, which was really thoughtful of him. The rest of the kids, the ones we’re not worried about running off to fall in the lake, are kicking balls, swirling hula hoops on their hips, and Gabby showed them how to draw a hopscotch board in the dirt.

Before we started cooking the fish, Mr. Jacobson cooked a few bags of dinosaur-shaped nuggets, and the small kids have

already eaten. The bigger kids are waiting for the fish and hushpuppies.

The putter of Mr. Jacobson's golf cart makes me turn my head. I see Jake and Sam climbing off it, their arms laden with bowls. Sam hesitantly walks over and sets a large bowl on the table next to the fish. Mr. Jacobson lifts the cling wrap and looks into the slaw. "Why are there carrots in my slaw?" he says. Sam grabs a spoon, dips out a bite, and holds it out to him. I hold my breath as Mr. Jacobson takes a bite, chews, and says, "That's good, chef," in a grumble. But his eyes twinkle. He lifts the foil from on top of the fish, plucks a piece out with his fingers, and holds it out to Sam. Sam's face changes, his eyes dancing. He takes a bite and says, "It's good, chef."

"Don't ever tell me I don't know how to cook fish," Mr. Jacobson pretends to grumble. But he pats Sam on the back. It's about as close to an apology for spraying him with the hose as I think Sam is ever going to get.

"It was just a suggestion!" Sam crows, snags a hushpuppy, and runs off with it. He takes a hula hoop from Kennedy and tries to make it go around and around. He finally gives up. "I don't think I have enough hips," he says as he passes it back. Kennedy has no hips at all, and she seems to be able to make it work.

"You show them how it's done, baby," Pete says, scruffing the top of her head as he walks by.

Gabby comes to stand next to me and Sky. "Pop is funny about his food," she says. "Doesn't like for anyone to tell him he's wrong, that's for sure."

"What do you have left to do for the wedding, Gabby?" Sky asks. "Anything I can help with?"

"I think everything is all set," Gabby says. "But I was talking with Seth yesterday about the dress fitting I have tomorrow morning..." She lets her voice trail off with a wince. "I should have asked this already, but I didn't know if you would want to go. Traditionally, it's the mom of the bride and the mom of the groom who goes for the wedding dress fitting,

but... well... that's not possible. If you don't want to go, I completely understand."

Seth walks up, stuffs a piece of a hushpuppy into Gabby's mouth, and says, "What are we talking about?"

"Wedding dress fitting," she says, around a hot mouthful of hot batter. "Tomorrow. Oh, my god, that's so hot." Air hisses around her teeth as she sucks it in.

"I know I am, but what are you?" Mr. Jacobson chimes in from his spot in front of the fryer.

She rolls her eyes and ignores him. Finally she swallows. "I'd love for you to go if you want," Gabby says shyly. "I don't want to impose."

"Of course she wants to go," Seth says. He walks over, gives Sky a loud kiss on the cheek, and says, "My mom's not here. And Aunt Sky's the closest thing I've got. She wants to do everything the mom of the groom would normally do." His brow furrows. "Don't you? You don't have to..." He suddenly looks unsure. "I'd hoped you'd sit in my mom's seat and dance the mom dance with me."

I watch Sky as she blinks back tears. She's acted in a motherly role to Seth since he was sixteen years old, but he never seemed to accept her in that role until recently. His new attitude is a switch, for sure.

"I want to," she whispers, her voice cracking. She places her hand over Seth's, which is resting on her shoulder. "I do want to go, Gabby," she says. "It would be an honor. I can't wait to see your wedding gown."

Gabby winces. "It's more of a dress than a gown. It's very simple, but I think you'll like it. We have to be there at ten. Will that work for you? Mom and I will pick you up around 9:30."

Sky nods. "I'll be ready."

Gabby and Seth walk away, his fingers tangled with hers.

"Did you hear that?" Sky asks, leaning against me as she watches them walk away.

“He invited you to stand in for his mother because he loves and appreciates you,” I say, pressing my lips to her forehead.

“Yeah,” she says, her voice watery. “He did. He does.”

“How’s that feel?” I ask, just curious.

“It’s the best, Matt.” She swipes a tear from below her eye before anyone can see her, and then she wipes her face on the sleeve of my t-shirt.

Mr. Jacobson calls out, “It’s done!” And we all go to make our plates.

Even Sam has to begrudgingly admit that it’s the best fish he’s ever had.

SKY

I step out onto the porch and look around the peaceful lakeside community, and I take a deep breath. It's different here, almost surreal. Matt left with the kids two hours ago to take them to swim at the lake. They walked away with floaties on their arms, innertubes around their waists, and they were all wearing goggles. I took lots of pictures. My oldest two, Joey and Mellie, just naturally helped to corral the younger ones.

When I first moved in with Joey, Mellie, and Seth, I never anticipated the amount of joy they would bring into my life. I had a boyfriend who didn't care about me, and to be quite honest, I didn't care about him either. Now, I have a husband who adores me and whom I'm not sure I could live without, a huge family I never expected to have, and even more friends than I can stand sometimes.

I hear tires crunching on gravel and look up to find a large black sedan coming down the dirt path toward the cabins. I glance at my watch. It's almost 10 in the morning. What are they doing here so soon?

My parents weren't able to come for the whole week. Instead, they decided to come for a few days before the wedding. They wanted to spend some time with the kids and Seth before the big day. My dad has always been a big part of their lives, and he is the main reason that Matt and I were able to adopt the kids. I couldn't imagine my family without my three oldest kids, who were not born of my body but most definitely born of my heart.

While Dad has been a massive influence in their lives, he was never present in mine until I got much older. The kids are his grandkids, the product of an affair he had with their grandmother many years ago. He worked things out with my mother, and that's a whole story in itself. My mom's an alcoholic, and she has been sober for years. Despite that, we have never been close. Our relationship is strained, mainly by years of abandonment.

Mom opens the car door and steps out. She reaches into the car, retrieves a straw hat, and plops it on her head. "Never too late to worry about your skin, Sky," she warns. She comes over and air kisses my cheek. "I keep telling your father he needs sunscreen when he golfs, but he never listens."

Dad holds his arms open wide and hugs me. He comes by often to visit the kids. In the past few years, he has started to bring my mother with him. "Where are my grandbabies?" Mom asks.

Just then, I hear a squeal from behind us, and Joey and Mellie run toward my parents. The girls are wet, and they're wearing nothing but swimsuits with towels around their necks. Their feet are bare, and they slowly pick through the dirt drive in front of the cabin, looking for safe places to step.

But what gets me is that instead of running to my dad, they run straight for my mom. Mom was never very physically demonstrative when I was younger. In fact, she was cold. She didn't hug, coddle, or try to make me feel valuable. I was raised by nannies and housekeepers, and the gardener even taught me how to drive. But that's not the case for these kids. Joey and Mellie aren't technically her grandkids – again, they're from an affair my dad had—but she treats them as though they are. The love she never gave to me, she gives to them with no restraint. My mom hugs them tightly, stepping back to look them over. "You need sunscreen," she says as she tweaks Mellie's nose. She takes off her straw hat and plops it onto Mellie's head.

"Do you want to go swimming?" Joey asks.

“I do,” Mom says. “I need to change clothes, though,” she says. I feel like I just got jolted by a sudden bolt of lightning. I didn’t know my mom owned a swimsuit.

“You’re in the cabin next to ours,” I say. “The door is open.”

Dad unloads the bags while Mom looks at Lake Fisher. “Lovely place,” she says. She turns to me and smiles. I can see why you like it so much here.” She walks toward the cabin and slowly up the steps. She goes inside with Joey and Mellie, each holding one of her hands.

Dad walks up next to me. “She’s different, Dad,” I say.

He grins at me. “I know. Isn’t it great?” He picks a piece of tall grass and tucks it between his teeth. It must be an older man thing because I saw Mr. Jacobson do the same thing last night. “She’s a new person. Happy.”

“I wish she’d done it sooner,” I say quietly.

“She did it when she could,” he says stoically.

I nod. “I know.”

After a few minutes, Joey and Mellie walk out of the house, chattering noisily at my mom, who is now wearing a coverup and what I assume is a swimsuit under it. Mellie is still wearing her hat, but Mom has traded it for a sun visor, I presume, to keep the sun out of her eyes. She has a basket hanging over her arm with towels bulging from it.

“Are you going to the lake?” she asks.

“No, I have plans with Gabby and her mom,” I say. I immediately regret it, and I’m afraid Mom will try to invite herself to go with us.

“Where are you three going?” Mom asks as she adjusts the sleeve of her coverup.

“Gabby’s wedding dress fitting,” I admit finally, wincing as I do it.

Mom claps her hands. “Oh, what fun!” she says.

“Gabby asked me to go, and Seth was in favor of it since his Mom isn’t here.”

She reaches over and squeezes my forearm. “Seth’s mom is here, sweetheart,” she says quietly, suddenly blinking back tears.

I blink hard.

Katie and Gabby pull up in a sedan. “There’s my ride,” I say. I walk toward the car. I turn back at the last minute. “Mom, do you want to join us?” I ask.

Her face softens. “No, dear. Today is all yours. Enjoy every minute of it. I didn’t get to do these kinds of things with you, mainly because I never earned the right, but you, my dear, have earned the right to all of it. You’re a good mother. Go and enjoy it.” She glances toward the lake almost wistfully. “I’m going to get my hands on some grandbabies,” she says, rubbing her hands together like she’s chafing them by the fire.

“You’re a good grandma, Mom,” I say quietly. She was a shitty mom, but she’s a good grandma.

“Thank you, dear,” she says, her voice suddenly watery. “It’s not a hard job to have.”

Dad walks out of the cabin in his board shorts, and they head toward the lake together.

I turn and get into the backseat of the sedan.

“Should I have invited her to come with us?” Gabby asks. She glances at her watch. “There’s still time if she wants to join us.”

“No, she’s ready to go swimming,” I explain. Plus, I don’t want to share this event with her. I know that sounds horrible when thought out loud, so I don’t say it, but I do think it.

We go to the bridal shop, and the bell tinkles over the door as we walk in. We’re greeted with mimosas, and Gabby pushes one into my hand. Katie gets a glass of orange juice since she’s driving. Gabby clinks her glass against mine and says, “Bottoms up.”

An attendant comes out and leads Gabby back into a dressing room. Katie sits down next to me on the sofa, kicks off her flip-flop, and pulls one leg up under her. “You didn’t want your mom to come, did you?” she asks. She takes a sip of her juice.

“Not particularly,” I reply. “Our relationship is an odd one.”

She nods. “Seth told me about it. When we were working on the guest list and figuring out who was going to get a cabin and who wasn’t, he brought up the history. You had a hard life.”

“They try much harder to be in my life than they used to,” I explain.

“Do you want them to be in your life?” she asks candidly. She holds up a hand. “Only if you feel like talking about it.”

“I do,” I say. “I feel like I met my parents for the first time after my mom got out of rehab,” I try to explain. There aren’t adequate words.

“Do you like them?” she asks.

“I like who they are now. Not so much who they used to be.” I shrug. “Sometimes it’s hard to let go of the past and just enjoy who they are now.” I haul in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I need to let go of all that, I guess.”

“Seth says Joey and Mellie adore your mom. She comes and takes them shopping, just the two of them.”

I nod. The first time she did it, it shocked the hell out of me. “She treats them just like she does the rest of the kids. They’re a little older, so she actually does more with them than she does with the little ones. She takes them for pedicures, and they go to the tea room. She buys them fancy dresses they only wear when they’re with her. They call her when they need fashion advice. If they ever call her, she always answers.”

Katie’s eyes narrow. “Are you ever jealous?”

“So jealous I can barely stand it,” I admit. Katie laughs, and so do I. Then silence falls over the room.

Katie glances toward the closed door. “Do you think they’re ready for marriage?” she asks. “They’re so young.”

“They’re ready,” I say. “Seth loves her so much.” An attendant takes my empty glass and presses another mimosa into my hand. “Thank you,” I say absently.

“I have a feeling they will forego kids and do lots of brilliant medical things with tons of travel involved,” Katie says.

