

MAKE YOU MISS ME

A SINGLE DAD. A DIVORCÉE. A SECOND CHANCE.

B. CELESTE

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MAKE
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B . C E L E S T E

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*To myself—for realizing that I was wasting time with a Hunter when I
deserved a Fletcher all along.*

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PLAYLIST

“Not Ready to Make Nice” – The Chicks
“Good 4 U” – Olivia Rod
“Lonely” – Maria Petra
“Lose You to Love Me” – Selena Gomez
“Rainbow” – Kacey Musgraves
“I Don’t Know About You” – Chris Lane
“Breath” – Breaking Benjamin
“Speechless” – Dan + Shay
“Love Again” – Dua Lipa
“Forever and Always (Piano Edition)” – Taylor Swift

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OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)
[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)
[The Truth about Us](#)
[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)
[Where the Little Birds Go](#)
[Where the Little Birds Are](#)
[Into the Clear Water](#)
[Color Me Pretty](#)
[Tell Me When It's Over](#)
[Dare You to Hate Me](#)
[Tell Me Why It's Wrong](#)

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PROLOGUE

BEFORE

The scratchiness of short blond stubble against my palm leaves the dread in my chest that much heavier as I avoid looking into the deep blue eyes set on my face. My hand falls from the squared jaw down to the toned pectorals covered by a wrinkle free uniform that shows off the body sculpted by determination that I've spent a long time admiring. Under my shaky palm is a thumping heartbeat I used to love drifting off to sleep listening to every night since I was nineteen.

People say the eyes speak a thousand words—that they're the window to your soul. And his are pure good, full of the admiration that I've grown attached to since the day we met. The words they silently spoke in the past told me everything I'd ever wanted to hear with a single look.

Which is why this moment crushes the splintered pieces of my heart that I've barely mended together since the first argument we'd shared which was quickly followed by a second, third, and fourth one. Those broken pieces grew bigger, deeper, slicing into the beating organ for him not trying even a fraction as much as I did to make this work.

Given up on.

Wasted.

Unwanted.

Suppose I had a tattoo for every time a fragment of my heart was taken from me by something somebody said that made me feel unworthy. Every negative word in the dictionary would cover me—permanently mark me with reminders of time wasted on people who I should have never trusted to begin with.

"One day," I tell him, choking down the hoarseness of my voice and reaching up to cup the face I've loved touching for years, "I'm going to find someone who loves and admires me like you do."

Throat bobbing, I let my palm slide off his face, the one that people always say looks like it belongs to the love child of young George Clooney and Pierce Brosnan. Taking a deep breath, I wiggle the cold piece of gold off my finger that no longer holds any weight or warmth since the day a

strange man showed up to the house we'd shared and handed me papers that would change my life forever.

"Except they're actually going to mean it," I whisper.

If I were stronger, I'd tell him that he'd regret his choice. I'd hold my head up high, look him straight in the eyes, and say, "*I'll make you miss me, Hunter Cross.*"

But I'm not strong.

I pass him the ring, then take a step back.

Then another.

His lips part...

But he says nothing. He doesn't fight or apologize or beg me to stay the way I'm silently praying he will, and I should know then and there that this was nothing like I thought it was.

I don't let the tears free until I'm far away from the man who looks far too good in his green uniform, knowing this is better for both of us.

One day, I'll even believe it.

CHAPTER ONE

AFTER

The door clicking closed allows the smallest exhale of a shuttered breath to release from my tight lungs. It's been six months since my last anxiety attack, prompted by empty promises that resurfaced at the worst time possible.

Ever since I accepted my best friend's offer to go to meditative yoga classes with her, the episodes come and go far less than they used to. I've barely even needed my medication, which is a nice break from the hazy numbness I usually feel after swallowing one of the pills.

But every now and again, it takes the slightest thing to trigger the tremble of my hands, and palpitations in my chest. It's better than waking up in the dead of night sweating like I ran a marathon with tears running down my face for no real reason, though.

My doctor told me it'd get better with time, but I'm 32 and still fighting periods of near hyperventilation in the middle of my workday, which would undoubtedly traumatize my classroom full of fifth graders.

Before I can even dig into my lunch, there are two swift knocks at the door before it opens and a head full of tight black curls pops inside. "Is this why you told everyone not to do anything in the staff lounge?" Sonia asks, walking in and closing the door behind her. "You okay, birthday girl?"

Lips twitching, I force them upward and give a single nod in false confirmation, hoping she doesn't see the red rimming my otherwise hazel green eyes. "I figured I'd get some work done while I had the free time. You know how the kids are once they get back in from recess."

I know Sonia well enough by now to understand that the gleam in her brown eyes is a mixture of sympathy and pity. Not a great combo to get from anyone, least of all the other fifth grade teacher that I work with more than anyone else in the school. "Is it because of...?"

She lets her voice fade as her plucked brows arch, guessing exactly what the problem is without saying the words. I'm more grateful than she can know for that.

Clearing my throat, I set down my plastic fork and give the woman blessed with mixed Mediterranean and Cuban genetics a wavering smile.

“It’s always harder on my birthday. I know it’s been long enough by now, but sometimes I can’t help but wonder if I made the right decision.”

My parents both told me they were worried I was rushing into marriage with Hunter. I thought I knew better at nineteen. Hunter Cross was everything to me. My first boyfriend, my first kiss, and my first everything else. He’d told me he loved me, and I felt it with every fiber of my being. I don’t think he lied about his feelings—I just think that love slowly unraveled the longer his deployment kept us separated until there was nothing left but a loose, shredded string that stopped holding us together.

“I thought I’d be settled down by now,” I admit, hearing the crack in my tone. At 32, I just moved into my very first house—a small, two-story Cape Cod with an open floorplan, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a fenced-in backyard for a dog or kids that I don’t even have. The neighbors are far closer than I would have liked in the small residential neighborhood, but I’d been looking for months with no luck finding anything on the market that worked for my budget, so I’d settled for the cute blue, recently renovated home in Stanton Springs, New York.

It’s a reasonable fifteen-minute commute to work, leaving plenty of time to listen to music or one of the many audiobooks I always have downloaded on my phone to decompress. Even if I have to flick them off sometimes when the romance leaves a bigger hole in my chest than the one already there.

“You’re not listening to a word I’m saying, are you?” Sonia guesses, her lips curling up partially.

I flush. “Sorry. It’s been a long morning.”

She waves me off. “I was just saying that Anton makes delicious cakes for everyone’s birthdays, so you really missed out. He usually asks what people’s favorites are and then whips it up like he’s a Master Chef or something.”

It sounds more like she’s upset she missed out on cake than anything, but I can’t be upset with her. We’re not exactly friends, but we’re a step above coworkers. Friendly acquaintances? Two people who can vent to each other when life becomes too much? Sonia knows about my past. Not all the details, but enough.

“I’ve been watching what I’m eating anyway,” I lie, thinking about the lonesome cupcake I bought for myself at a bakery I spend a little too much of my paycheck at every week.

It was red velvet with a cheesecake filling and buttercream frosting—my favorite. And I’m sure Mom and Dad will show up at my place later with more baked goods, so I’m not celebrating alone.

My coworker reaches into the bag I only now just see resting in her lap and pulls something out. She passes me a card-shaped envelope and smiles when I accept it with hesitation. “We all signed it. It’s nothing much, but we know you just bought a house so...”

Throat bobbing as I open the white envelope and read the front of the card, I have to fight off the tears that form when I peel it open and see the gift card inside along with well over twenty signatures of other teachers and faculty in the building.

“I don’t...” I shake my head, touching the \$200 gift card to a home goods store that I’d once admitted to Sonia I loved shopping at. “I don’t know what to say.”

She stands, draping her burnt orange bag over her shoulder. It’s an expensive one—Coach, based on the little emblems covering the strap. My coworkers’ love for brand-name bags is the same as mine for baked, sugary goods. I know she’s always looking at sales online whenever I pass by her in the teacher’s lounge and even offered to get me one when there was a buy-one-get-one-half-off sale a week or two ago. “Just say thank you and promise me that you’ll buy pretty things for your new place with that. You’re a hard worker, Stevie. If anyone deserves this, it’s you.”

I hide the lone tear that escapes the duct and bat my lashes to stop others from following suit. In a watery tone, I say, “Thank you. When my place is all set, I’ll invite you over to see it if you’d like.”

Nobody besides family and my best friend, Vickie, has been over to my place yet, so the offer surprises even me, but it’s genuine.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, but not another word is spoken between us. When she opens the door, I blurt, “He sent me a card too.”

It’s what triggered the attack she walked in on, the one I’d forced down after opening my purse and going through the mail I’d snatched from my P.O. box on the way to work because I’d forgotten to check it for a few days.

In the mixture of bills and junk mail was a blue envelope with my name and box number in handwriting I recognized instantly, even before my eyes traveled to the sender’s information.

“Your ex-husband?” she asks quietly.

I nod, feeling the sting of tears threaten to leak down my face.

“Oh, Stevie...”

I wave my hand in the air. “It’s been years,” I say aloud, but I’m not sure if that’s a reminder for her or me. Not knowing what else to say, I sit there and stare at the untouched salad while my coworker shifts where she stands until she decides that being left alone is what’s best for me right now. She’d told me during one of our many teacher conferences toward the end of summer that she didn’t do well with crying, which is fair.

I don’t do well with people seeing me cry.

My eyes go to the card sticking out from under a pile of papers on my desk, the first name the only thing visible, taunting me. Reminding me of what was and what’s no more.

Two and a half years without Hunter shouldn’t hurt so much, but the simple words he’d written in the card brought back every single good memory we’d shared for the better part of the last decade and broke my heart all over again.

Happy birthday, smalls.

Love always, H.

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CHAPTER TWO

I never imagined my dream wedding when I was little like some girls do. I didn't think about what my dress would look like or what kind of flowers my bridesmaids would be holding, or what type of location I'd choose the event to be held at. Truthfully, none of that ever crossed my mind until I met Hunter.

Then it was a whirlwind of emotions from the day he said "hello" in the high school hallway, to the first time he asked me to the Dairy Shack for ice cream for our first date, to the first kiss we shared on the front porch of my father's house that my dad broke up by flickering the porch light in warning.

Maybe the rush of heavy, all-consuming feelings is the reason why we'd decided to make it official after being together for four years. I was nineteen and finishing my freshman year of college. He was twenty in the Army and wanted to have something to come home to.

And that was me.

He'd wanted *me*.

I never quite understood what about me grabbed his attention. As a teenager, I was the same short height I am now, barely 5'1", and leaner than most girls. Considering both of my parents' families originated from Ireland, my skin was on the paler side, and rarely tanned in the summers, even now. My limbs were long and lanky, my brown hair, which was—and still is—a shade darker than my all-time favorite death by chocolate ice cream, had been pin-straight naturally, barely kissing my shoulders, and I'd had hideous bangs that were in style back then. Plus, I was introverted by nature. Nothing about me particularly stood out, but for some reason, he'd still noticed. Out of all the girls he could have chosen to shoot his shot with, he'd picked me.

Looking back now, all this time later, I don't know if I would have done anything differently, even knowing the outcome. Because we were happy once upon a time. In love. Obsessed with each other. I remember how hard it was to keep my hands off him after we'd progressed to that point and thinking that it would never end, that we'd be insatiable.

Everyone said the honeymoon phase would end eventually, but for us it seemed to go on and on even when he was deployed and would be gone for long periods.

He'd send letters. Call. FaceTime.

I'd send care packages with all of his favorite things.

We made it work despite people's doubts.

That's why I'm still confused about where it went wrong. We went from sharing everything with each other—secrets, dreams, worries, fears, to sharing ourselves with others.

At least one of us has.

Thirty months of being apart and twelve of them being officially divorced left my ex-husband wide open to be with whomever he wanted. Because I know how he works after any argument, any fight. He'd need physical touch—a reminder that we were there, alive, human, and flawed, but ready to heal.

I needed that too, the intimacy to tell me I was still alive even if I wasn't living, but I couldn't put myself in the position to feel anybody else's callused hands on me when all I'd wanted were his. When did we stop touching each other? Needing that mutual connection?

One day it was just...gone.

Vanished.

Never to be seen again.

When you grow up believing that true love exists, you don't think about the possibility of it being the very thing that destroys you—the thing that leaves you vulnerable. As little girls, we watch movies and read books about happily ever after, thinking everything falls into place easily after the wedding.

We're not taught reality.

Because if those movies shared a shred of the truth of what could happen even after the credits roll, I wouldn't be standing in my front yard covered in overgrown grass, staring at the weeds mixed into the flower beds that have white and purple calla lilies planted in them remembering when my former mother-in-law suggested white rose and calla lily bouquets for the wedding party. I hadn't fallen in love with the idea like she and Hunter had, but I'd agreed to it to make them happy.

I add digging up the flower garden and replanting it with something new to the growing list of to-dos that never ends because the last thing I want to

come home to every day are the flowers I held while saying my vows.

My mind wanders to the birthday card, the one I'd forced myself to throw away at the school or else I would've hoarded it with other old mementoes that I torture myself with.

The reason why I haven't moved on the way I'm sure Hunter has is that, unlike him, I'm stuck wondering what I did wrong. Did I love him too much? Hold him too tight? Or not enough? Did I suffocate him with plans of our future family? Or did I not make my dreams to have a family heard well enough?

I'd agreed to a lot when I said, "*I do*", including losing part of myself in the process—putting things on hold, focusing on him instead of me, waiting for the right moment for us to move onto the next step...I became somebody unrecognizable in the mirror.

Until this moment, wondering how much it'd cost to buy a lawn mower versus hiring some local kid to mow for me, thinking about how hard it was going to be to repaint some of the rooms on my own, and move heavy furniture when I sought fit, I didn't know just how lost I was.

Because I'd relied on Hunter and his family to take care of me, I depended on a man who made me need him more than I needed anything else in the world.

For the first time in a long time, I whisper to the wind what I hadn't let myself admit since I'd taken back my maiden name.

"I'm not okay."



The knock on the door comes late morning as I'm teetering for balance on one of the kitchen chairs trying to hang my new curtains. Thanks to the money my coworkers collected for me, I was able to update the kitchen with cute décor, including light green curtains, and matching dish towels, white hanging shelves that matched the white counters and cabinets, and some new pots and pans from my favorite TV personality's cooking line. For once, the space starts to feel homey.

I almost fall when the second knock sounds, and I pinch my face trying to figure out who it could be. I'm not expecting Dad until tomorrow to help

me install all my shelving, and Mom left an hour ago for a hair appointment with Aunt Rebecca.