“How does that make you feel?” I ask.

“Honestly, I’d support whatever they do.” Katie sighs happily.

The door opens, and my breath catches. Gabby walks out. Her dark hair is piled in wispy ringlets on top of her head, held still by shimmery combs. Her shoulders are bare, and her dress is simple but elegant. It looks like it was spun by fairies, the pattern so light and delicate that it’s barely there. The dress falls around her calves, not even touching the floor. It’s gorgeous. I look over at Katie, and she blinks. “Your dad would be so proud if he could see you,” she says, and her voice cracks.

Gabby blinks hard, and then she turns to face the mirror. “Do you really think he would like it?” she asks softly.

Katie walks over and stands behind her, placing her chin on Gabby’s shoulder. “He would love it,” she whispers, and then she kisses Gabby’s cheek and steps back.

“They did a great job on the alterations,” Gabby says. “It fits perfectly.” She lets me take a few pictures. Then she points at both of us in turn. “Now, your turn!” she says. “You both need mom dresses. Seth and I talked about it, and we want you both to look amazing, so I picked out some dresses for each of you. They’re in the changing rooms. Go try them on. Let’s get something beautiful.”

“Today is supposed to be about you,” Katie protests.

“And this is what I want to do with my day, so go try on a dress, Mom,” she says. She takes Katie by the shoulders, spins her around, and smacks her butt. Katie squeals, but she goes.

Gabby disappears to change back into her shorts and t-shirt. When she comes back, she sits down on the couch next to me. Someone takes my empty glass and presses a full one into it. I burp into my fist, my head swimming a little. They give Gabby a fresh drink, too.

“I think I’m a little tipsy,” I admit. Gabby clinks her glass with mine and drinks her mimosa all at once. The attendant laughs and gives her another. Katie comes out in dress after dress until she finds the perfect one. By the time it’s my turn, I’m nearly drunk, and the dress shopping is the most fun I’ve ever had. Gabby gets tipsy, too, which makes it even better.

“It’s not even noon yet,” I hear the attendant whisper to someone. I finish my last drink and wave away another. I can barely stand as it is.

But I do find the perfect dress. We take the dress bags, hang them in the car next to Gabby’s bridal gown, and go back to Lake Fisher.

I lie down in the back seat because my head is spinning. “I think that was the most fun shopping trip I’ve ever been on, Gabby,” I say. “Thanks for taking me.”

When we arrive, Matt meets us at the car. “The fuck did you do to her?” he says playfully as he stares down at me.

“She’s drunk,” Gabby admits with a laugh.

“Did you take Aunt Sky out and get her drunk at ten o’clock in the morning?” I hear Seth ask. He must have been waiting with Matt for us to get back.

“I did,” Gabby says. “And I’m not ashamed of it even a little bit,” she says. She holds up one finger and says, “In fact, I’d do it again.” She turns to me. “Do you want to do it again, Sky?”

Katie snorts.

“I had better get her home,” Matt says.

“I’d do it again and again!” I yell. Matt grabs my arm and pulls it to sit me up because I’m still lying in the back seat.

Then he stands me up. “Let’s go take a quick nap,” he says with a chuckle.

“That’s how we got pregnant with our last baby,” I remind him. I must say it loudly because Katie snorts again. “We took a nap, and then I was knocked up again.” I grab his t-shirt in my first. “Want to knock me up, Matt?”

“Oh, God.” Seth groans and swipes a hand down his face.

“Sure,” Matt says. “Let’s go do it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Seth says.

“That’s what I’m going to be saying in a few minutes!” I whisper-yell at them all. “Jesus Christ, that was good! I’ll be calling on all the saints, too. Although I can’t remember their names right now.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Matt says. “They don’t need a play-by-play.”

“Please, God, no play-by-play,” Seth says.

“I’ll give you a play-by-play later, Gabby. You can use some of the tricks on the honeymoon!”

Matt gives up on walking with me and tosses me over his shoulder. “Time for bad girls to be in bed.”

I smack his ass and whoop, “I’m a bad girl!”

“Close the damn door!” Seth yells. “We can still hear you!”

I shove it shut after we go through it so hard that the little cabin vibrates. “That might have been too hard,” I admit.

He carries me a few feet to the tiny bedroom and tosses me gently onto the bed. My head spins. He lays down next to me and pulls my head onto his chest. He pulls my ponytail holder out and starts to run his fingers through my hair.

“I didn’t mean to get so drunk,” I admit as my eyes fall closed.

“Happens that way sometimes.” Matt’s fingers continue to play in my hair, his heart beating steady under my ear, and I

feel myself go soft. I can barely keep my eyes open.

“They got me a mother-of-the-groom dress,” I say with a yawn.

“Tell me all about it later,” Matt says quietly, and he presses his lips to my forehead, lingering there. And that’s the last thing I remember.

FRIDAY

Sam has been barking orders since around five in the morning when he first started cooking. He, all the Reeds, their friends, and everyone Mr. Jacobson knew from the fire department met at a small outdoor kitchen that Mr. Jacobson had set up for the campground years before. Only today it is being used to cook spaghetti. There are stations set up for cooking pasta, making sauce, frying hamburger, and general prep. This place is like a well-oiled machine, and I can tell they have done this many times and perfected the art of cooking large meals.

“Is this a thing around here?” Emily whispers to her from where she sits, chopping more onions. She’s just graduated from cutting bell peppers. She blows a breath up to lift a lock of hair from where it has fallen from beneath her hair net.

“You mean cooking until you drop?” I reply.

Logan walks over and tucks the lock of hair beneath her hairnet, stopping long enough to kiss her on the forehead. “They do this every year, from what I hear,” Logan says. “Only this year, it’s bigger.”

“They do this every year?” I ask. This is a massive operation, even for a group the size of ours. Even our kids are helping.

“Mr. Jacobson said something about the county needing a new fire truck,” Logan explains. “That’s what all this is for.” He takes the bowl of freshly chopped peppers and onions and walks away with it.

“I thought it was just so Sam could gripe at everyone all day,” Peck mutters as she walks up carrying a load of what looks like brownies and plastic bags. “I thought Mr. Jacobson was a tyrant. Sam has taken it to a whole new level.”

Suddenly, a round of applause goes up. I look up from where I’m sorting plasticware into threes—fork, spoon, and knife—and wrapping it tightly in a napkin.

I see Sky take a bow, her face red as she takes the ribbing everyone is giving her.

“What’s that about?” I ask.

Sky walks over, plops down next to me on the picnic table bench, and lays her head on her folded arms.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I got drunk on mimosas around ten in the morning, made an ass of myself, and told everyone that Matt and I were going to make another baby.” She groans against the table, her voice muffled by her folded arms. “Seth is probably mortified.” She heaves in a deep breath and finally lifts her head. “Matt had to carry me to bed, where I proceeded to pass out and drool all over him for about two hours.”

“When you do it, you do it well,” I remark with a laugh. It’s not as though all of us haven’t done it at one point or another.

“I think I’m still a little bit drunk,” she admits.

Suddenly, Joey runs up, rests her hands on her hips, and glares at Sky. “Pregnant? Again?” she asks, her brow furrowed. “Seriously? We talked about this. We have enough babies!”

“I agree,” Sky says with a groan, holding her hands up to fend Joey off. “We certainly have enough babies. I’m with you, Joey. Enough babies. No more babies.”

“We were just practicing,” a voice booms from behind her. “No babies,” Matt confirms as he walks closer, his arms full of plasticware, napkins, and rubber bands. He dumps them onto the table in front of me just when I was almost done. “Just

practice,” he confirms again with a laugh, and then he walks away.

“I’m sure it was a hardship for him,” Joey says drolly. Then she walks away.

I snort because that shit’s funny.

“Has Matt figured out what his activity is yet?” I ask, suddenly curious. All the brothers picked an activity each to benefit the community. For Pete, it was the animal shelter; for Sam, it was the spaghetti supper for the fire department; Edward helped build two wheelchair ramps for people in the community whose mobility had been affected; Paul agreed to do some in-person interviews; and Matt’s activity is a mystery.

“Matt has no idea what his event will be,” Sky admits. “He’s still working on it. He said he might go by the cancer center to visit patients. People might like that. But he really wants to do something bigger. He just doesn’t know what.”

“Is he going to go by himself?” I ask.

“Actually, he’s planning to go with Seth. He thinks the trip will be important to Seth, especially because of the wedding, particularly because of what happened to his mom.” She smiles shyly. “I kind of wanted to go with them, but this might be something they need to do alone. Together.” She shrugs. “I don’t know. They were both affected so much by cancer. Seth lost his mom, and Matt lost a lot, but he also found a lot. Sometimes, I think he almost feels guilty for surviving.”

“And thriving,” I add. Matt and I have discussed this at length. There’s a certain sadness knowing that you survived an ordeal that other people haven’t. He’s not sad about living, but there’s a level of guilt, he says, that sticks with you.

Sky watches Joey as she dumps a massive can of tomatoes into a pot almost as big as she is. Then she proceeds to bust the tomatoes against the side of the pot using something that looks like a boat oar. Sky grins at me. “Can you believe Matt was ever worried about having a big family with lots of kids?” she asks.

“I was there,” I say quietly, “so yes, I do remember.”

“He asked me to give that letter to his ex if he died,” Emily says. “I thought it was an I’ll-love-you-even-in-the-grave letter.”

Sky snorts. “It was not.”

Emily clears her throat. “Did I tell you I ran into April at the grocery store a few weeks ago? She is very happily married to that attorney she met at the airport. They have a couple of kids.”

“Whatever happened to her wedding dress? Didn’t she show up all wet that night after the wedding wearing it?”

“She did,” I say. “Paul contacted her to see if she wanted it back, but she didn’t. He sent it off to a group that makes burial gowns for babies.” Her voice trails off. “It’s a charity that does a lot of good, so he was happy to help.”

“And to get rid of it at the same time,” Emily adds.

“He went and bought all the bridal gowns at the thrift shop and added them to the box. It was a very good cause,” I add.

“I never knew that,” Emily says wistfully.

“The Reeds and their good deeds. They never stop.” I smile as I get up to find Paul, who is strangely absent.

PAUL

When they told me that a reporter from their local paper wanted to interview me, I have to admit that I was hesitant. We live a very public life, but some things need to remain private. However, Mr. Jacobson said this reporter was something special and that I should meet with her, so I made the arrangements. She wanted to meet down on the dock. The minute we get there, she kicks off her shoes and dangles her toes toward the water, so I do the same.

She's tall and wiry, and the look in her eyes reminds me a lot of the way Edward looked when Pete first brought him home. She looks hungry, and I don't mean just for a story. She's hungry for validation, for belonging, and maybe even for guidance.

"Can you tell me what your early life was like?" she asks, her pencil poised over her notepad as she looks at me. "We know what your life is like now because we see it on the show," she says. "Or at least we see what you want us to see."

"You see a lot," I say, "but no, you don't see everything."

"Like when Edward's wife got pregnant, and no one knew until she posted pics of him wearing the baby in a carrier at the garage. Or when Sam bought his second restaurant, and no one knew until they did that cook-off show on the Eats Channel."

"Do you know why they started the show at the tattoo shop?" I ask her.

"Five hot guys with tattoos," she says with a nod and a grin. "What's not to like?" Her cheeks turn pink, and it's

impossible not to smile along with her.

“No, that’s not why,” I explain. “It was the camaraderie between all of us,” I think. “Aside from my wife and kids, my brothers are the most important people in my life. The show saw our bond, and they wanted to share it.”

“And Friday,” she reminds me. “They liked how she griped at all of you. She never took a lot of crap.”

I chuckle and rub my jaw. “Friday has never taken any crap at all, that’s for sure. The first time I ever met her, she told me I needed to fix the tattoo on my neck because it looked terrible.”

“I’m sure she didn’t say it like that,” she says. “Friday’s language is more colorful.”

“You are correct,” I say. “I’ll let you fill in the blanks.”

She scribbles, and then she closes one eye and stares at me with the other. “What has it been like going from nothing to what you have today?” she asks.

I hold up a hand. “Who told you we came from nothing? Whoever told you that was wrong.”

“But you grew up really poor,” she rushes to say.

“We did, but it didn’t mean we had nothing. We had all our needs met, and we got some of our wants met. But we were rich in a lot of ways that other people weren’t.”

“You mean your family?” she asks.

I nod. “Yes, our mom and dad gave us what we needed. And they probably kept us from getting a lot of what we wanted, which made us better people. But to say we had nothing would be inaccurate. We had everything growing boys need.”

“Until they died,” she says quietly.

“Even after they died, really,” I explain. The wind brushes my hair back as a gentle breeze blows across the lake. “They had set us up to love one another, and after they were gone, that’s what we did.”

“You told a story one time, the first time you did the Christmas dinner in your community, where you said that you guys were too poor to buy a Christmas tree.”

“True.” I let her continue.

“How did that make you feel?” Her feet swing absently.

“It made us feel like we didn’t have a tree,” I explain with a shrug. “But remember that we had everything that mattered. Remember what I said about wants and needs. We had one another. Family is what’s important—not the little things you don’t have.” I hold up a finger. “One thing to keep in mind is that we did get a tree that year. Our neighbors knew about our situation, and we woke up to find a four-foot fir tree with lights and Christmas balls all over it. There were presents for each of us under the tree.”

“How did that feel?” she asks.

“There was also a Christmas ham. Sam and Pete ate ham for a week.” I can still see their faces in my memory. They were thrilled. We had gotten a small turkey from the food bank, but our mom had always made a Christmas ham.

“How did it feel to know that your neighbors did that?” she asks.

I find myself getting misty-eyed and blink it back. “That’s what community is for. We take care of one another. When we started making money from the show, endorsements, commercials, and all that stuff, the first thing we did was give back to the people who gave to us.”

“But what you give is so much bigger than a tree and a ham.”

I shake my head. “Not really. It’s all pretty much the same—giving what you can when you can any way you can.”

“Can we switch gears?” she asks.

“Sure.”

“Did Hayley’s mom leave because she wanted to be with someone with more money? You were still broke back then.”

“You’d have to ask her that,” I reply. I have a rule that I won’t speak poorly of Kelly. Not ever.

“In an interview she did recently, she mentioned that you guys broke up because your lifestyle didn’t agree with her.”

I bark out a laugh. “And you think that lifestyle means money?”

Her brow furrows. “Doesn’t it?”

“Again, if you have questions for Hayley’s mom, you’d have to ask her. I can’t speak for her.”

“When you look back at your life, do you take note of any big mistakes you’ve made?”

I rock my head from side to side. “I take note of them.”

“You’ve made a lot of mistakes?” she asks.

“Don’t we all?” I reply, a smile tugging at my lips.

“Mr. Reed,” she complains with a sigh, “you’re being awfully cryptic.”

“Did you think being a reporter is easy?” I reply. “And you can call me Paul.”

She sighs and sets her pad down. “Paul,” she says. She stops for a moment like she’s mulling over her words. “Let’s be real here.”

“I thought we already were.”

“Are the good deeds some kind of martyr syndrome? A way to bolster yourself.”

I shake my head. “God, I hope not. That would be terrible, making myself feel better by helping other people.”

She grins when she realizes what I’ve said. “If you could look back and change one thing about your life, what would it be?”

“I would have taken a step back the time Matt dropped the toilet seat on my dick when we were kids.”

She barks out a laugh.

I shrug. “True story.”

“You’re a terrible interviewee,” she says with a growl.

I bump her shoulder with mine. “Ask me something else on your list.”

“How do you pick the people you help?” she asks. “What makes somebody worthy?”

“Oh, God, if we waited for people to prove they’re worthy of help, we wouldn’t be able to help anyone. What if the neighbors hadn’t helped us or gotten us that Christmas tree when we were younger? Sam and Pete were stupid little shits—shenanigans all the time. They were noisy and rude. They got away with it because they were adorable. But if those neighbors had to decide if we were worthy of being helped, we never would have been given anything. So, we never look at worthiness as a qualifier when we try to help people. We just do it.” I narrow my eyes at her. “Do you want to hear a story?”

“Yes, please,” she says, and she reminds me of what Hayley might look like when she’s older. I hope Hayley will be this eager and attentive.

“When I was nine, I fell off a slide at the park. I broke my arm. My mom had to take me to a hospital. A cabbie on the street turned off his light, put us in the backseat, and drove us to the hospital. He never charged her a dime.”

“Okay,” she says slowly.

“And when my mom learned that our older neighbor couldn’t see to read her favorite books anymore, she would make us go over there and take turns reading to her for an hour a day. Mrs. Bashar would make butter cookies, and when we arrived, she’d start the little timer on her stove. When it went off, we were free. But most of the time, we’d gotten to a good part of the story, and we’d stay. Mom would have to come and get us.”

“Can you give me a hint and tell me your point?” She growls a little as she picks up her notepad.

“The point is that you have to be grateful,” I say thoughtfully. “Instead of focusing on the bad things in your

life, you have to have an attitude of gratitude.”

“Elaborate,” she says, which makes me chuckle.

“Instead of being sad that we didn’t have a Christmas tree that one year, we were grateful that we were all in the same home. There were doubts back then about whether someone my age could be responsible for four boys. And when I broke my arm, my mom was grateful it wasn’t worse. When Matt got sick, we were grateful when he stopped puking his guts out for a few hours. When Logan brought Emily home, we could have seen her as one more mouth to feed on an already stretched budget. Sure, we could have focused on the negative, but what good does that do you?”

I look up and find Friday walking toward us down the dock. “Am I interrupting?” she calls out.

“Come and join us,” I reply. She sits down next to me and leans forward to look at the intrepid reporter. “Did you get everything you need?” she asks her.

Jenni slides her jaw to the side. “Not sure yet.”

“What else do you need to know?” Friday asks.

“Let’s do five rapid-fire questions, shall we?” she asks. “All you have to do is say the first thing that comes to mind.”

Friday gestures from me to her and back. “Both of us?”

“Why not?” she replies.

“What’s your favorite curse word?”

We both say “fuck” at the same time, which makes me laugh.

“If you could be anywhere right now, where would it be?”

“Right here,” we both say at once. Friday looks at me and grins.

“If you could re-do one event in your life, what would it be?”

“Nothing,” we both say.

“Seriously?” she asks.

“Seriously,” we both blurt out.

Friday punches my shoulder. “Stop it,” she warns.

“You stop it,” I reply.

“What’s your favorite animal?”

I say, “A dog,” just as Friday says, “A sloth.”

“What’s your favorite genre to read?”

“Romance,” we both say at once.

Her eyebrows shoot up, but she doesn’t say anything about it. It’s true, though. Wise men read romance.

“Pizza or burger?”

I say “pizza” just as Friday says “burger.”

“White or black?”

Friday says black. I say white.

“Ebook or paper?”

“Ebook,” we both say at once.

“Thank you for meeting with me today,” she says as she gets to her feet. She holds out her hand to shake. I accept it. She looks down at it. “I’m never going to wash my hands again,” she says dreamily.

Friday laughs.

“Thanks again!” she calls as she walks away.

“What did you guys talk about?” Friday asks.

“Gratitude. Being poor. Having everything. Misconceptions about success.” I shrug. “Just the normal stuff.”

I look toward the hill where a line of cars has formed. “I had better go and get dressed,” I say. I’ve been in swim trunks all day, but I suppose it’s time for jeans and a t-shirt so I can look the part while passing plates of spaghetti to people in cars.

“Need some help?” Friday asks, waggling her brows.

I reach down and take her hand to hoist her up. “If you’re offering, I’m not declining.” I take her face in my hands and kiss her softly. “I meant what I said about gratitude,” I say quietly, my lips close to hers. “I’m grateful for you every day.”

She whispers back, “I’m awesome. Of course, you are.” Then she grins and runs ahead of me up the path.

PETE

Friday is in full Friday wear, all the way down to black lips, heavy eyeliner, and fishnet stockings. She works to whip us all in shape, and I'm not going to lie—it's a tough job. She's directing traffic like a pro. There are five lanes of cars filled with people waiting to pick up spaghetti plates, and the street has pretty much been closed down since the plates started going out. Mr. Jacobson presold tickets for the spaghetti supper, and now that we know Sam didn't kill him while cooking the spaghetti plates, we can call it a success.

Mr. Jacobson drives by me on his little buggy, ready to deliver another load of plates to line number four. He has a scowl on his face that would generally make me run and hide, but I have learned that it's pretty much his general disposition. Sam looks over at me and wipes his forehead. He's been cooking since five in the morning, and he could have stopped working, but he said that as long as Mr. Jacobson was still working, he would work, too. That man never stops.

He did tell us that, with the presales for the spaghetti supper tickets, a few large donations we may or may not have helped facilitate and help from the community, the fire department now has enough money to buy the new fire engine it desperately needs.

A car pulls up, and Reagan walks around to take the tickets from the driver while I load him up with his spaghetti plates. Each of us has a line. Edward and Avery left to deliver plates to office buildings that made large purchases.

“You need sunscreen,” Reagan says with a frown. “You’re turning pink.”

A cop pulls up next to Mr. Jacobson and gets out of the car. “Mr. Jacobson,” he calls out. The dude is huge.

“Little Robbie,” Mr. Jacobson says. “What the fuck do you want?”

I stop in my tracks as Reagan smothers a laugh. There’s nothing little about this guy. He’s at least six and a half feet tall. He’s a monster. But he cowers a little when Mr. Jacobson glares at him. “We’ve got to clear the road, Mr. Jacobson,” he says. “The police chief just called to complain.”

Mr. Jacobson shoves a box of plates into Little Robbie’s arms. “You want it to go faster?” he asks. “Pass out some plates.”

“I’m on duty, Mr. Jacobson,” he says in protest.

“Duty, shmooty,” Mr. Jacobson says. “You want to clear the road? Pass out some plates.” Mr. Jacobson gazes down the road outside the complex. You can’t see the end of the line. It goes on for miles. Anyone just trying to get home from work will be screwed until we get things moving.

“Yes, sir,” the one he called Little Robbie says with a grunt.

“That’s what I thought,” Mr. Jacobson replies sharply.

Little Robbie hits a button on the mic on his shoulder and says, “Going to be here a while. Mr. Jacobson said the fastest way to clear the road is to help them give out plates, so that’s what I’m doing.”

The mic crackles, and the person on the other end says, “Don’t piss him off. Just do what he says.”

“Roger that,” Little Robbie replies.

Little Robbie takes over for Reagan as she goes to collect more plates. “Do people always do what he says?” I ask absently, just curious—not judging.

“If they want to live,” Robbie says drolly.

It makes me laugh.

“Honestly, Mr. Jacobson is one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet. He’d give you the shirt off his back if you genuinely needed it. And he knows how to get shit done.” He holds up a finger. “Don’t ever try to outdrink him. He’ll drink you under the table.” He grins. “A couple of years ago, I got a call that some drunks were jumping off Five Mile Bridge. The police chief told me to go and check it out. It turned out to be Mr. Jacobson and some people from the cabins. He was five sheets to the wind. I looked over, saw his pecker flapping in the wind, and he didn’t give a damn. He jumped bare-ass naked right off the side of that bridge. He did get offended when someone told him he was a respectable person. He said he’d never been respectable a day in his life. And he was genuinely disturbed by the comment.” He laughs. “And he’s right. He’s never cared about getting anybody’s respect, mainly because he’s earned it through the years. He houses the homeless, feeds the hungry, and takes care of people who can’t take care of themselves, all without anybody having to ask.” He looks at me. “I’m really grateful for what you’ve done here this week. You’ve really helped the community, and we really appreciate you guys.”

That’s the sincerest thank you I think we’ve ever gotten.

It takes about six hours to pass out all the plates. By the time we’re done, I’m almost dead on my feet. Sam walks by me, his cheeks pink, his shoulders aching, and he stops next to me. “That old man has worked me under the table today,” he admits. We watch him putter past on the way to take another load of garbage to the dumpster.

“Do you think you could live in a place like this?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “Nah. I like the city. I do like to visit, though,” he admits at the end. He grins. “I’m about to have my fill of fresh air, sunshine, and happy vibes.”