Carefully stepping down, I walk across the house to the chipped white door that needs a fresh coat of paint since the movers accidentally scraped some off when they were moving the living room furniture in and open it to find three women standing on the other side. One of them looks around my mom's age and either has a bad case of resting bitch face or just doesn't like me already, and the other two both look to be a little younger with partially welcoming smiles.

The mean looking one says, "You must be the new owner. I'm Maggie. This is Brenda—" She points to the brunette next to her, then the shorter, fake blonde on the other side. "—and that's Kristen."

"It's nice to meet you," I offer, though the look I'm being pinned with makes me nervous when all three gazes start wandering around the front of the house.

I'd invite them in, but aside from them being perpetual strangers, the inside is a disaster. Boxes are still thrown everywhere, furniture is in disarray, and some rooms are still half empty because I haven't had time to do any shopping for things I want to buy for them. Slowly, I'm working from room to room, starting with the ones I'll spend the most time in and leaving the others for whenever my free time and motivation will allow.

"We wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood," the shortest of them, Kristin, tells me, smiling.

Maggie, the ringleader, based on how the other two pipe down as soon as she opens her mouth, says, "We're part of the Homeowners Association, and we've been getting complaints."

My eyes widen at the statement since I've never had a complaint made against me in my life. "I don't understand."

She sighs. "Your lawn is unkempt and needs to be mowed, and something needs to be done about the flower beds. You can't leave things like this if you want to remain here. I'm sure the realtor you went through gave you a list of regulations for the HOA you would have needed to sign, including penalties for any violations."

I blink.

Gape with parted lips.

Close my lips and blink again.

The middle woman, Brenda, clears her throat and digs in her purse before pulling out a card and handing it to me. "There are a few people who do lawn care for residents here if you're interested in hiring someone who knows the regulations better. Me and a few others use them. They're great."

"Either way," the ringleader says. "We wanted to come by and give you a warning. A written notice will be the next step if it's not taken care of in the next three days, which should give you plenty of time to handle it."

I *almost* smile when I see Kristen roll her eyes over the dramatic woman who's standing as straight as possible to seem more authoritative. If height is how she chooses to dominate others into doing whatever she wants, there's no competition between us. I'm barely over five feet. Most people I meet are taller than me.

I wave the card in my hand. "I'll make sure to give someone a call as soon as I can. It was nice meeting you all."

The dismissal doesn't seem to go over well with at least one of the women, but I've had enough practice with my ex-in-laws to know a stubborn woman when I see one. I was raised with manners, but there's a fine line between being rude and standing up for yourself so you don't get walked on, and I swore I'd never let that happen to me again.

Sighing as soon as the door is closed behind me, I know more than likely that if I call the number listed on the card, they'll be too busy to come before I get something written in the mail. And considering I have no interest in making enemies here, especially not in record-breaking time, I do what I do best whenever I have a problem.

I call my dad.

After greeting him, I fill him in on what happened and hear him chuckle over my rendition of the neighborhood police. "So, can you bring the push mower with you when you come?"

"Damn, kid. Making friends already."

I stare at the curtains I hung, then at everything else I need to do yet and feel overwhelmed with what I've gotten myself into. "You could say that. Vickie is supposed to come help me unpack some things, though, so at least I'll have one person who doesn't hate my guts."

"What am I, chopped liver?" His tone is teasing no matter how much he tries to sound offended.

"You and mom are obligated to love me. It's your job as parents."

My argument is lacking since I've met a handful of family members of my students, and not everyone has the same mentality as I do about parental-child relationships.

"I let Sonny borrow it, but I'll get it back and make sure the lawn is taken care of. Anything else you need me to bring?"

Alcohol, I want to say. But considering my father hasn't touched a drop of it in six years and seven months, according to the AA tokens he's collected and proudly shown off, I don't even bother saying it no matter how much I'd love to curl up on the couch with a bottle of wine.

My father's alcoholism changed everything when I was in middle school. He and mom got divorced because of how much time he spent at the bar with a bottle of his favorite malt liquor instead of spending time with us. Now that he's better, their relationship has gotten significantly better too. They still talk, check in on each other, and even have dinners together once in a while. But I don't think they'll ever get back together again, and the thirteen-year-old in me still wallows over that.

"Just your gorgeous face," I say instead, hearing the groan and grumble that makes me brush off my thoughts and smile.

It takes a few more hours to finish the little things in the kitchen that I can do on my own, washing, drying, and putting away all my new dishes and cookware, hanging up the second set of curtains, moving around some smaller appliances until I get them where I want, sweeping and mopping since I keep tracking in mud on the light tiled flooring I already hate and heating up some food Mom stockpiled in my fridge before she left earlier.

I'm glancing outside at the grass through one of the front windows and cringing at how bad it looks compared to the other lawns around me when a big, newer model black four-door pickup truck drives past the house and slows as it nears a raised-ranch style house kitty-corner to mine. The turn signal flicks on as it glides into the driveway and stops right in front of the closed garage, and it doesn't take long before two bodies emerge.

One large.

And one small.

I see the green attire first, the color that always sparks something in my heart, making it go into overdrive. It used to be excitement coursing through my veins because I knew it meant the person wearing the uniform was home, right where he belonged. Now it sparks something completely different.

Pain.

Regret.

Anger.

The man isn't wearing a uniform, though, just a T-shirt the same color green I've grown to hate and a pair of dark jeans. I know it's not the person who caused the massive hole in my chest. He's taller, bulkier, and the little boy whose hand he's holding is the dead giveaway.

Hunter wasn't ready to have kids.

I'm not sure he ever was, even though he knew how badly I wanted them from day one. How much pillow talk we'd have about our kids and animals and the home we'd grow in.

Swallowing, I close the curtains and walk over to the couch with my steaming food and glass of water and put on the news to drown out the heavy, bitter feeling carving itself deep in my bones.

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CHAPTER THREE

I don't know much about lawn mowers since I've never used one in my life, but I do know the one my father is currently using shouldn't be making the sound it is. Not even a few seconds after I stop organizing the various pictures, plants, and trinkets on my new bookshelf in the living room, I hear the telltale signs of my father's cursing that tells me it's definitely not a good sign.

Frowning, I walk out with a cold bottle of water for the 66-year-old and see him squatting beside the piece of equipment and scowling.

I tilt my head. "What's wrong with it?"

He accepts the water and guzzles half of it before shaking his balding head where brown hair used to be. What's left of his receding hairline is a mixture of dark gray and silver, the same color streaks I started seeing when I turned 30. Since my hair is so dark, the silver highlights basically stand out like a sore thumb. One of my students even thought it was tinsel stuck to my head, which was sort of funny until three more popped up.

"Goddamn Sonny must have mowed over something he shouldn't have. *Again*. Your mother told me not to let him use it after last time, but I didn't listen. Love thy neighbors and all that bullshit."

I snicker. "Maybe you should listen to Mom next time if this keeps happening." We both know he won't because Sonny is one of the most persistent people on this planet. I grew up calling him Uncle Sonny even though there was no relation because he was always just...there. Helping Dad tinker on odds and ends in the garage, barbecuing with our family, helping me learn how to ride a bike when Dad was a little preoccupied elsewhere.

Dad *harrumphs* but doesn't give any indication that he knows I'm probably right. It's ten minutes later when he lets out a heavy sigh and gives me a solemn look from where he has the mower on its side to figure out what's wrong with it. "I'm going to need to fix this, which means figuring out what parts store has what I need and then actually replacing it all."

My shoulders drop a fraction. "Oh. Is that going to take a while?"

His dark, sympathetic eyes tell me 'yes' before he says, "I'll need to make some calls, but I probably won't be able to get everything I need until

tomorrow or Tuesday at the latest. Sorry, kiddo.”

“It’s okay.” What else can I say? He’s helping me for free anyway to get me out of a bind. Like always, I’ll figure it out. “Do you need some money for the parts?”

I’ll admit, it hurts to offer knowing I don’t have much to my name right now. But I’ve got food in the kitchen, all my bills paid for the month, and gas in the car. I’d make do.

The scoff from him doesn’t surprise me since that’s usually the sound he makes when I offer to help him with anything. When I was sixteen, I’d gotten a job at a movie theater to save up for my first car, and once in a while, I’d offer Dad part of my paycheck for things like groceries. Mom was worried he’d take it and spend it on things he shouldn’t, but her worries were moot because Dad never accepted the helping hand. “I don’t need any money, Stevie. You worry about yourself now that you’ve got this place. And you should probably call the lawn people, so they’ll add you into their next rotation.”

As always, he’s right. I should have called them yesterday after I’d gotten off the phone with him. “I’ll call them when I go back inside. Do you think—”

“Mower trouble?” a deeper voice asks from not so far away. Both dad and I turn at the same time, looking at the sidewalk where a tall, muscular man built like a tank is standing with the kind of straight posture that’s drilled into heads of others who share the same short buzzcut as he does. His white T-shirt looks like it’s about to bust a stitch from the massive biceps and broad shoulders it’s encasing, and the dark denim on his legs aren’t tight but not loose from where they hang low on his hips. In his hand is a leash with a gorgeous, friendly-looking golden retriever attached to the other end who’s wagging its tail as it watches us.

The dog isn’t what I find myself staring at the longest, though, because when I glance up from the large work boots that look like they’ve been well worn, long legs covered in those faded blue jeans with a rip in one of the knees, and the tee that is either too small or arguably just right, I see the tan face attached to the burly body. Clean-shaven sharp jawline, neutral expression, and eyes that are dark and watchful, always observing through the thick lashes lining them like he’s always on alert.

Dad doesn’t even know why my breath catches, that it has nothing to do with the man’s rugged good looks.

I swallow when the man I've seen a handful of times over the years looks from the mower to my dad, then back to me. There doesn't seem to be recognition at first, but when he gets a good look at my shocked expression and stiff body, he blinks.

Just once.

Then those brawny shoulders draw back.

Dad doesn't even seem to notice, not that it'd make any sense for him to. He'd never met any of Hunter's commanding officers, including this man with short brown hair, hair slightly lighter than mine, who stands with the type of authority any other Lieutenant Colonel is trained to have in the army. Stock straight, perfect posture, and eyes that see all to be prepared for anything.

But I bet he didn't see this.

"My damn neighbor ruined the blade and crankshaft," Dad announces bitterly to the man still watching me with a careful eye before slowly pulling his gaze downward to my father.

I don't bother pointing out that the chance of Sonny being responsible for what sounded like an expensive fix isn't likely since Dad managed to mow half the lawn. It wouldn't surprise me if *Lieutenant Colonel* Miller probably knows that too but doesn't say it.

"If you need to borrow mine," that baritone voice says, "I can go grab it for you."

Through my lashes, I glance up to see the familiar set of eyes watching me again, waiting for an answer. But because I'm a coward, I let my father be the one who answers for me. "We'd appreciate that, wouldn't we, Stevie?"

Heat slithers up the back of my neck as I pick my head up and offer an appreciative nod. The smile with it is tight, still full of surprise and uncertainty as the two circular orbs, the color of my favorite espresso, pins me where I stand with the intensity of the gaze. If Mom were here, she'd tell me I was being rude, then elbow me discreetly to comment on the commanding officer's looks when he wasn't looking. There'd been more than one occasion where an attractive man was somewhere nearby, and my mother felt the need to point them out like I didn't have two eyes of my own. The difference between those times and now was that I could freely ogle the strangers without feeling bad about it because it'd never come to anything.

Fletcher Miller isn't a stranger, though. Considering I don't know what he does or doesn't know about the split one of his soldiers and me, there isn't a lot I'd trust myself to say without reopening old wounds that I've worked hard on mending shut.

"We would appreciate it," I force out, proud of how steady my voice sounds even if I'm shaking on the inside.

When those piercing eyes lock on me, I don't dare move or blink. I hold my breath, wondering what he's thinking, and only release it when he dips his chin once. "Okay."

Okay.

That's all.

The man, who has to be in his early to mid-forties by now, tugs on his dog's leash and starts walking down the street. It isn't until he crosses it to the house I saw the black truck park in the driveway of yesterday that I realize the cold hard truth reality is smacking me with.

My ex-husband's commanding officer is my neighbor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three days later, I'm walking to the small faculty mailboxes set up in the main office when my boss sticks her head out from her small office in the corner and pins me with one of those sweet smiles she gives people before asking them to do something. "Stevie, just the person I wanted to see. Can you come talk to me real quick?"

As if I could tell her no.

Nodding, I collect my things from the box and follow her inside, closing the door behind me. She sits behind her oak desk with pictures of cats and children resting in frames and a name plaque that says *Ms. Clifton* in gold engraved lettering. A present from her nieces, the very same children showcased proudly in the brown picture frames beside it, since she doesn't have any of her own.

"What can I help you with?" I ask, taking a seat across from her. The first time I sat in this very same chair was for the job interview that led to this position, and as nervous as I was, worried I'd have pit stains by the time it was over, I knew I'd crushed it. So, when I'd gotten the call with the official job offering, I'd taken it with a big smile that I couldn't wipe off my face for weeks.

Beverly Clifton, a fifty-something-year-old woman with a no-nonsense attitude, gives me a warm look. Warm for her, anyway. I can see why some of my coworkers are intimidated by the woman who doesn't often smile when she's around the adults. Kids are another story, which is a good thing since you need a lot of patience and a friendly face when you're surrounded by hundreds of them daily.

"I wanted to give you a heads up about a new student starting today that'll be in your class. I spoke with his parents last week, and they informed me he's on the spectrum. He has high-functioning autism. His father told me he didn't need an aide at his last school, but they're open to it if they feel he needs help here at Stanton. He went through extensive therapy when he was younger, and they say he's shy but a smart young man. So, I think he'll be a good fit in your room."

She wants me to keep an eye out and give her reports if I'm reading between the lines correctly. I have a background in special education

studies, minoring in it in college, so I know a thing or two about autism. “Okay, I’ll make sure to note anything I feel necessary.”

My boss smiles at me. “I knew you’d be a good fit for him. My Ari is on the spectrum too. I don’t think I’ve ever told you that.” She reaches forward to grab one of the photos of a tall blonde holding a cat half the size of her. “She’s always been the sweetest little girl in the world, nothing my sister couldn’t handle. But some people don’t look at differences the same. Unfortunately, not all schools have the resources to handle children like Ari. She isn’t high-functioning.”

Ah. So, the last school district couldn’t give the family what they needed. I’ve learned in my years of study that they might have some trust issues with other districts. It’s reasonable. It just means I’d need to prove to them we can handle anything their son would need.

“You can count on me,” I tell her genuinely, readjusting my bag and sliding my mail under my arm.

“I know I can.” She leans back and gives me a look—one I can’t quite determine the meaning behind before she says something that makes my body lock up. “You’d make a wonderful mother someday.”