He’s full of shit, and I know it. “Are you going to the hospital with Matt tomorrow?” I ask.

He lets his head fall back and groans. “Fuck. I thought we were done after this.”

“This is the last big event,” I remind him. “Matt never could pick a fundraiser, so he decided to just swing by the cancer center in town and go meet some of the people. I’m thinking it might be hard for him, so I kind of think we should go too.”

He heaves out a breath. “Fine. I’ll go. Then we’ll have a day off before the wedding, right?” he asks.

He’s not exaggerating. This week has been a lot of work to benefit this community, but it’s what Gabby and Seth wanted. Since Seth is now a Reed, we’d do just about anything for him. Truth be told, we’d have done just about anything for him before he changed his name, but now, we do it a little faster.

“This is the last big event,” he reminds me.

“Do you think we could con Mr. Jacobson into getting the boat out and pulling us on that tube thing on our day off?” I ask. We saw someone else on the lake yesterday pulling a tube, and it looked like a lot of fun.

Gabby walks by. “I’ll pull you guys. You don’t want Pop to do it. He has a habit of slinging people off all over the lake.” She shakes her head. “It’s brutal.”

“Can you drive a boat?” Sam asks.

She laughs. “Can I drive a boat? Of course, I can drive a boat.”

“I taught her everything she knows,” Mr. Jacobson says as he rides by with another load of trash. He doesn’t stop. He’s still working. “Chop chop, boys,” he calls back over his shoulder. “Quit wasting time.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam says.

“Why don’t you go to bed? I can finish up here.”

“Not a chance, fucker,” Sam says as he shoves my shoulder.

It makes me laugh. There's not a chance I'd leave him when I knew there was work to do, either.

REAGAN

The cancer center is a solemn place. It's quiet, and I suppose it should be. We all decided to go with Matt. This is a sacred space for him, and since this was his event, we want to support him in this. His eyes are already misty, and we only just arrived. When we get there, we all pile out of the vans. There are reporters everywhere. We can't hide when we're in public here, not with all the fundraising events we've done. Lake Fisher is relatively secluded, and Mr. Jacobson let us bring in extra security to keep the paparazzi away, but out in public like this, it's a different story.

Pete takes my hand as I climb out of the van. "You doing okay?" he asks.

Crowds used to bother me a lot. I've come a long way since then. "I'm fine," I say. "Do you think Matt's going to be okay with all this?"

This hospital has one of the largest cancer centers in the country, and it's one of the finest. The place is enormous. There are long-term residents, and there are day-therapy visitors. Matt wanted to do a meet-and-greet with his brothers, and I just came along for the ride. What surprised me the most was the Fallen from Zero girls and their husbands also came. Lark, Finny, Star, and Wren came along with Peck, who, of course, accompanied Sam. The Zeroes brought their security, because they're so popular that safety was a concern. Five huge guys surround them as we all walk into the cancer center. Their husbands all trail behind.

They gather the Reed boys and take them to a large conference room with a long table at the front. There are promo pictures of the Reed brothers all over the place. The head of the board of directors greets them, they shake a lot of hands, and they settle behind the table. They're all dressed in jeans and t-shirts, their tattoos on display, and I've never been prouder than I am right now to be part of this family. They do a lot of good back home, but this is on another level. They are giving their time. They also gave quite a lot of money, but when Matt set all this up, he told them he didn't want anyone to know about the money he was donating. He just wanted to show his face and let the people know he cares.

Paul speaks for a minute, and I'm not going to lie—I zone out a little. I look at the people who have gathered. They let the patients fill the first ten rows of seats. They are all ages, from kids to preteens to middle age and beyond. You can tell they're at different stages of their therapy, and a few of them wear cancer survivor pins on their shirts, meaning they came through to the other side and are in remission.

Someone raises his hand and asks if tattoos hurt. Paul answers and informs him that most tattoos do, indeed, hurt.

After Paul finishes speaking, a hand goes up, and a small voice says, "Mr. Reed." All five brothers say "Yes" at once, which makes them all laugh. "Mr. Matt Reed," the boy corrects. Matt sits up taller.

"Just Matt is fine," Matt says patiently. "Did you have a question?"

"You had cancer, right?" the young man asks.

Silence falls upon the room. "I did."

"Did you ever worry that you'd die?" the boy asks.

Matt freezes. Then he sucks in a deep breath. "Only every day," Matt admits. He presses on. "Then I worried that I would live. I saw a lot of friends die, people I met in the hospital." His eyes meet Seth's, and Seth nods at him in encouragement. "So, I worried about death, and then I worried about living, and then I mourned people I did lose, and most of all, I

worried about my brothers mourning me.” He finds Emily in the room, and he stares at her as he speaks. “My family didn’t have a lot of money, and we didn’t have insurance, so I couldn’t get the treatment that I needed because we couldn’t afford it.” He continues to stare at Emily. “Then I met someone who helped me get into a chemical trial that had had some success, but it was very expensive. My little brother fell in love with the right girl at exactly the right time. I lived. The therapy worked for me.”

“Do you worry it’ll come back?” the boy asks.

Matt nods slowly. “I do. I keep up with my tests so I can see if it has. But I do worry about it.”

The questions continue, and they want to know what it’s like to have four brothers. Does anyone ever put the toilet seat down? “No!” Friday calls from where she’s leaning against the wall at the back of the room, which makes everyone laugh.

They ask more questions, and it takes about an hour for them to finish up. The boys joke with one another like they always do. They give one another a hard time, but there’s a lot of love there.

Someone raises his hand and says, “Logan.” Logan sits up taller. “What’s it like having a famous wife?” he asks. He grins.

Emily started touring with Fallen from Zero and singing with them years ago. Now that they have kids, she only attends local events, but she still sings with them sometimes. She’s famous both for being married to a Reed brother and for her own talent.

He pretends to think about it, but I’ve heard him answer this question before. “When you choose the person you want to marry, you should always choose someone who is passionate about something. Music was Emily’s driving force back then.” I see Emily stand taller in the corner of my eye. “She used to busk in the subway for spare change.”

“Doesn’t she still do that sometimes?” someone calls out.

Logan laughs. “She does,” he admits. “She loves music. She loves to perform. And she’s so good at what she does.”

“Does she plan to tour again with Fallen from Zero?” he asks. “I got tickets to see them next year.” He looks from Emily to Logan and back. “Well, if everything goes well.” He’s talking about his prognosis, and while he looks tired and worn now, we all know it could go either way.

Logan freezes. He looks at Emily, and I see her nod her head. They have this effortless way of communicating with nothing more than a glance. They’ve always been that way.

Emily starts toward the stage, and the people make room for her. She stops to greet the boy, leaning down to speak to him. She grins.

“I think we should do a little concert!” a voice calls out from the back of the room. I look over and see Star with her hands cupped around her mouth. She’s grinning, though.

“I second that!” Finny says.

God, I love these people so much.

“Does anybody have a guitar or two?” Wren asks.

Someone runs off to the music room and comes back with both an acoustic and electric guitar. Peck grabs a trash can, flips it over, and sits down behind it. She pulls a set of drumsticks from her back pocket and gives the trash can a tap. She nods.

“Are they really doing this?” someone says from in the crowd. “Do you know how much their concerts cost?”

“This is the best!” someone else says.

I look over and see what I assume is the boy’s mother wiping a tear from her eye.

When Emily opens her mouth to sing, sheer beauty comes out. Star takes the harmony in the first song, and it sounds like magic. The hair on my arms stands up, and I feel Pete stand next to me, pulling me close to him. He kisses my temple, and I settle back against him.

“This is the best,” I whisper to him.

“You’re the best,” he whispers back.

For more than an hour, the Zeroes play their greatest hits. Peck keeps the beat with a trash can, and the rest keep up, and it’s honestly one of the best concerts I’ve ever been to. There are a lot of laughs as mistakes are made, and someone tosses out a joke about their rhythm being off. When they’re done, they’re all sweaty and happy, and the crowd is thrilled.

I see a hospital administrator walk over to Matt and hear him ask him quietly if he’s sure they can’t announce the large donation. He tells them that he’d rather they not. I’ve never been prouder of this group in my life.

After they end the show, all the guys split up, sign autographs, and visit rooms independently. The Zeroes walk around and meet people, too, their security guards keeping them all together. You can’t be the shit without some risk.

When we get back to the lake, Mr. Jacobson greets us with a cooler full of beers. He passes them out. “I’m mighty proud to know you guys,” he says. Apparently, someone called to gush about the concert before we even got back to the campground. He glances at his watch. “As of now, you’re off the clock. You can enjoy all that Lake Fisher has to offer without having to do any more work.”

PECK

When my sisters are all in a room, there will be trouble. And there is trouble now. It's the night before the wedding, and Gabby doesn't want a traditional bachelorette party. She wanted everyone to get together, so that's what we did. Mr. Jacobson opened the game room at Lake Fisher, even though it wasn't raining, and he grumbled about people who disregarded traditions the whole time.

Apparently, the game room at Lake Fisher is only open when it rains because Mr. Jacobson thinks it's more important to be outside enjoying all the lake has to offer, as opposed to playing arcade games. Truth be told, though, these games aren't like video games today are. They're the old-style skee ball games, ping pong, pool, and air hockey. There's Tempest and Pacman. And they're so much fun! It's the perfect place for a sort of bachelorette night. The guys all went to do manly stuff, Mr. Jacobson had said after he let us all into the game room.

I had no idea Marta was such a pool shark, but she is. She and Emilio arrived this morning because, as he had stated, "I go where my daughters go. "

"I used to travel with Emilio, you know," Marta said. "I had to have something to do during the downtime, so we would go to pool halls and hustle people out of their hard-earned money," she admits with a laugh as she breaks the balls with a clatter.

“Tell us more,” Finny says as she balances a cue stick on the top of her head. It falls off, but she catches it before it can hit the floor.

Marta closes one eye and focuses on her next shots. She shoots two balls home. “What would you like to know?” she asks.

“If you could give our girl Gabby—” she grabs Gabby in what looks like a headlock, but I know it is much softer because I’ve received a lot of them”—one piece of advice, what would it be?”

“Not to follow anybody’s advice in your marriage,” Marta says candidly.

“Boo!” Finny says, giving her an exaggerated thumbs-down.

“Hear me out,” Marta says.

“Fine.” Finny pretends to give up, hitching her hip on the edge of the pool table. “Please enlighten us.”

“Never take advice on your marriage—except this. Every relationship is different, and what works for one couple might not work for another. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned in 30-plus years, it’s this: always choose kindness. There will be days when you’re tired, frustrated, or just plain fed up, but it’s in those moments that a kind word or a gentle touch can make all the difference. Marriage isn’t about being perfect; it’s about being patient, forgiving, and willing to grow together. Remember to laugh often, say ‘I’m sorry’ when you need to, and never forget why you fell in love in the first place. Keep choosing each other every single day.” She takes a deep breath and sinks two more balls with a well-placed strike of the pool cue. “That’s all I can tell you, Gabby.”

“And fuck his brains out on the regular,” Finny tosses in.

Gabby’s face turns red, but she has spent enough time with Finny to know what to expect from her, which is pretty much anything.

Katie stabs her fingers in her ears and shouts, “La la la la la la la!” which makes Gabby laugh.

“Like you’ve never had sex before!” Gabby shouts so she can hear her with her ears stuffed.

“I’ve had lots of sex,” Katie admits, “and I have the kids to prove it.” She sticks her tongue out at Gabby.

“Ew,” Gabby says, scrunching up her nose.

Someone calls for gifts, and we all move over to a small lounge area, where Gabby proceeds to open gifts for about an hour. She is absolutely scandalized by some, intrigued by others, and disgusted by one of them. I told Finny she wouldn’t like that, but she insisted that every woman needed it in her sexual arsenal.

After a while, I’m visibly fading, and so is Gabby. “You have a big day tomorrow,” her mom reminds her. Gabby yawns. “True. I’m ready, though.”

“Are you?” her mom asks softly. Her mom is sitting at her feet, where Katie has been passing gifts to her and keeping track of who gave her what.