It’s not a totally *inappropriate* thing to say to your employee, but it’s definitely bordering on that line. There’s a reason why I teeter on topics of conversation when I’m here because I know from personal experience what it’s like to have certain things I’d rather not talk about, especially with people I have to see every day, brought up in casual conversation.

Like my divorce.

And like the whole having children thing.

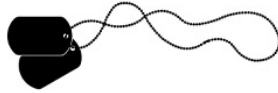
It’s hard to sound normal when I force out a calm, “Thank you.” Maybe she could hear the slightest tremble in my tone, but I clear my throat and stand before she can say anything about it. “Is there anything else?”

She shakes her head, oblivious to the storm of feelings swarming my stomach where the butterflies used to flutter once upon a time. “I suppose that’s all. Here’s the name of your newest student and the transfer file on him so you can get a better idea of his background. I’ll have someone show him to the room when he gets here.”

Accepting the thick folder and tucking it with my other things, I head out of the office with a few wavering “hellos” and head nods to the other tired-looking faculty pouring in before the school day starts. Refusing to let

anyone see the cloud building over my head, I hold myself up higher, walk confidently, and paint a smile on my face like I do best.

I'm your everyday Picasso, perfecting phony smiles with a flick of my lips instead of a paintbrush.



The name on the paper given to me didn't register until the classroom door opens and a little boy with a head full of blondish-brown hair walks in, followed by a tall, older version of him.

I'd glanced at the name scribbled on the paper in black ink when I set my things down in my room, and no red flags stood out because plenty of people have that same last name. In my 32 years of life, I've probably run into at least ten different Millers.

So, when Fletcher Miller walks in holding the shoulders of a little boy who's wearing a pair of light blue jeans and a wrinkle-free white polo shirt neatly tucked into the waistband of his denim, staring at either his black Sketchers or the checkered tile floor, I nearly choke on the coffee I just took a sip of.

Because *really*?

But I recover quickly, offering a welcoming greeting as I walk over to the newcomers and give them each a smile as if I don't know who either of them are when the squeeze in my chest says otherwise. "You must be Dominic," I tell the little boy. He doesn't say a word, only scrapes the toe of his sneakers against the tile that his eyes are plastered to.

His father clears his throat, squeezing his shoulders in encouragement. "Go on, Nic."

Lowering to his level, I offer the timid boy a soft smile as he glances at me through his lashes before quickly looking back down. "My name is Ms. Foster. It's very nice to meet you." When I notice his tiny fist tighten around something, I give it an inquisitive look before meeting his eyes again, which dart away the second they meet mine. "What is that you're holding?"

The little boy glances up at his father, who's watching us carefully, a hold still on his son's shoulders, before seeing his father's nod of encouragement again.

When Dominic, or Nic, I'll have to figure out what he prefers being called, opens his fist, there's a single piece of white ribbon in it that looks stained and frayed. "It's my good luck charm."

His...

I smile wider. "I have one of those too. A blue marble I carry with me in my pocket everywhere because I was told it'd bring good luck."

He blinks. "Has it?"

I nod. "Every time."

Looking up at his father again, he quickly tucks the ribbon in the pocket of his blue jeans before looking around the room. Some of the students are reading, others are finishing up basic entry level assignments to figure out where best to start in my teaching modules, and some are probably goofing off based on the smatter of giggles coming from the girls in the corner who are all looking at something on their table.

When I stand, I gesture toward a desk off to the side. "You can set your things down over there. We don't have assigned seats in this classroom, but that's the only one available for today. I'll introduce you to everyone in a few minutes."

After he turns and squeezes his dad's legs in a quick hug, he walks over to the desk I pointed out and sets his things down on top of it, touching his pocket every few seconds to make sure his good luck charm is still there.

I turn to the man who I'm still surprised to see in my domain. "He'll be in good hands," I assure him in case he's worried.

"Was it true?" he asks low enough for only me to hear. "About the marble?"

Reaching into the pocket of my favorite polka-dot dress, I retrieve the item in question. Nobody besides my family knows I still have it, but I'm not sure they know I still carry it around even though I've come to terms with it being a regular old marble people can find in stores worldwide.

It's about the mindset.

The man filling a majority of the doorway blinks, dark eyes widening slightly as he studies the circular object pinched between my two fingers.

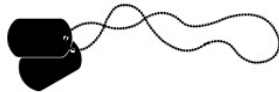
Putting it back in my pocket, I look over my shoulder at his son, who's staring out the window facing the playground. "Everyone needs something to comfort them through the hard times, no matter what those times are. It doesn't matter how old you get."

I lift my shoulders.

“I need to get back,” I tell him, and I feel relieved when he steps back with another dip of his chin. “Pickup is at three sharp if the office didn’t tell you. We’ll have a good day.”

When he walks away without another word, I let myself breathe a little easier as I turn to my class and clap to get everyone’s attention.

“Okay, everyone. Eyes up here.”



Maybe if I weren’t my mother’s daughter, I would have ignored the opportunity presenting itself when I pull into my driveway after work and notice the man hosing off his truck a few houses down. But a voice in my head resembling my mother’s tells me to go over and thank him for letting me borrow his push mower so my lawn wouldn’t be the cause of a neighborhood riot.

I’d put it off long enough even after my dad returned it to its rightful owner with a handwritten thank you card from me attached to the handle. Mom had told me I should have put my number on it, or at least gotten him a gift card somewhere nice, but there was no way in hell I would do the first and didn’t have a lot of spare money to offer him the second.

Now that I’d have his kid in my classroom for almost an entire year, I need to at least be civil with the man of few words instead of feeling like there’s sordid history lingering, even if the history isn’t ours. Not that I think he’d randomly blabber anything about what or *who* he knows at any school event we might both be at. I just need to be sure that the air is cleared for my peace of mind, if nothing else.

Sighing, I pull my keys from the ignition of my bright green Hyundai Accent and stuff them into my purse after locking up behind me. My family always teases me about the hard-to-miss lime color of my small car, but I love it. I can’t lose it in a packed parking lot, and it doesn’t take a lot of money to fill the gas tank. Hunter always felt the need to comment on the nine-year-old vehicle too, not caring that it was paid off and cheap to maintain because it never compared to the fancier things he drove.

He’d always suggest trading it in for something like his, giving the car a small sneer whenever he was around it. He’d always have to remind me how much his sleek, black sports car cost along with other random facts

about the engine that mine didn't have as if that instantly made his better. Still, I never cared enough about the unnecessary add-ons to get rid of mine.

But that was Hunter. He was raised to like nicer things. Name brand instead of generic. Nothing secondhand. And when it came to anything material, it had to be the best of the best. I couldn't really fault him for thinking the way he did since it was all he knew before meeting me and my family—the exact opposite of his. That doesn't mean his constant teasing about my car, the color, the size, and everything in between, didn't sometimes get on my nerves. I always just let it go, giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Brushing off the wandering thoughts, I make the short walk to the house, where murky water runs down the driveway and into the small storm drain right off the end.

I don't know if my neighbor can hear me coming since I changed out of my heels and into flats as soon as I got into my car, but his back is to me as he focuses on spraying off one of the front wheels that looks like it's covered in dirt.

Whether he knows I'm there or not I don't know. But I don't make a point to stand there like a creep without making myself known, no matter how badly my eyes want to linger on the stretch and pull of his taut back and arm muscles as he moves the hose. "Where's Nicki?"

It took some time, a lot of eye contact avoidance, and a few smaller conversations whenever his attention would be pulled to the window instead of something I was saying, but Dominic eventually told me he prefers being called Nicki. So, I made a mental note of that and stuck a Post It on the attendance sheet for any subs that'd need to know in the future.

The man who must stand 6'4" straightens, his back tensing as he releases the nozzle handle to stop the water. Slowly, he turns to me, where I stand by the open tailgate of his Dodge RAM 1500 according to the emblem on the side.

It takes him a few seconds, his eyes never wandering from my face, before he says, "Inside playing video games." A pause. "He didn't hate his first day."

Some people may be offended by that lackluster statement, but I take it as a compliment. Sort of. "I'm happy to hear that. I think he'll get along with his peers well. A few of the other children went up to him at lunchtime

and sat at the same table, trading snacks. He didn't say much, but he didn't move either like he could have."

Once again, all I'm given in response is a small nod—a barely-there gesture of acknowledgment.

I sigh, knowing that he knows I'm not here for small talk. "Look, I don't know what you do or don't know about..." My lips press together, shaking my head at my fading words. God, why is this so hard? "Not a lot of people around here know about Hunter."

There. I said his name.

And my neighbor...tenses?

Willing to evaluate that at a later date, I say what I need to since I'm sure he has better things to do than listen to me ramble. "I know that we know some of the same people, probably even talk to some of the same groups still, but I live a very private life here because of how things...went down. All of that stuff, things with Hunter and his family, is a really sore subject for me, so I don't talk about it to anybody if I can help it. Only one person at the school knows, and that's because she caught me crying in the bathroom, which is still mortifying to think about. I don't even know why I told you that." I cringe, then watch his long eyelashes fan his cheeks with a slow blink, taking me and my nervousness in. "I'm not proud of still struggling a little with the situation, but it's the truth. So, I just wanted to let you know in case you run into anybody or in case you mention something to anyone in the area."

Not that it's likely many people from my old life would care about where I am now. It's not like I'm hiding from anyone. Even when I get rid of my PO box and change my address to the one across from where I'm currently standing in front of a stone-faced beast of a man, it wouldn't be hard for anyone to get it if they asked around. My mom especially likes to share the information she probably shouldn't, though I'm unsure if she'd be so loose lipped with Hunter if he had the gull to ask her.

Swiping my tongue along my dry lips, I flatten a hand down the front of my dress. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I hope nothing is going to be awkward between us because of our past with people. Hunter...he always really looked up to you. I'm not sure if you knew that, but I think he sort of saw you as a father figure since he didn't have one." He probably didn't need to know that either, but when the word vomit starts, it's really hard to rein it in. Hunter's biological father died when he was little, and he

never got along with his stepfather, so he always looked at the man standing here like a role model he never had. “Sorry, that wasn’t relevant to this conversation. I’m not even sure where I was going with this other than to ask if we’ll be okay. Since we’re neighbors and I’m your son’s teacher and all...”

I’ll probably cringe again when I think about this conversation later, but then I’ll be proud to have had it. The old me probably would have done anything to avoid an awkward conversation, but that gets people nowhere in life.

“So, are we good?” When he doesn’t answer, I shift my weight so the trail of water still rolling down the slight decline of his driveway doesn’t run underneath my shoes.

Lieutenant Colonel Fletcher Miller, my neighbor, and father of my newest student, doesn’t say anything for the longest time. Or maybe it just feels that way because of how intensely he’s staring at me with pursed lips and a tight jaw. It’s not the first time I’ve seen him in this mode. People called him Hellfire back on base because of how he presented himself—hard eyes, tough exterior, rarely ever a smile on his handsome face. He always looks so serious, like inside his head, he’s thinking over the next move and maneuver that gets him to where he needs to be.

Eventually, he loosens a sigh, looks over his shoulder at his house as if he’s checking for his son before his eyes go back to me. “Your business is your business.”

Okay...

That’s good, I guess. A start.

The fist not clenching the nozzle tightens by his side before loosening again. “Nic seems to like you,” he adds quietly. “He doesn’t like many people because they don’t treat him like other kids.”

Instantly, I frown. It doesn’t surprise me, though I wish it did. During my college classes and school observations, I heard stories about how students with learning disabilities or any type of special needs were mistreated from the rest. I always swore if I ever had a student in that situation, I’d include them in everything, making sure they weren’t singled out or made to feel uncomfortable. For some kids, the classroom is the only safety net they have. I never want them to feel like they’re unwelcome in any way.

My lips only waver from the deep-set frown weighing down the corners of my lips when he finally tells me, “We’re good.”

I know why.

Because his son likes me.

And he loves his son.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I give him a single nod. “Good. Okay. Um, well I should get going. By the way, thank you again for letting me borrow your mower. If you need anything...” There’s not much I can offer him, but I know it’s the polite thing to offer. “You know where I live.”

Though, I hope to God he doesn’t take me up on that.

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CHAPTER FIVE

A few weeks go by without incident as I settle into the house. I do my best to smile and wave at a few neighbors that I see in passing, accept helpful tips for gardening by a kind elderly woman who's clearly the neighborhood green thumb, and even befriend the fifty-something woman who lives directly next door to me. All it took was a knock, friendly smile, and bottle of wine as a housewarming present before I invited Bex, my neighbor, inside and offered her a glass.

I don't go out of my way to seek Fletcher, but I also don't make it a point to avoid him either. If I see him walking his dog, which I heard Nicki call Admiral once when he was trying to call the big, friendly lummo back inside, I'll wave and say good morning, good evening, or something equally as neighborly. I even asked him how he was once, which had gotten me a one-word reply.

Fine.

Maybe he senses my hesitancy to make friendly conversation with him, unsure of what to say or do outside of small talk like the weather or some sports game that I know nothing about. Or the obvious go-to, which is Nicki and school. He's probably seen me talking to the other neighbors, laughing with Bex, or fussing and cursing over some DIY project I'm attempting in my front yard.

For all I know, I made a fool of myself by asking him if we were okay. He probably wouldn't have paid me any attention if I didn't draw it to myself or even care about how we knew each other in the past. I'm not the same woman I was when I was married to Hunter, after all. Not just in the way I grew into a woman's body with slightly wider hips, a fuller chest, and a bit more padding to my thighs and stomach, but in how I carry myself too.

When you're going through hell, there's no way to escape unscathed. You just have to crawl out with as few burns as possible. And when you do, when you realize you survived, you stand a little taller, a little surer, knowing nothing else can beat you down again.

Remembering that, I brush off any weirdness I could have caused by approaching Fletcher. I did what I had to in order to feel good about my new home and life here in Stanton Springs. Even if I'd known who my

neighbor would be, a coincidence that I still reel over when I let my mind wander, I wouldn't have changed a thing because everything I have here is mine.

Only mine.

Exhaling heavily through my nose, I put my hands on my hips and examine the small flower garden. The weeds are long gone, and so are the other plants that used to be rooted in the fertilized soil. I'll find something else to plant that'll come back once the warmer weather hits in the springtime since the fall is slowly creeping in.

Standing up and brushing off my jeans, I peel off my thick gardening gloves and drop them onto the grass by the wooden flower beds. I don't hear anyone approach until Bex's familiar raspy voice says, "It's looking better already." I turn with a smile and see her holding up a plastic container of something before lightly shaking it at me. "I brought some leftover cookies my youngest brought me. Want some?"

I eye the container. "I think you're trying to fatten me up," I accuse. Last week she'd come over with leftover chocolate cake from a birthday party her family had at her mother's house. The week before there was homemade bread, which was probably the tastiest thing I'd ever eaten. I never want to be rude, so I always accept it.