“Yeah, I am,” Gabby says softly.

“I’m sorry your dad’s not here,” Katie says, and I think this is a private moment that’s supposed to be between them.

Gabby presses a hand to her heart. “He’ll be here. It’s okay.”

We all disburse and head back to our cabins. I heard Katie and Gabby are staying in Gabby’s room together. Seth is sleeping on the couch.

As I walk toward the cabin in the dark, I hear a slight creak, and I look over, expecting to find a small animal on the porch of the cabin where I know Edward and Avery are staying. Instead, I see Edward. He’s rocking slowly, his daughter in his arms, as he sits and holds a bottle to her mouth.

“Everything okay?” I ask as I walk closer.

“Everything is perfect,” he says quietly with a grin. He looks toward the game room. “I thought you guys would be out later,” he admits.

“Everyone was tired,” I say with a yawn. “Big day tomorrow.” I look back and see Avery talking with Gabby and her mom outside the game room. “Wait,” I say. “I thought the men were all off getting shit-faced or something.”

He chuckles. “Only some of us got shit-faced. Mr. Jacobson and Henry were the biggest offenders,” he admits. “Then Jake and Emilio got into a pissing contest, like a real-life pissing contest, to see who could piss the farthest. Emilio won, probably because he drank more beer. Then we all walked down to this big bridge, and Sam and Pete fell in, so everyone else followed. It was all ridiculous. Even Mr. Jacobson jumped in.”

“Did you jump?” I ask.

“I did. But then I came home.” He gestures to the baby in his arms. “She always wakes up once a night, and Avie pumps so I can feed her. It’s kind of our time. I love it, and I didn’t want to miss it, so I came home to change clothes, sent the babysitter home, and she woke up like she was waiting for me to get back.”

“You’re a good dad, Edward,” I say. I can still remember what he was like when Pete first brought him to meet the family. He was a mess, desperate for validation and looking for a place to belong.

“It’s not that hard, honestly,” he says with a shy smile. “I don’t know why some dads struggle with it. It’s honestly the easiest and most rewarding job I’ve ever had.”

I yawn again and sit on the top step since I can still see Avery talking with Katie. “I wish somebody had told my mom that,” I admit. My mom finally succumbed to her addiction a year ago. Sam and I had put her through rehab several times, and the last time she got out, she went out and got a bad batch of drugs the same day we’d picked her up. She died. We buried her in a neat and tidy grave, and the only people who came to the funeral were our friends and Sam’s family. Well, our family, really. He shares them freely.

Edward doesn’t say anything about my comment. His mom had a substance use disorder, too. He knows exactly

where I'm coming from. When my mom died, it felt like closing the cover of a book I never wanted to read.

"When I was younger," I say, "I would have given anything for a good family."

"Now you've got one," he reminds me. "But the best part of it is that you get to give your kids what you never had—a family with people you can trust to care for them. That's what every kid needs. Just someone to trust." He stares wistfully down at his daughter's face. Her lips are still moving, but the bottle has fallen to the side.

The door opens, and Penny sticks her head out. "Dad," she starts. She stops when she sees me, and I can see her cheeks turn pink under the porch light. "I mean—Edward. Can you come and tuck me in?"

"I'll be right there," he says quietly. Penny steps back into the doorway and closes it softly behind her.

I grin. "Dad, huh? Is that new?"

He smiles. "It started a few months ago, but she only does it when we're alone. It's almost like she's testing me out. The first time she did it, she stumbled over her words and rushed to ask me if it was all right."

"How does that make you feel?" I ask, my voice quiet in the night. It feels like a loaded question. Even the cicadas go quiet as I wait for his response.

"Honestly, it's the best fucking thing ever," he says with a laugh. "I mean, being married to Avery is great, but being a dad to these two kids—that's on a whole other level. Equal in perfection, but different."

"Did you ever think you'd get here?" I don't mean here at Lake Fisher. I mean here in his life.

"When I was younger, I saw a bleak future. But you know the rest," he admits with a soft smile. "I'm here now, and that's what matters. I've heard people say that you go through life wanting your kids to have what you never had, and I never had anybody love me. So, I make sure they have that because I can't help but feel like if they have that, they have the world."

He adjusts the baby so he can stand up. "I'm going to get my daughters to bed," he announces as he stands up. "Everything okay with you?" he asks at the last minute when I don't immediately get up.

"Yeah, I'm just going to sit here and bask in this feeling for a minute."

"Have fun," he says quietly. He goes inside and shuts the door behind him.

Avery strolls up, stopping when she sees me sitting on her top step. "Everything okay?" she asks as she sits down next to me. She bumps my shoulder with hers.

"I was just talking about life with Edward. Did you know Penny is calling him Dad?" I ask.

Avery laughs lightly. "I do, but she doesn't do it around me yet. She's still trying it on for size, I think. It makes Edward feel like a million bucks, though, so I hope she keeps it up." She glances at her watch. "I'm actually not surprised he beat me home. He likes his quiet time with the baby. It's almost like he's sucking up all the love he didn't get growing up and basking in it, even. It's fun to watch him be a dad. Endless patience and love. He reminds me of my parents and how they were with me and Penny. Boundless devotion, I guess you'd call it."

"I think it's sweet."

She gets up, brushing her butt off. "I'm going to get to bed unless you need me for something."

"No, go to bed," I say. "Tomorrow is going to be a busy day." I get up with a groan.

When I get to my cabin, I send the babysitter home, take a shower, and crawl into my bed. It's late when I hear Sam come in, and I hear him curse as he trips over the rug in the entryway. Then, he bumps into the coffee table and knocks the lamp over. I get up and stand in the doorway to the bedroom and watch him as he tries to navigate the furniture he's not used to.

"Fuck," he mutters as he stubs his toe against an old chest.

“Follow my voice, Sam,” I say with a quiet laugh. “This way.”

He looks up and grins that goofy smile he only has when he’s drunk. “I have to shower off the lake water. Pete pushed me into the lake.” He burps loudly.

“Why does that not surprise me?” I ask as I go to the small bathroom and flip on the light for him.

“You light up my life,” he says with a snort. “You give me hope,” he continues.

“That’s enough,” I say, shushing him. I lean against the edge of the bathroom counter as he turns on the water and steps in. He doesn’t close the door, so I take that as an invitation to join him. I strip and step in, and he grabs me and holds me close just like he always does.

“Did you have fun tonight?” he asks.

“Finny gave Gabby a couple of vibrators,” I admit. “She was thoroughly embarrassed.”

“Be glad that’s all she gave her, I guess,” he says with a laugh. “It could have been much worse.”

“True,” I say with a shrug. Sam pulls me from the shower and dries me off, wrapping me in a towel.

“I missed you,” he says.

“Hey, did you know that Penny is calling Edward Dad?” I ask as he turns down our covers.

He nods. “He’s trying not to make a deal of it.”

“It’s a big deal.”

“It is,” he agrees. “Huge.” He points down below his waist. “You know what else is huge?” He waggles his brows.

“That might be an overstatement.” I snort.

“Wait. I’ll prove it to you,” he says as he rolls me onto my back and stares down at me. He runs the side of his nose up the length of mine. “God, I love you,” he says. And as he

settles between my spread thighs, I believe him with my whole heart.

SETH

Aunt Sky snuffles as she pins a boutonniere to my shirt. She has gone around doing everyone's. "Are you ready for this?" she asks.

I nod, brushing a hand through my hair. "Yeah, I'm ready."

She tilts her head and waits for a beat. "Do you have a minute to take a walk with me?" she asks. "I want to talk to you about something."

I look around. We've already set up all the chairs and tables. Mr. Jacobson has been cooking since early this morning. The scent of the smoker and cooking meat was what woke me up today. How he got up so early after the amount of drinking he did last night is still beyond me, but whatever.

"Yeah, I have time," I say. Sky walks out the door, and I follow her. She looks slightly nervous and a whole lot of resigned, and I'm honestly a little worried all of a sudden. "Is everything okay?" I ask. She keeps walking until she falls in beside me on the narrow path that leads down to the water. She's wearing a dress. I know Gabby helped her pick it out. It's stunning, but Aunt Sky has always been beautiful. "I don't want to do this," she says, her voice cracking. "But I promised."

I freeze when my shoes hit the sandy shore. She has led me to the water's edge. The sand is crunchy and slippery at the same time beneath my shoes.

"Do what?" I ask.

She wipes a tear from below her eye. “I swore I wouldn’t cry today, but I might have to break my promise.”

“What did you want to talk about?” Now, she has made me nervous.

“Your mom,” she said.

I freeze. “I don’t need...” I start to say. But I let my voice trail off when I see the resignation on her face. “What about her?” I ask.

“I never knew you guys even existed until Dad called me one day and asked me to have lunch with him. He told me about his other family. He told me about your mom and you three kids, and he told me what you guys were going to be going through. He asked me if I would take you. “Because I had so much love to give,” he said, or something like that.” She waves a breezy hand in the air. “All bullshit, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“I didn’t know shit about being a mom. The weirdest part was when I saw my dad with you guys at the funeral. He knew you guys. He’d never known me. He barely spoke three words to me on a normal day, but he knew you three, that was for certain. He adored all of you. And I was jealous. So jealous. He was for you guys what he’d never been able to be for me.”

She swallows so hard that I can hear it. “Do you remember the day we were at the hospital, that last day with your mom?” she asks quietly.

“Yes.” I do remember it. I remember every detail, all the way down to the smell of antiseptic and the click of the IV pumps that helped to control my mom’s pain. “I remember.”

“You left to go to the bathroom, and she asked Matt to leave and to keep you out of the room for a few minutes. I think he took you down to the cafeteria or something. The girls were still sitting in the lobby with the nurse, but then Reagan sat down with them, and she hung out for a little while. Do you remember?”

“I don’t remember Reagan, but what about it?” My brain is ticking back. It’s like looking through old albums in my mind.

Turning pages and seeing the moments.

“While you were gone, she said something to me, and I think it’s important for you to know about it.”

I haul in a breath and scratch the bridge of my nose. “What was it?” I finally ask.

Sky takes my face in her hands and stares into my eyes. She smiles. “She said I have to do this, so bear with me,” she says with a watery chuckle.

“Okay,” I whisper. My mom used to grab my face and stare into my eyes all the time. Sometimes, she didn’t even say anything. It was just to let me know she was there.

“She said to tell you that you are the best and most important thing she ever did. Her law degree? Worthless. Her home? Nothing. Her success? Inconsequential.” Sky doesn’t even cry. In fact, she looks kind of happy. “You were her greatest success, and she told me I’m supposed to tell you that. You and your sisters—you meant the world to her. She would have given up everything else just to have you guys. And she told me to tell you that she desperately wanted to stay but couldn’t, but that she’ll be here when you need her, so if you need her now, she’s here.” She lets my face go and takes a step back. “That’s all she said. She said I had to tell you, and I had to tell you like that.”

“Okay,” I say. “Thank you.”

Aunt Sky’s brow furrows. “This is weird. I thought you’d be upset.”

I shrug. “I already knew all that. Mom showed me every day how much she loved me. I knew she didn’t want to go. And I knew she picked you to be my mom after she was gone. She picked you, and if she picked you, you had to be amazing because my mom loved me too much to make mistakes about who cared for me.”

“You took on so much responsibility as a child,” Sky says. “You were already a grown-up when I met you.” She laughs.

“Nah,” I say. “I was a little boy, still wanting to belong. I belong with you. With Matt. With Gabby.” I close my eyes and

wait for a minute. “If I could have picked anybody to be my mom, it would have been you, Aunt Sky.” I reach into my shirt and pull out the pendant Aunt Sky had made for me for the first Christmas after my mom died. It’s an etching of my mother. “I wear her close to my heart.” I tuck it back in. “My mom didn’t really have a choice about being my mother, but you did. You could have said no, and I’m really grateful that you didn’t.” I lean and kiss her cheek. “Really glad,” I say again.

Sky smiles.

I hear a voice calling to us from the top of the hill that leads to the area where the wedding is supposed to take place. I see Katie’s mom waving. “It’s time, Seth!” she calls. “As soon as you’re ready!”

Sky looks at me and adjusts my flower again. “Are you ready?” she asks.

“I’m ready.” We walk up the hill, and I see that the Reed brothers are seating people—some from home, some from here, and some from I don’t even know where. The aisle is short, and only our closest friends were invited, so there aren’t a ton of people. I tuck Aunt Sky’s arm in mine and deliver her to the place of honor, the place usually reserved for the mother of the groom.

She sits and arranges her skirt around her. The guys are all lined up. Gabby had trouble finding enough people for her side to match the ones on my side, but it worked out. Matt stands next to me.

“Did you bring the ring?” I ask.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls it out. “I didn’t forget.” He stares at me. “Did you talk to Sky?” he asks.

“I did. She grabbed my face and everything,” I say quietly with a chuckle.

“I remember your mom doing that.”

“I didn’t realize I needed that reminder until Sky did that. I can feel her now when I didn’t before,” I admit, but it doesn’t make me sad. If anything, it’s uplifting.

Suddenly, Jake and Gabby appear at the end of the aisle. Gabby's eyes meet mine, and I forget to breathe. Matt claps a hand on my shoulder and squeezes, giving a jolt to bring me back to life. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

And she's mine.

Matt passes me the ring, and I feel the gentlest breeze brush through my hair, and I know my mom is there. I stop, suck in a breath, and take in the knowledge that the people we love and who love us never really leave us. We can find them in our memories, like turning the pages of a book. Oh, look. There they are.

I slide the ring onto Gabby's finger, and there's no doubt in the world that she is where I am supposed to be.

After we say I do, I dip her into a romantic kiss she didn't expect. She comes up laughing, and the people sitting in the aisles go crazy. Someone whistles loudly.

We go to share the rest of the day with friends and family. We even end up in the lake at one point, but in the end, when we're alone in our own cabin—a gift from Mr. Jacobson—I pull her on top of me and count my lucky stars, and she leaves me seeing plenty of them.

MR. JACOBSON

A knock from the door jerks me out of my doom-scrolling. I look up and smile when I see Jenni Morgan standing on the other side of the door. I've known her since she was a kid, and now she's twenty-seven, just graduated college, and is ready to start her life. She got a late start because she could only go to school part time, since she was taking care of her granny.

I open the door and Jenni rocks onto her toes. "Hi, Mr. Jacobson," she says with a nervous wave. "Is this a bad time?"

I open the door wider and motion for her to come inside. "Never a bad time for good guests," I say. I motion for her to take a seat at the kitchen table.

"Where is everyone?" she asks, looking around. The only things here that move are the two cats we adopted. Captain Twinkles blinks at Jenni from beneath the table, and the other dangles from her perch on the cat tree. I reach up, give her a gentle shove to put her back in place, and she starts to lick herself. Damn cats. Funny thing is that I enjoy them almost as I do my grandkids. I never thought I'd say that, but it's true.

"Katie and Jake took the kids to a carnival," I explain. "After the last two weeks, they needed a good break."

The wedding was fun, but it was a lot of work. Truth be told, though, I'd do it all over again; it was that rewarding.

Jenni wrings her hands together, obviously nervous. "Mr. Jacobson, you knew my mom, right?" she asks.

“I did,” I say slowly. “She used to go to school with Jake.” Jenni’s mom was an addict, and Jenni’s grandmother raised Jenni, almost from the day she was born.

“She died eight years ago,” Jenni says quietly.

“I remember. I went to the funeral,” I say. It had been a somber affair.

“My grandmother was so mad that day,” she says with a chuckle. “But she was also relieved that it was over, I think. No more wondering when—or if—Mom would come home. No more hiding anything of value to keep her from stealing it. No more worrying about the days she showed up sober, because those days always came right before the worst.” Her voice trails off.

I lay my hand on top of hers, and she flips her palm up to give me a squeeze. She doesn’t allow the hold but for a moment, and then she pulls back.

“Did my grandmother call you?” she suddenly asks in one quick rush.

“Not today, no. Was she supposed to?”

“No, I mean before. Before the interview.”

“Oh,” I say. I don’t say more than that. I will neither confirm nor deny until I find out what she wants to know.

“I graduated with a degree in journalism,” she explains. “And I had applied at all the local newspapers, radio stations, and everywhere I could think of. No one would hire me. My granny suggested that I look outside our little town, but I don’t want to get too far from her. She’s all I have, and she’s getting older.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“There is a lot of judgment attached to being a Morgan. My mom was fairly well-known, and not in a good way.”

“Made it tough to get a job, did it?” I ask. I already know the answer, but I want her to tell the story.

She hauls in a breath and says with an exhale, “Very. You have no idea.” Her eyes suddenly meet mine. “Why do you do what you do?” she asks.

I startle. I can’t help it. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You help people, Mr. Jacobson. Nobody even knows you do it, but I’ve seen it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I have quite a reputation as an old curmudgeon, and I’d like to keep it that way.

“I saw you one day. You left food on our porch.”

I scratch my head. “Did I?”

“I was a little girl,” she begins. She stops and shakes her head, biting her lower lip. Then she rushes on. “You brought it by, and you said that someone in the campground had left it behind when they went home after renting one of the cabins.”

I nod. “That happened a lot. We ended up with a lot of crazy stuff renters left behind.”

“Granny was thrilled. The box had frozen vegetables, bread, sandwich meats, chicken and hamburger, and some snacks in it.”

“That sounds about right.”

“You forgot to take the receipt out of the box,” she suddenly blurts out, all smiles as her eyes get watery.

I get up to go look in the refrigerator, searching for something—anything—to do. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You bought the food, you delivered it, and you lied to my granny about where it came from so you could save her pride. You made her think it was things that would go to waste if she didn’t take them.”

I scratch my head. “Must have been a mistake,” I say.

“I found the receipt that day, and I hid it so my granny wouldn’t know. She never would have accepted it otherwise.”

“I did know that.” I think on it, trying to figure out how to salvage this situation. “I don’t remember that particular day,” I say, trying to skirt around the truth.

“I do,” she says. “Because that’s when I knew how much you value your community and the people in it. That’s when I learned what a good man you are, Mr. Jacobson.”

“Well, don’t tell anybody,” I grumble. I kind of feel like my guts are hanging on the outside of my body right now. “I have a reputation to protect.”

She narrows her eyes at me, and I can see her granny’s determination in her. “How did you get the interview with the Reed brothers?” she asks. “Did you have to pull major strings?”

I hold my finger and thumb an inch apart. “Maybe just one little string.”

“They don’t even do interviews anymore,” I tell him.

I nod. “I’d heard that.”

“How’d you do it?” she asks.

“I was talking to your granny at bingo, and she was telling me what a hard time you were having finding a job, and she asked me if I could help.” I shrug. It’s that simple. Well, sort of. She came to me and asked me if I could grease any wheels or open any doors. I called Paul up and said, “I have this reporter who’d like to talk to you when you’re here. She’s something special.” I didn’t go into more details. He agreed. My definition of special might be the same as his. I never could tell. “I greased a wheel. But you got it turning, so don’t give me too much credit,” I tell her.

“Well, I wanted to say thank you,” she says. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a newspaper. “This is tomorrow’s edition. My article will be in it. I got the job!” She punches the air. “They’re giving me a chance, and it’s all because of you. You opened the door so I could walk through it, and I am so grateful.”

I glance at the article, taking in her byline.

“Well, look at that,” I say. I turn it to face her. “Look what you did. That’s fantastic.”

“All because of you,” she says wistfully.

“All because of *you*,” I say to correct her.

She stands up. “I just wanted to say thank you and bring you a copy of the article.”

“I’ll be sure the Reeds see it.”

She smiles. “That would be great. Thank you again.” She hugs me quickly and mutters in my ear, “Thank you so much.”

“I might have to frame this,” I say. “Your first article. Look at that.”

She laughs. “Granny already did.” She turns to open the door, but at the last minute, she turns back. She nods toward the newspaper. “That article was about the Reeds, but it may as well have been about you, Mr. Jacobson.”

“You’re giving me too much credit,” I grumble.

“I don’t think I’ve given you nearly enough.” She walks through the door. I follow her out onto the back porch.

“Jenni,” I say. She turns back, her brow arched.

“Someone helped me many, many years ago. I felt like it was fair to pay it forward. You do the same when you’re able, okay?”

She smiles. “Yes, sir,” she says. She opens her car door, gets in, and shuts it with a clunk behind her.

Her window is down, so I call to her, “Drive safe! Watch for deer! Tell your granny I said hello!” I could go on and on, but I stop there. I watch her until she’s out of the drive, her beat-up old car pattering down the road.

I go back, pick up the newspaper, and start to read.

The Reed Brothers: From Humble Beginnings to Heartfelt Success

By: Jennifer Morgan, Local Correspondent

Sitting by the dock on a crisp afternoon, I had the pleasure of speaking with Paul Reed, one of the famous Reed brothers. Known for their TV show, businesses, and impressive camaraderie, the Reeds have become household names. But behind the fame, what remains clear is the genuine kindness that has defined their journey, from humble beginnings to well-deserved success.

Meeting Paul was an unexpected delight. Despite the initial hesitance to open up, his warmth shone through. We spoke barefoot by the water's edge, which seemed fitting for a family that has always remained grounded, no matter how high they soared.

When asked about their early life, Paul was quick to clarify a common misconception. "Who told you we came from nothing?" he said, smiling. "Whoever told you that was wrong." Yes, the Reeds may have grown up with less money than most, but it's clear they were never without the things that mattered most—family, love, and an unbreakable bond.

"It didn't mean we had nothing," Paul added, reflecting on their upbringing. "We had all our needs met, and we got some of our wants met. But we were rich in a lot of ways that other people weren't." His parents, despite their limited means, instilled in the brothers values of love, unity, and resilience. "Even after they died, they had set us up to love one another, and after they were gone, that's what we did."

It's this bond that viewers have seen on their popular TV show, filmed at the brothers' tattoo shop. "Five hot guys with tattoos," I jokingly mentioned, to which Paul laughed, "No, that's not why." He paused, then continued, "It was the camaraderie between all of us. Aside from my wife and kids, my brothers are the most important people in my life. The show saw our bond, and they wanted to share it."

The Reed brothers have built more than just a business empire; they've built a legacy of kindness. Whether it's Paul making sure people in his community have what they need, Matt running cancer fundraising events, Pete mentoring at-risk youth, Sam feeding communities with his restaurants, or Logan leading deaf advocacy initiatives, each brother finds a

way to give back. Their fame never disconnected them from where they came from. In fact, it seems to have fueled their desire to lift others up.

Paul shared a touching memory that embodies their spirit of community. “One year, we couldn’t afford a Christmas tree,” he said, recalling how they felt the absence of what many consider a holiday staple. But their neighbors stepped in. “We woke up to find a four-foot fir tree with lights and Christmas balls all over it. There were presents for each of us under the tree.”

“There was also a Christmas ham. Sam and Pete ate ham for a week.” He laughed, remembering his brothers’ joy. That act of kindness made a lasting impression on the Reeds. “That’s what community is for. We take care of one another. When we started making money from the show, endorsements, commercials, and all that stuff, the first thing we did was give back to the people who gave to us.”

“But what you give is so much bigger than a tree and a ham,” I pointed out.

Paul shook his head, “Not really. It’s all pretty much the same—giving what you can when you can, any way you can.”

And then there’s Friday, the woman who keeps them all in line. “She never took any crap,” Paul said with a chuckle. “The first time I met her, she told me I needed to fix the tattoo on my neck because it looked terrible.” It’s clear that, for the Reeds, honesty and straightforwardness are part of what makes their relationships strong.

But it’s not all about hard work and giving back. The Reeds have shown that fame and family can coexist beautifully, and their close-knit bond is the heart of it all. They’ve managed to do the impossible—keep their lives real and relatable while being in the spotlight. It’s rare to see a family so widely loved who are equally committed to their community and each other.

In a world that often focuses on what divides us, the Reed brothers stand as a testament to the power of unity. From the downtown apartment where they grew up to the red carpets they now walk, they’ve shown that success isn’t just about

rising to the top. It's about bringing others up with you every step of the way.