Bex doesn't seem apologetic at all as she passes me the container. "I'm trying not to fatten myself up. Ever since I became an empty nester, I've had way too much time on my hands to cook, bake, and indulge a little too much on the products. Anything I can pawn off on others, I do with a smile."

I can't help but laugh over her honesty. If I were in her shoes, I'd probably do the same thing. "I guess I can't blame you. Want to come in, or do you have plans today?"

I'm not entirely sure what Bex does with all her free time. From what she's told me, she works part-time at a salon in town doing nails, something I'll have to check out once I stop having so many home projects that ruin the nails I used to have done every two weeks, and visits her children every week for brunches or dinners.

I think it's sweet that she's so close with her two college-aged kids. One of them isn't far from here at a community college studying culinary, evident in all the baked goods Bex brings home after her visits. The other works as a mechanic in the town over. When she'd admitted they'd gotten

closer after the tragic loss of her husband in a car wreck years ago—the wreck that earned their family a hefty settlement to support them the rest of their lives—I’d given her a tight hug and thought about how lucky I was in the grand scheme of things.

There are all kinds of losses, ranging in so many different types of tragedies. We may all mourn them the same, but at least the ones I’ve suffered aren’t the permanent kind. The day Bex left after admitting her sad past, I realized that maybe the cards Hunter still sent me weren’t so bad after all.

Because he may not be here with me, but at least he’s still *here* on earth.

The thought of losing him...

Sighing internally, I turn to Bex as she explains her plans with a few old friends who are visiting town. “You can come with us if you’d like. Me and the girls are all laid back. Only one of us will try getting your entire life history from you, but all it takes is buying her chocolate, and she’ll be too distracted eating to focus.”

The offer is nice, and I’m almost tempted to take it, but I opt not to for reasons I’m not even sure of. “I appreciate it, but I have things to do around the house still.”

I’m not sure if she sees through the lacking excuse, but if she does, she doesn’t call me out on it. She’s been in my house plenty of times since the day we met and knows that most of my place is as good as it can get until I can scrape up some more money to finish furnishing it. She even offered to go shopping with me when it came time, which I’ll happily take her up on.

“One day, you’ll let me pull you away from here, Stevie,” she says with a sigh and smile. “You’re far too young to be hiding out behind these walls instead of living your life.”

I almost tell her I’m not doing that, but I stop myself. Maybe I’m not intentionally hiding, but I guess I have been isolating myself more lately and using my move as an excuse. Vickie couldn’t even get me to go to a local bar with her for drinks after we sweat our asses off moving around heavy furniture in the living room.

Bex touches my arm lightly. “Whatever is holding you back won’t be forever,” is all she leaves me with before walking back over to her property.

An older van stops at the curb in front of her mailbox to pick her up. When the horn of the blue minivan honks twice as it dives by, I wave at the group of ladies and think about what Bex said.

It's hard to deny the truth of it.



"I'm so glad you decided to come!" Sonia squeals, grabbing my arm as we exit her car and tugging me inside the bar where I recognize a few other coworkers are sitting. They all turn as we approach, all smiling and holding drinks already.

One of the girls in the group, a second-grade teacher named Abigail stands up and offers me a quick hug that surprises me. Coming from a family of huggers, it shouldn't, but I've barely talked to most of the other faculty in my short time here. "We were all happy to hear you were coming," she says, flattening the skirt she wore today as she settles back down on the stool.

I'm glad I'm not the only one who decided not to change. I don't even know what kind of clothes would be appropriate for a Friday night outing to a bar with some coworkers. Jeans? A skirt? A dress? The only person who knows I'm even here is my best friend, and Vickie told me to channel her. When I told her that I didn't own a pair of Daisy Dukes or a crop top, she'd laughed and told me to fuck off.

"So, you guys do this every Friday?" I ask, feeling dumb for asking since I've worked at Stanton Central School long enough to know the answer by now.

It's Anton, one of the other elementary teachers, who answers from a few seats down. He leans back to see past another male faculty member sitting beside him, glass bottle of Budweiser in his hand, and says, "Every few. We do it at least once a month to decompress and vent."

I could do this once a month. The bar isn't too crowded or loud, and it seems like everyone is keeping to themselves for the most part. I even smell something greasy that makes my stomach rumble loud enough for Sonia to hear.

She wraps an arm around mine. "Want to split some cheese fries with me? They have the best loaded cheese fry basket that comes with bacon and sour cream on top."

If I'm going to drink, I'll definitely need something in my stomach first. "Sure."

It's one of the guys sitting in our group who tips his glass of amber liquid toward a table toward the back. "We should go grab a bigger table to sit at."

After putting a few orders of food and drinks in at the bar, we head toward the large open table by the hallway with a RESTROOM sign hanging from the top of the archway between the rooms. I take a seat in the corner with Sonia on one side and the man with spiky blond hair who suggested the change in venue on the other. I've seen him around on occasion but don't know his name.

He remedies that quickly by sticking his hand out and giving me the same kind of smile that Hunter used to. Charming, boyish, and confident, all wrapped up in one. It was almost devastating, but I smiled back as he introduced himself. "I'm Miles. You're Stevie, right?"

I nod.

"Like Nicks?" he prods.

"The one and only." When my mojito arrives, I accept it graciously from the waitress who looks like she'd rather be anywhere but at work and take a sip.

Sonia leans forward, leaning her chin on the palm of her hand. "Stevie is just as kickass as the OG too. Right, girl?"

I blink, taken aback by the random compliment that is far from the truth. "Uh..."

"She's also single," my coworker adds with a wink, making my cheeks fire with heat.

Miles bumps my shoulder playfully. "I am too. What a coincidence."

I want to eye Sonia knowing that this is far from a coincidence, but I decide to push it off instead of making a scene. "How funny," I say quietly, holding my mojito tightly.

The next twenty minutes is all about Miles's recreational baseball team he plays in and his obsession with classic cars. Apparently, he goes to car shows during the season and always looks for someone to go with him, a not-so-subtle hint. And on top of only talking about himself and not once stopping to ask anything about me, he does another thing high on my pet peeve list.

He takes some of my food without asking. Reaches right across me and grabs a handful. No, please. No, thank you. Nothing.

Sonia doesn't seem to care even though it was her idea to split the fries with me. She's clearly devised a plan in her head that involves Miles and me getting together in some form, a fantasy I have no interest in playing out.

After another ten minutes of listening to the man beside me talk about getting tickets to a concert of a band I've never heard, I decide to excuse myself to use the bathroom. Sonia is quick to follow, barely letting the bathroom door close before she claps her hand and saddles up beside me at the sink, where I wash my hands from the sticky cheese coating the fries.

"He's cute, right?"

I can't really argue with that as much as I want to. "Yes, but—"

"And he seems to really like you!" she cuts me off, wiggling her eyebrows. "I knew once I found out you were both coming that you'd hit it off."

I blink. She obviously hasn't been paying attention to my body language or lack of interest since we sat down. "He's a little young for me."

Sonia rolls her eyes, propping a hip against the side of the sink. "He's only a couple of years younger. And so what? It isn't like you have to get married or anything. Just have some fun. Miles seems like the type to know how to have a good time."

My eyebrow twitches, but otherwise, I keep my expression neutral, calm. "I'm not really feeling it. He seems nice enough, but..." But what? Even if I list the reasons why I don't like him, I doubt Sonia will listen. "I'm just not ready, Sonia. I'm sorry."

My coworker looks a little crestfallen but nods anyway. "Well, there's always next time. Don't count him out just yet, Stevie. He's got a great reputation at the school. The kids love him, and kids have a great judge of character, right?"

That is true...

Licking my lips, I relent. "Fine, I won't count him out. But whatever you've got planned needs to stop. Nothing is happening tonight. Except maybe getting a second drink and more fries since *someone* has been eating ours."

Sonia cackles. "Yeah, I caught that mini glare you gave him when he did that."

I'm glad she's amused. "Let's go. I can stay for a little while longer before I should head home."

Sonia just turned 30 but still acts stuck in her twenties. I never judge. My best friend is my age and still goes to clubs and bars and lives her best single life just like she did in college where we met. The quiet, sediment lifestyle I prefer isn't for everybody. "You know you're old enough not to have a curfew right," she teases, pulling me out of the bathroom.

I almost walk right into someone who's walking toward the men's restroom, stumbling back until two hands quickly catch my biceps to steady me.

"Sorry about tha—" My words fade when I look up to see brown eyes roaming over my face. Brown buzzcut with little speckles of white hair shine in what little lighting is offered in the hallway before those meaty hands let go of me, and the towering body takes a step back. Clearing my throat, I say, "I didn't see anyone coming. Sorry."

Sonia wraps her arm around mine again, her eyes checking out Fletcher unforgivingly.

He shifts, seemingly uncomfortable, before grumbling, "Don't worry about it." Neither of us can say anything before he sidesteps me and pushes open the men's room door, disappearing behind it.

We start walking again as Sonia whistles quietly. "That is one hell of a man. I think I've seen him around the pickup area at school before."

I could tell her I know him, that his son is in my class, but for some reason, I opt not to. It isn't like she needs to know anyway, and if she finds out, I'll play it off as not being a big deal.

Because it's not.

Or it *shouldn't* be.

"Forget Miles, girl," she whispers as we near our table, giggling. "You need a man like that in your life. He looks like he knows how to take charge of a woman's body."

My heart about stops in my chest as I force a smile and sit back down in my seat.

I have two more mojitos until I'm well good and buzzed and not thinking about the man sitting across the dimly lit bar with another man about the same size and build as him. I blame the alcohol for my blatant staring and the fact that he glances up from the bar and looks right at me.

Caught.

Cursing to myself, I quickly look down at my empty glass and plate of food that Sonia and I devoured an hour ago before looking at the time on

my phone.

I groan. “I need to get going,” I tell her, standing and collecting my things. I stumble a little as I walk around the table, feeling Sonia close behind.

What I don’t realize is that Miles is too.

I stop halfway to the door, in the middle of the bar, and turn when he says, “Why don’t I drive you home?”

His hand coasts down my arm, stopping at my hand and giving it a squeeze. I move my arm away gently and smile. “That’s very kind of you, but I’ll be okay. Sonia drove me so—”

“Sonia lives outside of town,” he reasons, as if he knows where my place is in comparison. Maybe he does since I invited Sonia over. She seems keen on sharing things about me to Miles. “I don’t live too far from here. I’m sure it’ll be easier to have me take you.”

He’s giving me the eyes. The bedroom eyes. Like if I say yes, I’ll be agreeing to way more than a friendly ride home.

“She told you her friend was taking her,” a new voice says from behind me. I know the rugged, low tone, so I don’t bother looking behind me to see Fletcher probably towering over all of us. Including Miles.

Sonia’s eyes widen as her lips twitch into a secretive smile as she glances between the person over my shoulder and me.

Miles doesn’t give up. “I happen to be her friend too, buddy, so why don’t you butt out of business that isn’t yours?”

Oh God. If there’s one thing I know about the man behind me, it’s that he doesn’t take well to attitude. Not from his soldiers, and definitely not from random guys in bars trying to take a slightly drunk girl home.

“If her friend doesn’t take her home,” Fletcher says slowly, as if Miles needs to hear each word individually, “then I’ll make sure she gets home safely.”

He doesn’t say why thankfully.

And Miles... He doesn’t know when to stop talking. He scoffs, his body language becoming challenging as if he could take the man whose body heat is soaking into my back and a little too close for comfort for me.

“Yeah, because I’m sure your intentions with her are as honorable as mine, pal.”

I groan loudly. “Sonia,” I blurt a little more loudly than I mean to. “Sonia will take me like we agreed, right?” My begging eyes turn to my

coworker, who's watching the men talk about me like she's watching a tennis match.

Slowly, she nods. "Suuure..."

I tug on her arm. "Okay. Great. Bye, Miles." I hesitate to wonder if I should say goodbye to Fletcher too. I clear my throat and look over my shoulder as I start tugging Sonia to the exit. All I tell Fletcher, who's standing straighter than normal like he somehow grew a few inches, is a quick "bye" before speed walking out of there.

When we stop outside Sonia's car, she looks at me from where we stand on opposite sides and shakes her head slowly. "That sexy man wanted to take you home, and you said *no*?"

My nostrils flare slightly, the buzz wearing off way too quickly after that whole encounter. "I told you already. I'm not ready."

I'm not sure what she grumbles under her breath before unlocking her car and climbing in.

The ride back to my house is quiet.

And I'm perfectly fine with that.

CHAPTER SIX

The last thing I want to do is enter the principal's office under the circumstances I'm about to, but I have no other choice after what happened.

When I see elderly Mrs. Willington, the secretary who looks like she's been here since the day the school opened in the '40s, gesture toward Ms. Clifton's door, I know that when I knock and hear my boss's voice tell me to come in that there are already going to be two, maybe three, other people in the office with her.

Walking in, I see a bigger body taking up the tiny chair and a smaller body occupying the other one next to him. There's a third chair off to the side that I take after closing the door behind me.

"Thank you for coming in," my boss says, gesturing toward Fletcher and Dominic. "I was hoping you could elaborate on what happened earlier today for Mr. Miller."

My eyes go to the little boy who's the reason we're having this meeting before my gaze turns to his father. "There was an...incident in the classroom after lunch. Some of the students were having a disagreement, and Nicki threw a bit of a tantrum leading to one of his peers' glasses getting broke. He did apologize after we got him calmed down, but I had to say something because we can't tolerate any type of violence."

I feel bad knowing the child who hasn't looked up once since I walked in will probably be grounded, but what happened needs to be handled immediately. There's no way I could have let it go even though Dominic told Zachary he was sorry when prompted.

My boss clears her throat. "I spoke with the other parents, and they said the cost of a replacement pair of glasses will be covered by their insurance, but they'd like an upfront cost of the appointment to be covered by you and Dominic's mother."

Fletcher nods once. "We'll handle it."

I try not to let the 'we' part make me too curious, even though I haven't seen another vehicle at their house in...ever. There may have been one there at some point that I just didn't notice since I don't actively spy on any of my neighbors, but for the most part, it's just his truck that comes and goes

from their property. The file on Dominic goes through the SALT—speech and language therapists—reports that helped clear him for enrollment at his previous school, and old grades and teacher’s notes on behavioral and participation habits from his old district. Though I looked, more than once, I didn’t see much about Nicki’s mom anywhere.

Ms. Clifton goes on. “Given the circumstances, we know that incidents will happen from time to time. But Stanton Central still can’t permit any type of violence. It’s against our policy, so we will need you to keep Dominic home for a day for out-of-school suspension.”

If that’s a problem for Fletcher, he doesn’t give it away. Like with his soldiers, he keeps a stoic expression on his face as he dips that strong chin of his. “I understand. Do you have the contact information for the other child’s parents?”

My boss rifles through some papers before handing him a piece with a phone number and name on it. “That’s the mother. They understood some of the situation once I explained, but—”

“Dominic’s condition doesn’t excuse what happened today. And it shouldn’t,” Fletcher cuts in firmly, giving no room for excuses. “He knows right from wrong enough to know better, even if he struggles with his impulses. The punishment shouldn’t be any different than any other student who did something they shouldn’t have. If out-of-school suspension for a day is justified, then fine. If it’s more, then we’ll do it. I’ll be sure the parents are paid for their son’s glasses, but I don’t want them, or this school district, to brush off Nic’s behavior simply because of his autism. That teaches him nothing.”

My boss gapes in shock.

I glance down at my lap to hide my small smile.

Nicki remains silent.

Then a chair scrapes back. “If that’s all, I’ll take my son home.”

My boss agrees and wishes them a good rest of their day, but before they leave, I hear a rough voice say, “Dominic, I think you owe your teacher an apology.”

I couldn’t imagine being the child of anybody in the military, especially not someone with Fletcher Miller’s authoritative nature. But maybe it’s precisely what Nicki needs in his life to help him learn and grow into somebody strong like his father.

In a voice so quiet I almost miss it, I hear a murmured, “Sorry, Ms. Foster.”

Because I have a feeling that his father doesn’t want me to forgive him so easily, I simply respond with, “We’ll see you the day after tomorrow, Nicki.”



I’m pulling into the driveway a few days later with a backseat full of groceries when I see somebody sitting on the front steps of my front door. When I put the car in park, my eyes narrow to get a better look since the sun is right in my line of vision.

The body stands, and it isn’t until I put up my hand to shield from the sun’s rays that I see who it is based on the height alone. “What the...?”

Fletcher Miller is standing at my door.

Turning off the car, I step out and calmly grab my purse and some groceries from the back before walking over to him. “Is everything okay?” I ask. He’s never come over since the day he let Dad and I use his mower. I’ve hired a lawn care service, so I haven’t had to bother him or my father for one again.

His eyes go down to the reusable grocery bags in my hands, then to my car where the back door is still open, so I can get the rest. “Do you need some help?”

“Oh, you don’t have to—” He doesn’t let me finish before grabbing one of the bags from my hands while I try fishing my keys out of my purse.

“I was raised to have manners,” is all he tells me in a gruff voice that has me arching a brow.

Not sure what to say, I turn to the door and unlock it before gesturing for him to come in. We get the rest of my things inside and set them on the counter before I turn to the man studying the plants on my hanging shelves, then the funny signs I found at some garage sales over the years that I hung on the walls.

He makes a noise in his throat, something sounding sort of like a low chuckle at one of them, before turning his body toward me. “I didn’t get a chance to apologize about Nic.”

Is that what this is about? “It’s done and over with,” I tell him carefully. “Really, it’s not a big deal.”

He shakes his head in disagreement, one of his palms going to his buzzed head and swiping along the stubble. “It is. He’s had some problems over the past few months, but his mother and I were hoping a new change of scenery would help.”

As tempted as I am to inquire about Nicki’s mother, I don’t. “Has it helped?”

Besides that one time, Nicki hasn’t been any trouble in school. The other kids seem to all get along fine with him despite his outburst over a seat change.

“For the most part,” Fletcher answers in a low tone before sighing to himself. “Sometimes, I don’t think he wants to be here. I’m figuring it out as I go. We both are.”

That’s...something. “It always takes time to adjust. Kids can be finicky.” *Or so I hear.* “I’m sure it’ll get better with time.”

I refrain from letting my curiosity get the better of me about his co-parenting situation after reminding myself it’s none of my business. If I asked him to let me have my privacy, I’d be a hypocrite to pry in his personal life.

Even if I’m tempted.

So, so tempted.

“Like I said,” I tell him, “it’s okay. He’s been fine since he came back. Even Zach, the boy with the glasses, talks to him. I think they trade fruit snacks at lunch every day.”

Fletcher’s lip twitches upward in the tiniest smile as he says, “He likes the red ones. Would leave the rest if I didn’t make him eat them so they’re not wasted.”

I guess that explains why I only ever see him trade other students for the red ones. I smile at that too. “He’s a good kid.”

There’s no hesitation. “He is.”

We’re quiet for a long moment, my eyes drifting along the untouched groceries that I need to start putting away. “Um, well, I have ice cream in here somewhere that I should put away before it melts. But all is forgiven and forgotten. Thank you for apologizing anyway.”

His eyes go over his shoulder toward the door before turning back to me. “I’m sorry if I overstepped.” I’m about to tell him he didn’t, that anything

involving his son would never be an overstep when he chooses to clarify.
“At the bar that night.”

Oh.

I blink.

He clears his throat and scratches the side of his neck with one of his fingers. “You didn’t look comfortable, and he seemed a little too eager to get you alone. It was reflex.”

Not knowing what else to do, I wave it off with an awkward but appreciative smile. “Oh, that was nothing. You didn’t overstep. In fact, I thought it was nice you stepped in. Although Miles is harmless. I wouldn’t have gone home with him anyway.”

“Well, in case you did want to...” His words trail into silence as he scratches his neck again. “I wanted to apologize anyway.”

More silence.

Then, “Okay. Thank you.”

He nods once.

Both our eyes turn to the groceries.

“Thanks for helping bring these in,” I offer since I hadn’t said it already.

He looks like he’s about to say something but chooses not to. With a strange look on his face after his eyes go to some pictures I have on a different shelf in the kitchen—me as a teenager with my parents shortly before I went off and got married—he gives me a wave and leaves.

It takes me a few minutes to shake out of what happened before I get to work putting the groceries away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vickie groans. “That’s cheating!”

Dad and I both laugh while Mom rolls the same hazel-green eyes I have at our theatrics. Even as adults, family game night is part of our get-together routine. This time, it’s at my house since it doesn’t look like a total disaster now. Vickie is the only non-family ever invited, mostly because she’s a sore loser and always entertaining when she moans and groans about something being unfair.

“While you try justifying how me rightfully putting property on my own land is cheating just because you landed on it, I’m going to get more snacks.”

Mom stands up too. “I’ll help.”

I know that’s code for ‘let’s talk’ since it doesn’t take more than one person to pour chips into a bowl and grab the homemade salsa and guacamole she brought with her.

“How’s work?” she asks, opening the fridge for the dipping options and sighing over who knows what. It isn’t nearly as empty as last time she was here, and nothing like my first home where I mostly had premade meals and salad kits because I didn’t know how to cook much.

I throw away the empty bag of tortilla chips once the bowl is refilled. “It’s going well. I have a great class.”

That doesn’t seem to be enough for the nosey woman who birthed me. “Victoria told me that one of your neighbor’s kids is in your class,” she pries, and I have to fight from making a face over the thought of Vickie blabbing my secrets. Not that Nicki is one of them, per se.

“Did she now?” I hum, grabbing the chips and walking out of the kitchen and to the dining room where, the game is set up on the table.

Mom follows with the other things. “Is this the same one who was kind enough to let you borrow his lawn mower?”

I purse my lips. “Yes.”

We stop at the table where Vickie cusses at whatever move my dad made. She looks up at me, frowns at my expression, then looks at my mom. “What’d I miss?”

“We were just talking about Stevie’s nice neighbor. The man.” *The man.* She knows I have plenty of other neighbors I talk to, including Bex, but she’s hyper-focused on only one. I know if I bring up who he is, who he *knows*, she’ll more than likely stop prying on details of what else I may have borrowed from him or where our nonexistent relationship is going. “I was telling her I think it’s great he was nice enough to let her use his mower. And the fact she’s teaching his son seems like a great way to get to know him.”

I remind myself to bite my tongue. If they know he’s far from a stranger, the questions will rise. Does he still talk to Hunter? Does he bring him up? Does he know about the divorce? It’ll go on and on until I hide away in the bathroom and feign some sort of gross GI illness until they leave.

Vickie hiccups. “Oh, the one who saved her from her drunk coworker at the bar?”

I shoot her a look at the same time both my parents turn to me. Dad with narrowed eyes, and Mom with a wide gaze as she gasps, “*What?*”

My friend hiccups again, cringing at her lack of filter. “Whoops. Sorry. I blame the margaritas. Your mom makes them strong.”

“Yeah, she does that on purpose so people will have loose lips.”

Mom puts her hands on her hips with indignation. “I do no such thing!” Even Dad chuckles over that lie.

Knowing they won’t let this go, I internally groan and explain. “It’s not a big deal. I went out with some people from work, and one of my coworkers offered to take me home. When I told him I had it covered, he was just a little pushy. Seriously, it was nothing.”

Mom disagrees. “So why did your neighbor feel the need to save you?”

I not-so-subtly shoot my best friend a look, and she mouths *sorry*.

Shoulders squaring, I shake my head. “I didn’t need to be saved. He was just making sure everything was okay. You know how some men can be. They always want to be the white knight.”

Vickie hums. “Shining armor is sort of like a military uniform.”

Thankfully, my parents choose not to dissect that comment. I either need to stop telling Vickie everything or water down her drinks whenever my parents are over. Right now, I’m too irritated to decide which is more tempting.

“Can we get back to game night?” I ask, sitting down and grabbing a chip. “I think we may see 2012 Victoria. What I would do to have a video

recording in slow motion of her flipping the board game and watching all the pieces go everywhere.”

My friend’s head hits the table. “I thought we were going to let that go.”

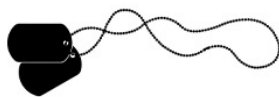
“Payback is a bitch,” I mumble under my breath.

“Stevie, language!” Mom chides.

Dad laughs.

I sigh.

Vickie looks at me with apologetic eyes, and we both know I can’t stay mad at her.



I cackle when I see the fruit basket sitting on my desk when I get back from lunch with Sonia and a few others in the teacher’s lounge. One noticeable difference while I ate some leftover pasta from the night before was Miles. For a while after the bar, he wouldn’t show up to eat with everybody else. Apparently, he got over it, even smiling at me and asking how my week has been.

I pluck the note off the edible arrangement display sitting in pretty packaging and grin when I see Vickie’s note that says, “sorry for being a tattletale bitch” along with a signature in her messy handwriting. It’s probably a good thing all her work is strictly online as a social media manager because her handwriting is barely legible, especially to people who aren’t used to it.

When the kids come back from their recess, I let them pick from the fruit basket and try not to act disappointed when, not surprisingly, all of the pieces coated in chocolate are picked first. Seeing the happy looks on their faces makes it worth it, though.

After a long day of dealing with cranky ten- and eleven-year-olds, who may or may not be coming down from sugar highs, I’m glad when the final bell rings and the classroom quiets. I sit back in my chair and look around my messy room, knowing I’ll need to reorganize the desks before the janitors come in later this evening and think a tornado tore through here.

Blowing out a breath, I give myself a few minutes to look out the window and smile at the suddenly enthusiastic students as they run towards

the busses parked along the long driveway and others skipping toward the line of family vehicles waiting to pick them up.

Walking closer to the window, I pull down one of the blinds and notice a familiar black truck in one of the first spots. I'm not sure what it is that Fletcher Miller does these days, whether he's on leave or retired from the army, but he's always one of the first parents to arrive. The few times I've seen everyone leave, I always notice the way he waits by the side of the truck, leaning against it with crossed arms on his chest and long legs planted on the pavement. Usually, one ankle casually crossed over the other, and he smiles as soon as Dominic appears. Like Nicki, Fletcher's outfits rarely vary. It's always some kind of dark denim on his legs, a different T-shirt or long sleeve plaid button down covering his broad shoulders and huge arms, and those work boots are never missing from his large feet.

I also notice some of the other parents, mothers mostly, who gawk in his direction. If he knows they're watching, he doesn't seem to care. I don't think he even greets them at all. He just stands there, waiting for his son, and always lifts an arm once Nicki gets close enough to give him a one-armed hug before opening the back door for him to climb in.

It's sweet.

"What happened in here?" a new voice asks, making me peel myself away from the window quickly like I've been caught doing something wrong. But, then again, mesmerizing a student's father like many of the moms do probably isn't considered right by many people's standards.

I blink at Miles, surprised to see him with his hands casually in his pockets as he takes in the messy classroom. "The kids got a little rambunctious toward the end of the day. Long weekend and all that."

He chuckles. "I know that feeling."

Deciding I've lurked like a creeper long enough, I move away from the window and start picking up after the gremlins who ditched me for whatever is in store for them after school ends.

"So..." Miles walks in and helps me clean up a little, not that he knows where anything goes. I could tell him he doesn't have to help, but I know he's just being nice, so I try not to make any faces when he puts things in the wrong spots. "I was wondering if you had any plans tomorrow night."

The question makes me freeze, my eyes staying glued to some papers tossed on the floor that way he can't see the panic building.

I haven't been asked out in a long time, and even though I'd love to pretend that's not what's happening now, I'm smart enough to know better. "Oh." My voice comes out funny, a little raspy, but Miles doesn't seem to notice.

"I know I talked too much the night we were all out, but I swear I'm not usually like that. I've always been a nervous talker." If that's true, I'd probably find it cute if I weren't internally freaking out right now. "And I know you usually keep to yourself, but I'd really like to get to know you better. All I'm asking for is one date."

Doing controlled breathing as I've learned in yoga, I finally pick my head up to meet his hopeful green-blue eyes. Miles really does seem like a great guy, but not somebody I can picture dating.

He's also determined, a trait I should probably admire but don't in this instance. "What's the worst that can happen? You don't like me? At least you'd get free food out of it." His humor does make me crack a smile, which he quickly notices and looks triumphant over. "One date, Stevie."

If Vickie were here, she'd push me at him or give him my number without me having a say. She's been trying to get me to go on dates since at least six months after Hunter and I separated. Then, the wounds were so fresh that any little thing would make me sob. I was a wreck. I couldn't even imagine looking at a guy at that point. It may not be easy now, but the *idea* of going out with Miles this weekend wouldn't be horrible in theory.

I have no idea why "okay" slips out of my mouth. None at all. Because Miles may be attractive and a seemingly nice guy, but I already know I'm not interested. He's younger than me, probably has a different lifestyle, and has no clue that I'm a 32-year-old-divorcee with serious emotional baggage.

My coworker beams. "Great. I can pick you up if you give me your number and text me your address."

I already regret my decision the second that charming, boyish smile tilts his mouth. The same one he'd shown off at the bar before he spent all his time talking my ear off and stealing my food.