As our interview drew to a close, Paul reflected, “You see a lot, but no, you don't see everything.” What we do see, though, is enough to remind us that kindness, authenticity, and love can still make a mark on the world.

From where I was standing, it was easy to see why the Reeds have captured the hearts of so many. They aren't just famous—they're genuinely good people. And that's a story worth telling.

ALSO BY TAMMY FALKNER

Lake Fisher Series

Feels like Summertime

Feels like Home

Feels like Rain

Feels like Trouble

The “AF” Series

Stranded AF

Lost AF

The Reed Brothers Series

[Tall, Tatted, and Tempting](#)

Smart, Sexy, and Secretive

Calmly, Carefully, Completely

[Just Jelly Beans and Jealousy](#)

Finally Finding Faith

[Reagan’s Revenge and Ending Emily’s Engagement](#)

Maybe Matt’s Miracle

Proving Paul’s Promise

[Only One](#)

Beautiful Bride

Zip, Zero, Zilch

Christmas with the Reeds

Good Girl Gone

While We Waited

Holding Her Hand

[Yes, You](#)

[Always, April](#)

[I’m In It](#)

A Reed Brothers Valentine’s Day Miracle

Don’t Doubt

A Reed Brothers Christmas at Lake Fisher

Rematch

Punter Sisters Series

What She Didn’t Know

What She Forgot

The Magic Series

A Lady and Her Magic

The Magic of 'I Do'

The Magic Between Them

Writing as Half of the Lydia Dare Team

A Certain Wolfish Charm

Tall, Dark, and Wolfish

The Wolf Next Door

The Taming of the Wolf

It Happened One Bite

In the Heat of the Bite

Never Been Bit

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tammy Falkner lives on a farm in a lovely, sprawling little town in rural NC with her beekeeper husband and a house full of boys, a few dogs, and a cat or two (or five - who has time to count?). As half of the Lydia Dare team, she co-wrote ten books, including the Westfield Wolves series and the Gentlemen Vampyre series. A huge fan of Regency England, she wrote three books for Sourcebooks as Tammy Falkner, featuring Regency Faeries, and then she began writing contemporary New Adult romances featuring the five tattooed Reed Brothers. The Reed Family has grown, and will probably keep growing. She's also working on the Lake Fisher series, which is available now.



**KEEP READING FOR A
SNEAK PEEK OF LOST AF
BY TAMMY FALKNER**

Available now!



TAMMY FALKNER

USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HE WAS
LOST
AF

INSIDE HIS OWN MIND.
BUT WHAT IF GETTING
LOST MEANT FINDING
THE ONLY WAY HOME?

HADLEY

I cringed as my phone vibrated in my purse. Again.

The judge banged the gavel, making me recoil even more. He raised one imperious, silver eyebrow. “Mrs. Jenkins, do you need to get that?” he asked. He glared at me from across the big desk behind which he sat. My phone made another plaintive noise. The vibration from it was barely detectable. But, of course, the judge had heard it. He’d heard it every one of the ten times it had gone off in the past five minutes.

“No, your honor,” I said. The defendant next to me fidgeted in her seat. “I’m sorry,” I mouthed at her.

“Let’s take a break while Mrs. Jenkins takes that phone call. Then we can all stop being distracted by her phone going off repeatedly.” *Bang!* went the gavel again.

I let out a breath. I’d had no less than ten calls in the last five minutes. That was a record. I scuttled out of the courtroom as fast as my heels could take me, dashed into the ladies’ room, pulled my phone out of my pocket, and saw that unknown caller who had tried repeatedly.

Just as I stared down at it, it rang again. I lifted it to my ear. “Hello,” I said quietly, pretty sure that someone wanting to sell me an extended car warranty wouldn’t have tried me ten times.

“Hadley, is that you?” a voice said. I knew that voice. I froze.

“Jace,” I replied. Then I cleared my throat. “Jason,” I said more formally, “what do you want?”

“Oh, my God,” he whispered. “I’m so glad I found you. Can you come and get me?”

My heart stuttered. It actually stopped beating for a second. “What?” I whisper-hissed.

“I need you to come and get me.” He let out a breath.

“Why?” I replied, still baffled that he’d called me, and I was even more confused by what he was saying. Jace and I hadn’t talked in over a year. And when we had spoken before, it never went well.

“They won’t let me leave without someone to take care of me.”

“Leave where?” The absurdity of the situation made my skin tingle. “And why on earth would you call me?” I held the phone away from my ear to stare down at it. Maybe I’d entered some kind of warped reality. “Is this a joke? If it is, it’s not funny.”

He sniffled. “Hadley, I need you. Can you please come?” he whispered, and his voice broke. “I’m so confused.”

Just then, my co-chair, John, dashed into the bathroom, all six feet of him. He walked quickly toward me when he saw no one else in the bathroom. “Hadley, sweetie,” he said calmly. His voice was way too calm. He spoke to me like I was an injured dog on the side of the highway. Like I was a horse that was ready to bolt. He thrust his phone at me. “Look at this,” he hissed. I took the phone and stared down at it. He had a video pulled up from a social media site. It showed a horrific car crash. One of the cars had been mangled and was lying on its roof.

“That happened two nights ago,” he said.

I shoved his phone at him. “So what?”

He bent down so he could stare into my eyes. “Sweetheart, that’s Jason’s car. He’s in the hospital. It’s all over the news.”

I sucked in a breath. Then I steeled my spine. “What does that have to do with me?”

He looked at me, his eyes softening in sympathy. “It has everything to do with you, and you damn well know it.”

“We are divorced,” I reminded him.

He took a deep breath through his nose like he was steeling himself. “Sweetie, you need to go to the hospital,” he tried again.

I heard a voice from my phone. I lifted it back to my ear. “Look, Hadley,” the voice said, “I have no idea what’s happening. I don’t understand anything. But I do know that I need you. Can you please come?”

He sounded almost like the old Jace, the one I used to love. But that man was long gone. He’d been gone for a long time.

“This can’t be real,” I said.

“Please,” Jace said again. I could hear beeping and voices in the background where he was.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“At the hospital. The one close to our apartment,” he explained.

“Our old apartment,” I reminded him. We’d both moved before the divorce.

“What?” he asked. “What happened to our apartment?”

I sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. I would have to go there, if for no other reason than to tell him he could go and suck donkey balls. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Hadley,” he said, and I could almost hear him smiling through the phone. Jace didn’t smile. Not anymore. Now he smirked, but he never smiled. He’d forgotten how.

“Sure,” I replied. I tapped the screen to end the call.

“Do you want me to drive you?” John asked.

I shook my head. “I need you to find out what’s going on,” I said.

“Go to the hospital, Hadley. Find out what’s going on for yourself.”

I nodded, and John and I arranged for him to replace me in court. The judge wasn’t too happy, but John knew everything about the case and would, at worst, ask for a continuance.

“Call me later, okay?” he said.

I nodded and jumped into my car to go to the hospital, the hospital that was near the apartment that wasn’t ours anymore, to see the man who wasn’t my husband anymore, knowing that I would have to reopen those old wounds that had finally scabbed over.

I steeled myself on the ride over, and when I parked, I stepped out of the car feeling like I was walking to my execution.

I strode through the doors, the whoosh of air from the ceiling blowing my hair back. I always wore it loose when I was in court. A pleasant attorney won more cases. Successful women had to also look pretty, after all.

I marched up to the desk, and the woman ignored me. I rapped on the window with my knuckles, and she looked up. She rolled her eyes, slid the window open, cracked her gum, and said, “May I help you?”

“I need to know where to find Jason Jenkins?”

“And you are?” she asked.

“His...” I stopped. What was I? I was nothing. Not anymore. “I’m his wife,” I lied. Ex-wife. Wife. To-may-toe, to-mah-toe. I held up my phone like it mattered. “He called me,” I explained.

She tapped on her keyboard, staring at the screen, and finally lifted her gaze. “Level five,” she said. “Room 512.” She closed the little window with a clunk.

I turned to find the elevator, my heart in my throat as I went up.

When I got to the fifth level, I looked for room 512, stopped outside, and took a deep breath. “Mrs. Jenkins?” a

voice called, and a white-clad doctor strode toward me.

I nodded. “Yes?”

“If I may have a word?” he said, his voice calm, almost soothing.

I tugged on the tail of my jacket. “About?”

He took a deep breath like he was steeling himself.

“Your husband has suffered a traumatic brain injury,” he explained. His eyes narrowed. “You’re aware that he was in a car accident?”

“I just saw the pictures on a news app,” I explained.

“Two days ago, he was brought in with a sprained wrist and a bump on the head.”

“Okay,” I replied. I looked through the little window on the door and saw Jace staring at nothing. “Is he going to be all right?” I asked. I shouldn’t even care. And if this doctor knew anything about our relationship and how it had ended, he wouldn’t ask me to.

“His wrist will heal, but his head may take longer.”

“How bad is it?”

“Here’s the thing,” he said as he winced. “His head injury will heal. He might suffer from headaches, nausea, vomiting, and some other issues, but the big problem he’s having right now is memory loss.”

I spun around to face him. “Memory loss?” I repeated. What did that even mean?

“He doesn’t remember any current events. His last memory is from five years ago.”

“But his memory will come back?”

He winced again. “We never know with the brain. The good news is that he’s retaining current information. He remembers yesterday, and he even remembers two days ago. But he doesn’t remember anything before that.” He held his

hands about a foot apart. “There’s about a five-year gap in his memory.”

“Well, you can keep him here until he’s better, right?”

He shook his head. “Our hospital is over-run. We need the bed. And, physically, there’s no reason to keep him here.” He reached into a little pocket on the outside of the hospital room door and retrieved a folder. It had doctor’s notes, medication information, prescriptions, handouts about brain injuries, and reminder cards for future visits.

I held up the folder. “Did you call me because I’m still listed as his emergency contact? He should have had that changed by now.”

He shook his head. “We called you because you’re the only person he asked for. The nurses called about a dozen times, and then he started calling too.” He smiled gently. “He remembered your number.”

But he didn’t remember that we’d divorced. And that it wasn’t at all amicable. It was painful and time-consuming, and it changed me a little bit on the inside.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll talk to him briefly and take him wherever he needs to go.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think you understand, Mrs. Jenkins. He can’t be left alone. Not right now. He will need care.”

I puffed out a laugh that sounded a lot like a fart. “And you think I’m going to give him that?”

He pointed toward the room and jabbed his finger in Jace’s direction. “No, *he* thinks you’re going to give him that.”

He shook his head and turned to walk away.

I knocked on the door and shoved it open at the same time. Jason turned to face me, and he smiled at me. It was that old smile that he used to have, the one that made me think he loved me more than anything in the world, and I stumbled as little as I fell into the room.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he gushed as he turned the wheelchair he was sitting in toward me.

I sat down in the chair across from him. “Jason,” I said slowly.

He startled so visibly that I could see his muscles tense. “What’s wrong with you, Hadley?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “You never call me Jason.”

I called him Jason because he wasn’t my Jace anymore. He wasn’t anyone I knew or wanted to know.

“Why did you call me on the phone, Jason?” I asked.

“Who else would I call?” He stared at me, confused.

I threw up my hands. “Anybody!” I said. “You could have called anybody.” I took a deep breath and tried a different tact. “The current year is 2023.”

“I know. They told me. I don’t understand, though.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

He smiled. “We took a trip to the mountains to go camping. We went for a week, and we hiked the big trail.”

I reached back into my memory. “That was in 2016.” So, he had forgotten a little more than five years.

He nodded. “Our anniversary. Do you remember, Hadley? We fished for our dinner, walked the trails all day, and made love all night.” His eyes look happy. He didn’t look like Jason at all. He looked like my Jace.

“You don’t remember anything after that?”

He shook his head. “No, but they say my memory can come back with time. I just need time.”

I reached up and massaged my forehead. I got to my feet. “I can’t do this, Jason.” I *really* couldn’t do this. Not with him. Not now. Not ever.

His brow wrinkled again. “You don’t call me Jason,” he said again. “Stop it. It’s weirding me out.”