Deep down, I tell myself this is a sign.

A good one.

One that tells me I'm letting myself heal.

Move on.

Even if it's not with Miles, it's a big step in a direction I would have never seen myself in months ago.

So, I give Miles my number and watch him walk off with a victorious look on his face even though my expression must be anything but.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The date is lackluster at best, nothing to write home about. I'm secretly glad that I didn't tell anyone I was going on it, even though the smart thing to do would've been texting Vickie in case I somehow wound up missing or in a ditch somewhere.

When Miles pulls into my driveway at almost eleven o'clock at night, I'm so relieved to be home that I practically bolt out of his car. He spent fifteen minutes talking about the car because there were a ton of custom features he apparently paid a lot of money for. Money I'm not sure how he has knowing our salary at the school, but I never brought that up. All I could think throughout the entire date was how much he'd get along with my ex-husband, and that wasn't particularly a good thing.

I silently hope he had a bad time, but when he gets out and walks me to my door like a gentleman, I nearly deflate when he says, "I had a great time tonight."

What am I supposed to say to that? *Thanks, but this won't work out in a million years.* I don't want to be rude, but I also don't want to get his hopes up or lead him on. The fact we have to work together is something I should have considered after passing him my number.

"Er, I'm glad." Internally, I slam a palm against my forehead. If he thinks that's a weird response, he doesn't tell me. Instead, his eyes go to my lips, and before I can even blink, his lips are on mine. Firm yet soft and eager for more as he tries to pry my mouth open despite my frozen body locking up with every second he doesn't pull away.

I can't think. Don't respond. He doesn't seem to care that I'm not kissing him back as his tongue traces the seam of my lips until one of his hands presses into my lower back and tugs me into his body. Only when I gasp in surprise does he slip his tongue inside to touch mine experimentally, causing a shiver of nerves to rush down my spine that gives him the wrong idea.

His hips tilt forward and something hard presses into me as he weaves his fingers into my hair and tries getting me to respond.

Stop this.

Stop him.

It's only when a dog barks from somewhere close by that we break apart. I'm startled for more than one reason, and Miles looks smug. If he thinks the flush of my skin and wide eyes are because he blew my mind, I wonder how he'd feel if I started sobbing like I desperately want to.

It's not him.

Miles isn't Hunter.

They have different lips.

Different smiles.

Different eyes.

Yet, they look at me all the same.

With cockiness.

Certainty.

Confidence.

And me? All I can think about is how the man in front of me is nothing like my husband. *Ex-husband*. He doesn't kiss the same or hold me the same or react the same way as Hunter did. He kissed me with a plan, even though our plans aren't the same. *That's* how they're similar.

I glance over at the sidewalk to see Admiral and Fletcher standing there. Staring.

Well, Admiral is wagging his tail as always, but his owner doesn't look as friendly.

Not that he usually does.

Clearing my throat, I squeak out, "Thank you for tonight. It was..." I don't want to lie. "It was good to get out of the house." Not untrue, but also not a five-star review on his behalf, not that he seems to care. So, I clear my throat again, and add, "I think it may be better if we're just friends, though. Since we work together and all."

He blinks.

Scrubs his jaw with his palm.

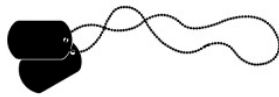
Then blinks again.

"Oh." He sounds disappointed. "Okay."

I blow out a breath and smile, but the curl of my lips feels as heavy as the weight sitting on my chest. "Goodnight, Miles."

He murmurs a "goodnight" before heading to his car. I quickly escape inside, turning off the porch light and glancing out the living room window to watch his car back out and head down the street until the taillights are officially out of view.

I also notice the man and dog walking away but refuse to wonder why they stopped there in the first place.



I haven't been worried about parent-teacher conferences because there's never anything bad to report. And that still stands true. Mostly. It's just certain people that I know I'll have to face that make my hands a little clammy than usual and my reactions a little jumpier over the silliest things.

Like when Sonia stormed into my room and made me nearly empty my bladder from all the coffee I'd downed earlier in the morning. She'd wanted to know why I hadn't told her about Miles because, apparently, everyone knew about our date from the man himself.

Not wanting to go into detail, I told her it was a spur-of-the-moment decision, and she looked as disappointed as him when I made it clear there wouldn't be a second one. Obviously, he hadn't told anyone that part.

I'm not surprised at all that the man who's always first in line to pick up his child is the same parent who's first to get a progress report on him. The good news is, after our meeting is done and he leaves, I'll be fine. I don't want to think about why I still get so nervous around the person who insisted we were okay—someone who apologized to me when he didn't need to and went out of his way to help me even though he didn't have to.

I'm straightening up my desk for the umpteenth time when a knock sounds at the open door before a large body fills the frame in the same clothes I'm used to seeing him in. Slightly stained, well worn, and molded to his body in dangerously delicious ways. I turn in my chair and quickly stand, offering a smile. I fidget with the floral blouse I put on along with my favorite pencil skirt, which looks professional yet cute according to my mother after she'd convinced me to buy it on a girl's day we'd had together.

"Hello, Mr. Miller," I greet, gesturing toward the chair I set up in front of my desk.

He doesn't move right away. "Fletcher is fine," he says before walking in and taking a seat across from me. "I'm early."

I sit after he does, flattening my blouse nervously. "That's fine. You're the first appointment anyway. And it's a force of habit to address the

parents that way. Though I won't lie, for a while, I was calling you Lieutenant Colonel in my head." The admission makes my cheeks heat, and I hope they aren't turning red as I grab Nicki's folder.

Feeling his eyes on me, his voice cuts through the silence. "I didn't think we were talking about that."

I cuss to myself, cringing at my stupidity for even bringing it up. "You're right, I just..." My shoulders drop a little as I look at him, his son's folder finally placed in front of me. "I didn't mean to make it sound like you couldn't say anything about that. I mean, it's your life. Who am I to tell you what you can talk about?"

He's quiet for a moment. "It's hard for you, though," he notes. No question about it. A simple, sure statement. Though, if memory serves, that's exactly what I told him. That I struggled. "I get it. It's not an easy lifestyle to live, no matter how long or in what way you're involved."

My nostrils twitch as I pick invisible lint off my shirt and shift in my seat. "You're right," I say quietly, clearing my throat. "Anyway, we're here about Dominic. I have a folder of a few things we can discuss and—"

"How's your friend?" he asks abruptly.

Eyes darting from the report in front of me to the man who asked the random question, I blink at his crossed, tense arms draped across his chest. Then I blink again. "Excuse me? My friend?"

"Your friend," he says slowly, as if hearing the words slower will help me understand the second time around. "The one who dropped you off the other night."

Oh.

Oh.

Miles.

I don't appreciate the roughness of his voice, or the way he felt the need to bring it up given we're here to talk about his son. With only half an hour for each meeting, it doesn't offer a lot of free time to catch up. And this certainly isn't a conversation I want to have, least of all with the man who's staring a little too intensely at me. "We're not here to talk about me," is how I reply calmly, fighting the heat from settling into my face.

A sound rises in his throat, and I can't help but notice how... unimpressed he looks. With me? I didn't even do anything wrong, so I can't see why he looks that way. "The people I choose to hang out with isn't any of your business, *Mr. Miller*. So, how about we go over Nicki's report?"

I almost think he's going to agree, be sensible, but I'm sadly mistaken. "I told you it's Fletcher. None of that Mr. Miller crap. I'm 42. Not old enough for all that bullshit formality."

I make a face to myself as I wet my thumb and start going through the papers, pulling out a small essay Nicki wrote a week ago that I felt the need to highlight. Unfortunately, now I'm beginning to rethink whether it's worth it. "For the record, I'm divorced. Which is the reason why talking about the life I used to live is hard for me. I did nothing wrong by going out, so I highly suggest you stop looking at me like that and start treating me like the grown woman I am. A woman who's simply sitting here *at her job* trying to do what she's paid to because her old life doesn't exist anymore."

The sharp edge to my voice as I deliver each word with my hazel eyes locked firmly on his dark ones has his eye twitching. "I never said you did anything wrong."

I sit back, reeling. "Then wipe the judgmental look off your face because whether you said it or not, your unjustified attitude tells a different story."

He blinks.

I blink.

Then he says, "I just think the guy is a tool, that's all. Surprised you'd go for someone like him. It's none of my business." He lifts a shoulder at his casual statement, as if saying something like that isn't a big deal.

Is Miles a tool? Maybe.

Is that any of Fletcher's business? No.

Do I want his opinion? Definitely not.

Deciding against continuing the conversation, I begin talking about the real reason we're here. "Dominic is a smart boy as I'm sure you know. He's been acing all his tests and done well on most of his homework assignments. Besides that one incident, he seems to be integrating well."

I pass him the paper, which he stares at for a few seconds before leaning forward to take it from me—those long, wide fingers wrapping around the edge before sitting back and scanning the handwriting. "The class was asked to write about somebody they admired. It could have been anybody. Family, friends, maybe a celebrity. Nicki's paper stood out to me, and I thought you'd like to read it after what you'd told me the other day."

I notice his lips pressing together as his eyes skim the paper, stopping, blinking, and then continuing. After a few minutes, he scrubs his smooth jaw with his palm and leans back in his chair. "He wrote about me?"

I nod. “Whether or not you believe he wants to be here, those words should tell you everything you need to know. He loves you, looks up to you.”

He shakes his head in disbelief as he lowers the paper, his eyes going back from the penciled words on the page to me.

When he doesn’t say anything, I give him a small smile. “I don’t know what it’s like to have children or what your situation is with your family. All I do know is that your son is happy to be with you, so you shouldn’t worry about him being otherwise. Just spend time with him. That seems to be enough for Nicki.”

“Why do you call him that?” he asks, something off about his tone. It’s curious and fishing, his gaze scoping out my face as I take in the question.

The answer is simple. “Because that’s what he wants to be called.”

All he does is dip his chin, his jaw ticking as he remains silent. His eyes go back to the paper he’s holding, the edges wrinkling under his grasp.

“Can I keep this?”

I nod, even though he isn’t looking. “It’s yours to do whatever you want with. Frame it, put it on the fridge. Whatever.”

The telltale sign of a long, inhaled breath has his shoulders loosening from there otherwise tense stature they were in as he exhales. “Thank you.”

I hum. “You’re welcome.”

When he picks his head up, the brown tone of his eyes is softer than before as they meet mine, like this was exactly what he needed today.

After finishing up the rest of the report I want to highlight, I close my folder and put it in the ‘done’ pile before standing as he does. Part of me hopes he’ll just tip his head as usual and leave, but he chooses to do the opposite.

Folding the piece of paper his son wrote, he pulls out his wallet and tucks it inside, sliding it into the back pocket of his jeans. “For the record, I didn’t mean to insinuate you were doing something you shouldn’t have been before.”

This again. I sigh internally, not willing to let it go so quickly. “I’m sure you’ve seen, or even done, far worse than go on a date with somebody you knew wasn’t right for you.”

I’ve heard the horror stories surrounding military men and women, especially when they’re deployed. Sometimes things happen—infidelity being the biggest threat against a serious, long-distance relationship. I’d be

lying if I said I didn't have my worries when Hunter and I were still married and thousands of miles apart from each other. But I believed him when he told me he'd never cheated. After all the fighting, the horrible things we'd said back and forth toward the end, I still took his word with the same seriousness as I did since the day we exchanged vows.

Licking my lips, I look away and add, "I already feel bad enough trying to move on, so I'd appreciate it if you kept your opinions to yourself instead of making me feel worse about simply trying to live my life again."

He's silent, but those eyes...

They're heavy and pinned to my face when I dare another peek, but I don't hold his gaze because then he'd see how much his silent accusation hurt my feelings. I know it shouldn't, that this man has no hold over me, but it doesn't stop the sting buried in my chest.

His eyes burn, willing me to look at him.

But I don't.

And when he realizes I'm not going to, he decides to leave without another word.

CHAPTER NINE

“If you could be any kind of fruit, which one would you be?” one of my students asks in the middle of my lesson.

I try not to show my amusement over such a random question, but it’s hard when something like that is asked in the middle of solving math problems. What’s even more challenging is not to laugh when other students start answering with random pieces of fruit like oranges, bananas, apples, and dragon fruit—the little boy who’d said it proceeded to roar and pretend to spit fire. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t even know what dragon fruit is. What nearly made me crack my calm demeanor was when Connor said he’d be a blackberry and when a few kids looked at him and asked why, he’d simply pointed to his dark skin and said, “Duh,” with a roll of his eyes.

If Vickie were here, she’d lose it.

Taking a few deep breaths, I clear my throat and set the textbook I’m using down on the corner of my desk. “How about we save the questions for our free period,” I suggest lightly.

They all groan. “You have to answer!” one of the girls tells me.

A bunch of the others nod in agreement.

It’s not the weirdest question I’ve been asked, so I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to indulge in their inquiry. “Fine, but after I answer, then it’s back to work. We need more help on our division before we start long division in a few weeks.”

More groans.

I laugh to myself. “I’ve never thought about this before, but I guess I’d have to go with a peach.”

“Why?” That comes from the very person who asked the question.

“Because.”

Another student asks, “But why?”

I sigh. “They’re my favorite,” I answer, not lying. My mom used to make them into everything when I was little—pies, jams, drinks. All because she knew how much I loved them. Whenever they were in season, I think my parents would buy out the store.

I clap my hands. “Enough questions. Back to work.”

“But—”

“Nope.”

“Aw, c’mon,” more whine.

Ignoring them, I grab my textbook and pick up where I left off with a smile on my face when I hear a few grumbles from behind me as I write a new problem on the whiteboard.



It’s usually never a good sign when the principal shows up at the door of your classroom at the end of the day, even if she’s smiling. I try not to overthink it as I finish cleaning up my desk.

“May I have a word before you leave?” she asks, still smiling, but her voice has the firm I-need-to-have-a-serious-talk with you tone that I’ve only ever heard from my mother before.

I smile through the nerves. “Of course.”

She walks in and closes the door, making the nerves settle into my stomach. I’m not sure what this could be about. There haven’t been any issues that I’ve seen with any of my students. The aide who works with Nicki says he’s been an angel, and I’ve gotten all my reports in on time—before the deadline, even.

“I wanted to talk to you about something I’ve been hearing,” she begins, smile slowly disappearing as seriousness takes over. “I’ll start by saying that there’s nothing against school policy that says you can’t date a coworker—”

Internally, I lock up.

Miles.

This is about *Miles*.

My hands tighten in my lap as she continues. “—but it can be a tight rope to walk if things go awry. Now, I try not paying much attention to gossip, I’ve certainly heard my fair share of false rumors over the years, but I do want to give you a word of warning.”

It’s hard to swallow as I nod slowly, afraid of what she’s going to advise me about. I’ve always liked her since the day she shook my hand and welcomed me to the team. In a way, she really did remind me of my mother. Firm, serious, and professional. Always wanting what’s best for the people she’s in charge of.

“You’re a very bright woman, Stevie, and I think it’d be best if you divided your work life from your personal one. I’ve seen time and time again when the two merged, and...well, it doesn’t usually end very well for those involved. It could be worse, I suppose. It could be a parent. While that also isn’t against school policy, I’d advise heavily against that too, for future reference. We should always put our students’ wellbeing first, and that can be hard to do when personal feelings enter the equation.”

I choke out an “Okay.” Then I blink, realizing that I need to say more to clear whatever gives her that look in her eye. “For the record, ma’am, I’m not seeing anyone. I went out with Miles a couple of times, sure, but once was with a group of coworkers. It’s hardly something I plan on making a habit of. I’m not...” She doesn’t need to hear my sordid past. “I’m not looking for anything. I’d rather focus on my job.”

The answer seems to appease her, melting the motherly expression as her bright smile comes back. “I’m glad to hear that. From what I’ve seen, your class is doing well. No more incidents with Mr. Miller?”

I don’t let myself think about why my brain instantly pictures Fletcher instead of Dominic. Brushing it off, I shake my head. “He’s been fine. Settling well, as far as I can see.”

“I’m glad to hear that too. Well, I’ll let you go. I’m sure you have more exciting things to do than be here talking to me.”

I manage to laugh a little, thinking about the rain gutters that I plan to clean when I get home with the ladder Bex let me borrow. The nice middle-aged man who comes over every few weeks to take care of my lawn says he could do it if I wanted for no extra charge. I know the only reason he offers is because he’s flirting with me, so the last thing I want to do is give him the wrong impression by agreeing.

“Oh yeah,” I muse, snickering. “I better get going to enjoy the nice weather.”

That’s how, two hours later, I end up on the very top of a ladder despite my absolute fear of heights, terrified of moving and clinging to the rain gutter that I’ve barely even cleaned yet. I didn’t realize how much stuff was crammed inside, including things I definitely should have put on gloves to touch.

I hear a car door close, voices, some laughter from a little way away, and try tuning that out and doing the job. Although, I’m a little irritated with myself for not just letting Mike, the lawncare guy, do this for me.

I'm teetering as I grab a fistful of leaves and toss it down to rake up later when I hear, "Are you *crazy*?"

I don't expect the low growl to be so close, causing me to lose my balance and nearly fall to my death. Or at least gain a broken arm. I quickly catch myself on the edge of the gutter, hissing when I feel a sharp pain across my palm, followed by instant blood dripping down the skin.

"Shit," I curse, shakily retracting my hand and seeing the slice across the palm. Quickly closing it, I carefully look down and see Fletcher looking up angrily at me. "You scared me," I accuse, keeping pressure on my hand and wondering how the hell I'm going to get down.

"You shouldn't even be up there."

"I was cleaning the gutters."

"I know what you were doing."

Tears well in my eyes over the pain from my hand and the fear rising higher and higher as I try to keep my balance. "I cut my hand," I tell him, hearing the quiver in my voice.

From below, I hear a quiet curse. "Can you get down?"

I sniff, fighting back tears. "I think so."

I'm surprised when I take each step carefully, knowing I have no other choice unless he's going to call the fire department, which would be embarrassing. I'm even more surprised when I hear his encouraging "there you go," and "you're almost there," and "a few more steps," before my feet eventually meet the soft grass again.

Instantly, I'm turned, the hand balled up and covered in blood being yanked away from me and carefully opened by the man with rough callused yet gentle hands as he examines the wound. He whistles. "I don't think you'll need stitches, but it may need glue."

I swallow. "Glue?"

He makes a humming noise in confirmation. "Come on. You need to wash that out, so it doesn't get infected. Who knows what's up there." The last sentence is rough, irritated, and the kindness he showed me suddenly disappears when he follows me into the house and adds, "You shouldn't have been doing that by yourself. The ladder wasn't even level. Did you know that? It could have fallen at any time."

Not appreciating his tone, I focus on washing my hand without making a huge, bloody mess or crying even though it stings.

A bulky body comes up beside me, an arm brushing my shoulder, as he grabs the dish soap. "You need to wash it thoroughly." He pauses. "It's going to hurt like a bitch."

Knowing he's right, I hold out my hand and pinch my eyes closed when he dribbles some of the soap onto the cut and starts softly rubbing it in until it does its job.

It doesn't stop me from hissing when it begins burning.

"Told you it'd hurt," he murmurs, tugging my hand back under the water and helping me rinse it like I'm incapable. For some reason, I let him. I watch as he adjusts the water and washes the cut and grabs a dish towel that's hanging from the oven handle before coming back over and drying off my hand.

After a few moments, he examines the cut again and nods. "It's not as bad as I thought, but we'll need to wrap it. It'll be best if you keep it that way for a few days to give the skin time to start healing."

"Do you even know what you're talking about?" I blurt, wincing when his eyes meet mine with a brow arched on his forehead.

He makes another rough sound. "I've seen my share of battle wounds on base and off," is what he says. "Where's your first aid kit?"

I point under the sink, watching as he squats down. I try not to stare too long at the fabric that hugs his impressive ass as he gets what he needs before he stands and gestures to the stool by the counter. Not saying a word, I sit down and watch him go through the kit before taking out a few supplies.

He does know what he's doing and looks perfectly comfortable as he opens up a few packages.

So, I say, "I'm sorry for what I said."

"It's fine."

It's not, but I let it go. "I didn't think it'd be this hard." This time, he pauses, unraveling the wrap to look at me through his lashes. I bite my lip. "Cleaning the gutters, I mean."

And having a man in my house and taking care of me, but I choose not to add that.

Going back to what he was doing, Fletcher says, "It's not something you should do on your own. At the very least, you need somebody there to spot you."

I know he's right, but... "I don't have anyone. I mean, my parents would have come, but they're busy. Dad probably would have done it himself in a heartbeat if I asked him to, but I wanted to do it myself. This house is my responsibility."

"You could have been hurt worse," he points out in that gravelly tone. "How would your parents feel then because you chose to be independent to a fault?"

My eye twitches. "I don't think there's anything wrong with being independent."

He doesn't look up, only focuses on how he applies the antiseptic and wrap to my hand as carefully as possible before replying. "There isn't. But everybody needs help once in a while, and there's nothing wrong with that. Don't be so stubborn. I'm sure your family would have come and helped you this weekend."

There's a pause.

"Or you could have asked me."

Him? "Why would I do that?"

His hands pause on mine for a brief moment before continuing to wrap it. "Because I'm right across the street. If you didn't want to bother your parents, you could have come knocked. I've cleaned gutters before. I know how to set up a ladder right."

I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm doing the best I can. And if you're always going to judge me for it, then now you know why I didn't think, 'You know what would be fun? Inviting Lieutenant Colonel Miller over so he could grumble under his breath about what he doesn't like about me.'" I roll my eyes and look away. "I think I'll pass, but thanks for the suggestion."

There's no doubt his eyes are on me, but I refuse to meet them. Silence passes for a long stretch of time as he finishes dressing my wound. It's only after he throws out the wrappers and puts the kit away when he says, "I'm retired now. And it's not that I don't like you."

I bite the inside of my cheek.

"I don't like what you do."

I blink, finally acknowledging the way he stares unapologetically at me. "Excuse me?"

He lifts a single shoulder. "You could have hurt yourself badly. More than a cut. I'm sure if your parents knew what you were doing, they'd say the same exact thing."

I'm about to reply, to argue when I decide to close my parted lips and glance down at my wrapped palm. He's not wrong, so what's the point in arguing with him about it?

He shifts, his feet covered in the same work boots that I always see him in. Same jeans and T-shirt combo, too, except this time there's an unbuttoned long sleeve blue plaid shirt over top of it that makes his brown eyes stand out. There's a stain on the tee and some wear on the denim, and I find myself comparing him to the only other style I'm used to seeing on a man.

Unlike Hunter, Fletcher doesn't seem to mind getting dirty or having flawless clothes, or re-wearing things more than a couple of times. Once, I bought a dress at a thrift store when I was out with Vickie, and my ex-husband told me I should have taken his credit card and got something new instead of scouring other people's closets. His mother had laughed, my best friend hissed at him, and I'd simply nodded because I didn't know what else to do.

I blow out a heavy breath, catching the interest of the man still standing in the middle of my kitchen. "Pretty big sigh for someone so little," he comments.

Rubbing my lips together, I offer a limp shrug. "Just thinking."

He doesn't press or seem like he wants to. Instead, he changes the subject. "I'll clean your gutters, but it'll have to wait a few more days."

"You don't have—"

"I'm aware."

"Really..."

"I don't do things that I don't want to."

Well...okay then. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to that, so I keep quiet.

He looks around, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I should get going."

I nod slowly then remember my manners after a few awkward moments of silence. "Thank you for helping me with my hand."

His chin dip is back, not offering me any words with it.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I stand up and walk him to the door. I hear his heavy steps behind me, turning only when I open the door and hold it open.

He leaves saying, "Don't do anything else that you shouldn't on your own."

My teeth grind.
I don't make any promises.

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CHAPTER TEN

That weekend, I'm grading papers at my kitchen table when my phone buzzes once with a message somewhere underneath the mess I have scattered in front of me. I search until I find it and glance at the screen, blinking a few times before letting out a short, startled breath.

Heart beating a little faster, I scan over the number a few more times to make sure I'm seeing it right.

It took a little over a year before I'd deleted Hunter's contact info. It was at least fourteen months following our separation before Vickie had said, *"What are you keeping it for? Are you waiting for him to change his mind? You're better than that, bitch."*

And I was.

Am.

But that doesn't mean I've forgotten the number that used to send me sweet texts and funny pictures or call me to check in and say he missed hearing my voice. How could I when I spent so many years of my life with him?

602-545-0102: Hey, Smalls

The phone tumbles from my hand onto the table, where I wince at the loud sound it makes when it comes into contact with the wood. I keep it there, the message still front and center, as I stare in disbelief like someone sent me real-life pictures of aliens or something.

Smalls. It wasn't an original nickname, but one I weirdly liked. I was short, especially compared to his 6'2". People would always remark on our height difference whenever we were out. Random strangers at stores, some of our family, a few men on base when I lived with him at Fort Drum.

I seem to let shock freeze me from making any type of decision. Do I respond back? Not? Should I call Vickie and ask for her opinion? I know what she'll say.

Fuck him.

That's what she said right before I'd deleted his number from my phone, and I'd asked, *"What if he calls?"* I'd had multiple what-if scenarios in my head. I was still his emergency contact on all his forms—something that

made his mother a little coo-coo when she found out—and was worried I’d miss something from him if anything bad happened.

But Vickie, my dearest, most honest friend, had given me a firm look and said, “*Fuck him. Not literally. Figuratively fuck him and his problems. They’re not yours anymore.*”

She’d been right, so she watched me go to my contacts and delete his name because she knew I’d probably chicken out otherwise if I put it off. It ripped out part of my soul, but I’d done it. If she had her way, I would have blocked his number too. But I didn’t have that in me.

Now, what the hell do I do? Mom would basically tell me the same thing as Vickie, but nicer. Dad would grumble and not really give his opinion because even though he liked Hunter to a degree, he definitely wasn’t his fan when the divorce papers came. I was always daddy’s little girl, so anyone who hurt me was immediately on his shit list, with Hunter on the top of it.

I’m about to pick up my phone and type out a response out of weakness before I hear something rattling outside, followed by a single *thump* against the house. Standing hesitantly, I walk over to the window and lift the curtains to figure out what’s happening when I see a ladder.

A ladder that looks way too nice to be Bex’s since hers was covered in rust and dents compared to the shiny, new looking one currently being climbed by the man who I’ve become accustomed to seeing across the street. I still wave, smile, and say hi, and he’ll usually lift a hand, tip his head, or grumble a hello in response. But it’s usually Nicki who greets me with enthusiasm or their dog that barks with the same amount of energy as the youngest Miller that always makes me smile.

Walking outside, I cross my arms at the slightly chillier weather and glance up at the man currently cleaning my rain gutters. Since it’s obvious what he’s doing, I ask, “Where’s Nicki?”

He doesn’t even pause. “At his mom’s.”

Oh.

He adds, “It’s her weekend.”

So that means... “Oh,” I say aloud this time, wincing at my weird tone.

I think he mutters something, but I’m not sure. It’s a few heartbeats later when he says, “I know what divorce is like, too.” He looks down, not even looking nervous at the height. “You look pale.”

How he could tell that from up there is beyond me.

“Is your hand bothering you?”

Almost forgetting about it, I glance down at the dark pink scab along my palm. I’d taken the wrappings off yesterday. It’s still tender and hurts to use, but it’s tolerable. “It’s fine.” I glance at the door and think about the text.

Lips twitching, I tell him, “I heard from someone unexpected, that’s all.”

I think he does that chin nod thing, but I’m not sure. He turns back to the gutter and keeps cleaning it out. “Hate when that happens,” is what he tells me.

That’s it. Doesn’t pry. Doesn’t seem like he’s that interested in who might have reached out, which makes me feel a little bad that I want to know the deal with his wife. Or ex-wife, I guess. But I know it’s none of my business, so I force myself to let it go.

I’m about to go inside for some warmth after we fall to a long period of silence when Fletcher speaks again. “Nicki told me that he aced his social studies quiz.”

He wants to talk about his son’s grades?

Wait.

I smile when I realize what he called him, and suddenly the minor breeze doesn’t bother me so much anymore. “He did. I notice history is his strongest subject.”

“He used to always ask me to read to him before bed when he was little,” my neighbor comments. “And he’d always choose some random historical biography. Once, I’d read him an entire book on George Washington. You’d think it’d make him fall asleep faster, but he always begged me for more when I told him I’d read enough.”

I can’t help but laugh. “I think that’s cute, and it’s clearly helped him as he progresses with school. Imagine how much he’ll participate when we hit the Revolutionary War.”

Whatever I said brings pause to the man on the ladder. “*Is* he participating?” His question is delivered with surprising interest, more interest than he expresses in most things, which I think is sort of sweet. It’s obvious he loves Dominic. I also know based on the notes from his previous teacher that Nicki had been having a far harder time at that district—acting out, staying nearly silent in class, sometimes demanding to go home if something happened that changed his routine.

“Some days more than others,” I admit. We’d talked about his participation briefly during the parent-teacher conference, but there’d still

been a lot of tension between us so maybe he wasn't really focusing.

"Has he been...?" His words fade, and I know there's worry mixed into them even though his tone doesn't reflect it.