I leaned toward him and spoke succinctly. “I don’t call you anything.” Or at least not anything nice. “We’re not married anymore.”

“Why not?” His eyes danced across my face. “What happened to us?”

“It’s a long story,” I prevaricated. I rubbed my chest because my heart hurt. It was so tender right now, and I’d promised I’d never put myself in this position again.

“I have time,” he said softly.

“Well, I don’t.” I gestured toward the door. “They said you need to go with someone who can care for you. Do you want me to call someone?”

He finally looked away. “You know I don’t have anybody but you, Hadley,” he said.

His parents had died about ten years ago. He was an only child, and he’d never known his grandparents or extended family.

“Do you have a friend you can call?” Someone he was dating, perhaps.

He shrugged. “Not that I know of.” He whispered, “There’s just you.” He patted the arms of his chair and smiled. “Let’s go home.”

“We don’t have a home.” I’d already told him this. “We moved out of the apartment.”

“Where do you live?”

“I moved to the cottage.”

“Your grandmother’s place? I love that cottage. Let’s go there.” He wheeled himself forward and went past me. “Come on. Let’s go.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Hadley, where am I going to go?” He suddenly looked like a lost little boy. And I couldn’t just leave him.

If I left him here, he'd be unsafe. But if he went with me, I would be. I took a deep breath.

"Fine," I said. "But you're sleeping in the spare room."

His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"We are not married anymore," I said again. "It's the spare room or nothing."

His brow furrowed, but he shrugged. "Okay."

"And this is only temporary, Jason."

"Jace," he corrected softly.

I shook my head. "You are not my Jace anymore," I bit out.

"Well, you're still my Hadley," he said.

"I'm not."

"You are." He grinned playfully, which made me groan. "Tell me one thing," he said.

"What?" I heaved out a breath.

"Why do you hate me?" He stared into my eyes, his brown gaze not even flinching.

I rubbed my chest again because it still hurt. "Let's go," I said. I looked down at the folder. "I think we have to pick up some medications from the pharmacy."

He nodded. "Okay," he said softly.

"This is temporary," I reminded him. "Just until I figure out what to do with you."

"Okay," he said again. He rolled toward the door. "Let's go."

JASON

Hadley walked beside the nurse all the way to the car, her jaw clenched tightly and a troubled look in her eye. She didn't want to be here; that much was obvious.

Ever since she'd walked into my hospital room, she'd avoided looking into my eyes. I would say that she was almost apathetic, but this was more. This was more than simple apathy. This was dislike. Maybe even hatred. It was how our friends, Jeannie and Richard, had looked after their divorce. We'd known them for a really long time, and we'd watched them fall out of love and move on with other people. Hadley and I had been at Jeannie's house one evening for dinner, and Richard had shown up to pick up the kids. Jeannie and Richard had glared daggers at one another, shooting harsh barb-filled words at one another. The subtle glances, knowing smiles, and feeling that they could read one another's thoughts had been replaced by an apathy that mirrored Hadley's actions.

Hadley looked at me now like they'd looked at one another, only I had no idea why. Hadley was my best friend, and the idea that she wouldn't look at me, touch me, smile at me, or reach for me nearly tore me up inside.

The doctors and nurses had explained that I'd lost more than five years of memory. What had happened in those five years to cause this? What had gone wrong?

Hadley was my best friend. She always had been, ever since we'd met. We'd become friends first and lovers second. We'd planned a life together. We were a team.

I didn't know much about my life. I'd had one call while I was at the hospital from someone named Quinn, who'd said she was my secretary. She'd asked me if I wanted her to go by and water the plants at my apartment. I'd said sure and asked if she had a key. She'd said the doorman would let her in. He'd done it before when she'd gone there before me. Why would she have been at my apartment? Why did I have an apartment of my own? Where was it? My head gave a dull throb, and I reached to massage my temple with my good hand. The other hand had a soft cast on it. I'd sprained it, they'd said.

Hadley cut her gaze toward me as I reached for my head, but she didn't ask if I was okay. Instead, she sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. There was a time when Hadley would have asked me if I was all right. She would have cared.

She didn't care now. That much was painfully obvious.

HADLEY

“Do you know where I live?” Jace asked as he pulled his seatbelt across his body. He couldn’t buckle the seatbelt with his casted hand, so I reached over and plugged the metal piece into the receptacle, taking great care not to touch him while I did it.

“Yes.”

I knew *where* he lived. I’d never seen it. Never wanted to see it. Still didn’t want to see it.

I backed out of the parking space, concentrating on the road so I wouldn’t have to focus on Jason.

“Do you still fill your prescriptions at the same drug store?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he finally admitted with a shrug.

We pulled through the drive-through at the local drug store, and they did take the prescriptions, assuring me that he still gets his meds there, so I left them with a plan to come back and pick them up in thirty minutes.

He rode along quietly as we drove toward his apartment building, pointing out stores and buildings that weren’t there five years ago. “That’s new,” he said as he saw a fast-food restaurant on the corner.

“Yes.”

“Do I like it?”

“I have no idea,” I said with a huff.

He rode quietly. I parked outside his high-rise building, and he leaned forward and looked up. Way up. “I live here?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Come inside with me?” he asked.

“I’d rather not.” I didn’t even unbuckle.

“I don’t know where to go.”

I pointed toward the front door. “I’d go in there.”

He blew out a breath. “Do I have a key?” He patted his pockets, found a lump, and pulled a ring of keys from the depths. “I guess I do.”

I sucked in a breath when I realized he had a lock of braided hair attached to his keyring. It was kept safe in a clear plastic bubble.

He must have seen the look on my face because he asked, “What?” He looked at his keys, studying them. He rubbed the edge of the bubble between the tip of his finger and his thumb. “Is this your hair?”

I cleared the lump from my throat. “No, it’s not mine,” I croaked out.

“Then whose is it?” He looked confused. “It looks like yours.”

He didn’t remember, and I was somewhat envious of that fact.

I unlocked my seatbelt because I would do almost anything to escape this conversation. “Let’s go,” I said.

He got out and stared at the building. “I don’t like this place,” he said.

I opened the door and walked through it.

“Mr. Jenkins!” the doorman sang out. “So glad you’re home!” He nodded his head at me. “Ma’am,” he said kindly.

Jason jerked a thumb toward me. “This is Mrs. Jenkins,” he said, and he grinned at me.

The man blanched.

“Jason,” I warned.

“It’s nice to meet you,” the man said, his face open and kind. And curious. So curious.

“Can you remind me which apartment is mine?” Jason asked patiently.

His aging brow crinkled. “That’d be eighteen twenty-four,” he replied. “The very top.”

“The top?”

“Yes, sir, the very best for you.” His brow furrowed. “I should probably call upstairs,” he suddenly said.

Jason waved a hand in the air. “No need. We’re on our way there no matter what.”

“Are you sure, sir?” he asked.

“Positive.” Jason patted the desk. “Thank you.”

The man smiled and gave him half a nod. “You’re quite welcome.”

We went up the elevator in silence. “Why did I choose this place?” Jason asked.

“I have no idea,” I said quietly. If I had to guess, it was because it was the best. The best view. The best service. The very best of everything. Exactly what Jason wanted.

We stopped at eighteen twenty-four, and he hesitated. “What do you think it looks like?”

Probably like desperate escapism. “It looks like an apartment. A very expensive one.” I shifted in my heels because my feet were killing me.

Jason looked down at my feet. “Why are you wearing heels? You hate heels.” He stuck his key in the lock and gave it a gentle twist.

“I had court today,” I told him.

He stopped short. So short that I ran into his back. “You passed the bar?” he asked, as a broad smile spread across his

face. “You got your license?”

I nodded as I shoved my hands deep into my jacket pockets.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said, and he looked like he meant it. “Did I graduate, too?” he asked.

“You did.”

“Do I work?”

“Yes.” He slowly opened the door and stuck his head in, looking around like he had never seen the place before. I guess that was probably how it felt.

Suddenly, a laugh rang out from inside the apartment. It was actually more than a laugh. It was a giggle—a loud one. A woman raced across the living room wearing nothing but a towel, and her damp hair was tousled and wild. Behind her, a man ran from the bedroom toward her. And they both stopped because he was wearing even less than her. He was wearing nothing at all. Not a stitch of clothing. He froze.

“Jason,” he said. He looked at the woman and then back at Jason. And suddenly, I knew who she was. I knew exactly who she was. She tugged the towel higher on her chest and dragged the bottom lower at the same time. The man with her picked up a throw pillow to hide his junk.

“Quinn,” I said with a nod.

“Um,” she began. Then she smiled at Jason. “Hi, Jason,” she said. She looked from the man to Jason and back. “I didn’t know you’d be coming home.”

Well, that much was obvious.

Jason pointed to the plush carpet under his feet. “Do you live here?”

“What?” She looked at me, confusion marring her beautifully plucked brows. “What’s he talking about?”

“He got a bump on the head,” I explained. “His memory is a little fuzzy.” I took a deep breath when I realized my lungs were burning from how long I’d held my breath. “But I’m glad

you're here. Jason, you won't have to be alone. Quinn, he's yours from here on out."

I turned to leave, but his voice rang out. "Don't you dare leave me here." His voice was clear and strong, and it brooked no argument.

I stopped and hung my head.

"We didn't know you'd be home, Jace," the man said.

"That's obvious," Jason replied.

"You don't remember me?" Quinn asked Jason. She laid a hand on her damp, glistening chest. "Seriously?" She looked as though he'd just slapped her with an open palm right across the face.

"I have no idea who you are," Jason admitted.

"Well, that stings." She sank onto the arm of the sofa.

"Jason, I can explain," the man started.

Jason held up a hand. "Not necessary. I just came to get a few things. I'll get out of your way in a minute."

Jason disappeared into the room they had just run out of. I saw the light flip on and heard him rummaging around in drawers. He came out with a small bag over his shoulder and nothing else. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Jason," I said slowly. "This is your home. And Quinn is here."

"Quinn's my girlfriend." He didn't ask me the question. He already knew. He winced as he said it. "And Quinn has been sleeping with this guy while I was in the critical care unit." He glanced at me. "Does that sum it up?"

I nodded. "Probably."

"It's not that simple," the man added.

"No, it really is," Jason said, cutting him off. "Who are you?" Jason asked.

"Tripp," the man replied. He laid a hand on his chest. "We're friends."

“No, we’re not,” Jason bit out. He looked at Quinn. “I’ll expect you to leave my apartment. Get dressed.” He looked at Tripp. “You too.”

Quinn nodded. Tripp gulped.

He looked at Tripp. “And I’ll expect you never to speak to me again.”

“But...” Tripp asked.

“Ever,” Jason said.

Tripp nodded.

Jason turned toward the door.

“Can I keep my job?” Quinn called out.

He turned back. “You work for me?”

“Secretary,” I muttered under my breath.

He closed his eyes, groaned quietly, and turned to me. “Why did I shit where I eat?” he asked me. He looked utterly offended.

“I have no idea.”

He turned and finally walked out the door. In the corridor, he stopped and looked back at me. “Are you coming?”

I walked toward him with my hands still jammed in my pockets. I followed him to the elevator, where he leaned against the wall and hummed a jaunty little tune all the way down, saying nothing.

“Jason,” I said.

“Not yet,” he replied as we continued to descend. “Please.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

When we got in the car, he put his hand on top of mine to stop me from pushing the button to start the car. “Why did I pick a shitty girlfriend and a shitty friend?” he asked. “Can you at least tell me that?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t involved in either of those decisions.”

“Was I fucking her?” he asked.

“She was your girlfriend.” I’d heard she was, at least. They’d been dating for the past few months, at least.

“I don’t know why I would do such a thing,” he spat out. “I kind of hate myself right now, and I don’t even know who I am.”

I didn’t know who he was, either. And I hadn’t known for a very long time.

“We need to go get your meds.”

“Okay,” he said with a nod.

I reached over and clicked his seatbelt closed.

“Thank you.” He leaned the back of his head against the headrest and stared straight ahead. He said nothing else the rest of the way home. Nothing at all.