My answer is honest. "If there were problems, I'd let you know." A strong gust of wind smacks into me, and I shiver as I hug myself a little tighter. Even though it's not strong enough to move the ladder or Fletcher and all that muscle on his body, I can't help but worry. "I'll be right back. I'm going to put a jacket on."

If he answers, I don't stay to listen. It only takes me a minute or so before I'm covered, zipped, and back outside. My neighbor is climbing down as I go back to where I stood, and I watch as he moves the ladder over to work on a new section.

"Thank you for doing this."

He glances over, eyeing the bright red jacket I bought myself for my birthday last year. It's wool and warm and as bright as my personality, according to my mother. I think it was a compliment, but sometimes it's hard to tell with her.

After he peels his eyes away, he starts climbing the ladder again. Halfway up, he says, "You don't need to stand out here. It's cold."

It's not that cold, but it never takes much for me to be freezing. "I seem to recall somebody telling me not that long ago that it was stupid to do things like this alone. I'm spotting you in case you fall."

If I look hard enough, I'd see the tiniest ghost of a smile tilting those otherwise flat, unreadable lips. I think he may even be chuckling because we both know he'd crush me if I tried catching him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

September comes and goes, and then most of October. It'll be Halloween in a matter of weeks, and the school is already decorated with black and orange banners, paper pumpkins, fake spiderwebs, and even hay bales outside the main entrances.

It makes me think about the times I'd taken Hunter's nieces trick or treating and watched them dance around in their costumes going door to door. They always had the time of their lives collecting as much candy as possible, even giving me some which I would have never done as a child. Toward the end of my marriage, it'd gotten harder to go with them even though it'd become a tradition. Seeing them hold hands and skip down the sidewalks and demand pictures while they posed together in their outfits always made me think about my future kids.

The ones I'd brought up on more than one occasion to Hunter without any luck of the conversation going anywhere. There'd been two times when I thought my dream of becoming a mother would become a reality when my period had been late. Two times when hope fluttered in my stomach and danced in my ribcage until I'd taken multiple tests and gotten negative results, then a period in the days following as if Mother Nature was taunting me.

Stress. That's what my doctor had told me caused the late menstruation. And even though I'd told her I hadn't been...

I lied.

The year before Hunter and I ended things, I'd told the girls I couldn't take them. It wasn't like they didn't have a ton of other people to go with them. Their mother, Hunter's sister Samantha, was always there. And on the Halloweens that Sam's husband Darren wasn't on duty as a sheriff's deputy, he'd be there too. Plus, they had Hunter's and Sam's mom, my mother-in-law Martha who went along to snap pictures and "ooh" and "aww" at whatever it is they did or got.

I never minded being a tagalong.

Until I did.

I haven't had this heavy, pitiful feeling sitting on my chest in a long time. When I split with Hunter, I knew I couldn't keep thinking about it.

Being a mom. Because there were more important things to focus on. Healing. Loving myself again. *Finding* myself.

I'm not sure why it's back now. The desire for motherhood and affection isn't quite as strong, but still there. A year ago, Vickie had told me if I really wanted to be a mom I could adopt. It'd been an option I considered, but not one I'd ever thought too seriously about. Especially not alone. She also told me I could have a random one-night stand with someone without protection and hope for the best.

She laughed when I gave her a horrified look, then laughed even harder when I gave her the middle finger.

I blame Hunter's out-of-the-blue text message for bringing up thoughts I'd let myself forget about for a while. I never texted him back because by the time I'd remembered, almost two days had gone by. Then I thought it'd be weird to reply, so I let it slip my mind again.

Pair that with the kids talking about their Halloween plans with family. It's really no surprise that I'd suddenly be envious and moody about where I am in life.

Vickie has no problem bringing up my sour mood when we go out for drinks on the weekend. I should have told her I had papers to grade, but she probably still would have dragged me out by my hair. "You need to loosen up and get that look off your face, or you'll scare off all the men."

I've been nursing a margarita for the past thirty minutes, mostly staring at the liquid in my glass while half paying attention to Vickie's work drama. Something about her new boss being hot and all the women she works with going out of their way to get his attention.

"Who says I want their attention anyway?" I ask, sipping my drink.

She rolls her eyes. "Maybe you don't, but *I* do, and they won't come over if one of the girls at the table looks like somebody just ran over her dog and then set her house on fire."

I gape.

She shrugs.

Then I say, "Why don't you just go after your boss if you want a man that badly?"

She throws a balled-up cocktail napkin at my head, making me laugh and dodge it. "Shut up. Unlike you, I don't date people I work with."

I groan, thinking about the kiss I'd shared with Miles before cringing. "One time."

“One time more than me,” she chirps, grinning when I shoot her a look. “And I don’t necessarily *want* a man. I just want some *fun*. We can’t all be hopeless romantics like you. If I have random flings and amazing orgasms for the rest of my life, I’ll have lived a good one.”

I swear the table of men closest to us perk up and glance over in our direction, clearly too interested in Vickie’s proclamation to be scared away by whatever face I’m making.

“I’m not a hopeless romantic.”

She eyes me skeptically.

“Marrying my high school sweetheart doesn’t mean I’m a hopeless romantic,” I argue with an edge to my tone that I’ll probably feel bad about later.

It just means I’m an idiot.

I know better than to add that part.

My hands gesture around us. “And look where that got me. Sitting in a bar being moody when I’d rather be at home.”

“You’d still be moody. You’d just be alone, and where’s the fun in that when I can press your buttons and feed you greasy food and buy you as much alcohol as you want here?”

Considering my clothes are already tight, I don’t need to be indulging in any more greasy food than I already have. Thankfully, I meal prep twice a week to make sure I have healthier options premade that I can quickly heat up or take with me to work, so I’m not ordering delivery all the time like I used to. I’d known how to cook the basics, but Hunter had far better kitchen skills than me and I never argued when he was around to make dinner. Instead, I always poured a glass of wine and watched him.

Since, I’ve learned plenty of easy recipes that are healthy, filling, and most importantly, cheap.

“Maybe I’m just not good company tonight,” I say with a sigh, grabbing my purse and tossing some money on the table. “I’m sorry, Vick, but I think I’m just going to head home.”

She frowns. “I thought we were having a girls’ night? We haven’t seen each other since game night because we’ve both been busy.”

“We can plan something soon, okay? But I want you to have fun, and me sitting around moping for no good reason isn’t exactly thrilling for either of us. Plus—” I subtly eye the cute blond giving her the eyes. “—there’s a

very attractive guy on your right. Blond, dimpled smile, and he's been looking at you for the past few minutes. You should go say hello."

Nibbling her lip, she casually looks over her shoulder and notices who I'm talking about, then turns back at me. "He *is* cute, huh?"

I nod. "Very."

"And you'll be okay?" she asks, worry in her tone this time.

I smile. "I'll be fine. I've been wanting to catch up on some shows anyway. Go have fun and text me when you're home safe."

She wiggles her eyebrows. "*If* I go home."

Yeah, she'd be fine.

I give her a hug, wave her goodbye, and walk to my car parked on the furthest end of the parking lot since there weren't any better spots available by the time I'd gotten here. I was fifteen minutes late, and apparently everyone else wanted to let loose like Vickie and me.

I start digging through my bag to grab my keys when I hear, "Hey, baby." Scrunching my face at the unfamiliar voice, I look around until I see a man pushing off the side of the bar with a cigarette in his hand and a plume of smoke around him.

I don't greet him back. Instead, I fist my keys, regretting not having them in my hand already since my trusty mini mace is chained onto it along with a mini flashlight and some random things given to me over the years by family and friends.

"You too good to talk to me?" the stranger asks, his voice irritated and words slightly slurred.

I'm only a few feet from my car, but I'm afraid to turn my back on the man approaching me. "Sorry, I'm just in a bit of a rush."

If Vickie were here, she'd tell me I was stupid for apologizing to someone like him. Then I'd get a lecture on how women don't owe men anything, least of all apologies. That is, after she'd tell the man to fuck off before guiding us away. It's a force of habit, though. When I was little, my mom would get irritated with me for how many times I would apologize. Which only made me do it more by default. And with Hunter? Sometimes I think I said, 'I'm sorry' more than, 'I love you'.

"Pretty girl like you shouldn't be at a bar like this alone, sweetie," the man says, stopping a couple feet away with a slimy look on his face.

Sweetie. I probably make a face. I offer him a tight smile. "I'm not alone, actually."

It's a stupid thing to say since I'm the only one out here. He looks around slowly, giving me time to inch toward my car. When he glances back at me, his brows arch. "I don't see anyone else."

Then he reaches for me.

And I react.

Taking my mace out, I push the button as I aim it at his face. I don't even think about it before watching him yell and close his eyes as the spray hits him in both. His hand flails, smacking me in the face, whether by accident or not, I'm not sure before he stumbles back and clenches his eyes.

I try ignoring my stinging cheek that he hit and bolt to my car, unlocking it and sliding in as quickly as I can before locking myself inside. The man is still stumbling around, cursing, and saying other things I can't really understand when I start the car and quickly drive away.

I don't look back as I drive home, trying to remember my even breaths as I fight off tears from adrenaline.

I just maced somebody.

Oh my God.

I'm not quite sure how I get back to the house. I just sort of drove on autopilot, not really paying attention the whole way here. But all of a sudden, I'm sitting in my driveway, car parked, with my hands gripping the steering wheel and staring at my home with watery eyes.

Five minutes pass.

Maybe ten.

That's when I hear the knock on the window. I jump a little before looking over with wide eyes and see two different pairs on me through the glass. Two similar yet different gazes. Then I see the wagging tail next to the smaller person watching me.

Fletcher, Dominic, and Admiral.

From outside, I can hear Fletcher say, "Why don't you take Admiral home, buddy. You can play video games until I get back. Okay?"

Nicki shrugs, looks from me to his father, then back at me, before taking Admiral's leash and leading the large dog home.

Fletcher reaches for the door, gives me a look with his brows arched like he's asking for permission before the door cracks open. I don't remember unlocking it, but suddenly there's a body squatting down next to me.

"Stevie?"

Stevie. I think that's the first time I've heard him say my name.

“What’s wrong?”

My mouth is dry.

My heart is still hammering a little.

I think about the events that unfolded.

Then, I blurt, “I think I committed a crime.”



“Nicki is at home,” I remind the man filling a kettle that Mom bought me with water and putting it on the stove. “You don’t need to stay.”

I told him I was fine after he coaxed me out of my car and asked me to tell him what exactly had happened. His eyes instantly went to my cheek, and a dark, shadowed expression eclipsed his face.

“Unless you’re going to tell me who did *that*,” he says ‘that’ with a grim tone, and I know even with his back to me, he’s referring to my slightly sore cheek, “then I think I should stay for a little longer. Nicki will be fine.”

I press my lips together.

He turns the front burner on and places the kettle onto it, then walks over to my fridge, opens the small freezer on top, and digs through a few things before grabbing a bag of green beans. After wrapping it in a dish towel, he passes it to me, and I put it on my cheek without him bossing me.

“Is it...a boyfriend?” His eyes are hard as he stares at where my hand is holding the frozen vegetables. “You can tell me, and I’ll help.”

Boyfriend? “No. It’s... I already told you that I’m not seeing Miles.”

One of his brows arches as if he isn’t sure whether to believe me. “Tell me what happened,” he commands, arms crossing over his chest.

So, I do. It doesn’t take very long, and I make sure to tell him that the man probably didn’t mean to hit me but was just trying to catch his balance. Whatever is going through Fletcher’s mind isn’t obvious to me because the look on his face barely changes.

“Stop making excuses for a man who was drunk and pushing boundaries he shouldn’t have been,” he finally tells me, standing a little straighter.

“Regardless of why he hit you, he still laid his hands on you, which he should have never done. Got me?”

Is that the voice he uses on the men on base? I give him a single nod.

“What you did was self-defense,” he informs me, voice a smidge lighter. I know he’s talking about my concern that I assaulted a man and then ran from the scene. The last thing I need is police showing up at my doorstep and being the neighborhood’s latest hot gossip. It wouldn’t be hard to find out where I live since I have no garage to park my bright green car in. “Anyone with half a brain would see it that way.”

I cringe since *I* hadn’t.

He sighs. “I didn’t mean you.”

I lift a shoulder.

“Next time, make your friend walk you out that way you’re not alone.”

“Then she would have been alone!”

“You could have dropped her off at the door or had somebody who worked at the bar walk you out for safety.”

Once again, he’s telling me I was stupid.

Which, sure. I should have been more cautious. But the last thing I need is for him to keep hounding me about things he doesn’t like me doing.

“I’m not one of your soldiers,” I inform him coolly, grinding my teeth. “You can’t keep talking to me like that.”

“Like what? With reason?”

My nostrils flare. “Like you’re the boss of me. Like I’m some sort of idiot. I don’t appreciate it. Nobody likes being condescended, so get rid of the army voice and start acting a little nicer. This isn’t Fort Drum, and I’m not one of the grunts you’re trying to break in to fit whatever the hell mold you want them to.”

He doesn’t say anything.

But his eyes do narrow.

“You should go,” I murmur.

His sigh is brief but heavy. “I’m not trying to—”

“Please?” I cut him off. “I’m tired.”

When I meet his eyes again, he blinks. Just once, probably replaying the pathetic sound of my voice before he dips his chin. “If that’s what you want, Peaches.”

Peaches?

I don’t even get to really think about the random nickname before he’s gone, the door shutting behind him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A week goes by, and I force myself to take a break from going through bills, grading schoolwork, and cleaning my neglected house, to dump two huge bags of variety pack candy into the biggest bowl I own and flick my porch light on right before trick or treating starts.

I didn't always help my parents pass out candy at Mom's house when I moved back home with her after my split with Hunter. She'd always ask but never push if I decided to do something else. Usually, stay in my room and mope until I decided it was time for bed.

Since it's my first Halloween at the house, I want to make new traditions. Ones that won't make me into some sad cat woman in training. And if that means passing out candy to cute kids in costumes for an hour or two, then I'd do it with a smile. It's not exactly a hardship, especially knowing there's a chance I'll see some of my own students who've been talking about today for the last month.

The first few knocks come early on. I admire the costumes being worn by the trick or treaters, wave at the parents, and wish everyone a good night. If it were slightly warmer, I'd pull a chair outside, and people watch. An hour in, the candy bowl is half empty, the kids showing up are becoming fewer and fewer as the air gets chillier and sky gets darker, and I'm about to call it a night and overindulge on some of the leftover chocolate while watching a movie when another knock comes.

When I pull it open, I see a familiar little face with a mixture of blondish-brown hair and brown eyes looking up at me. Then I see the green digital camo he's wearing.

"Trick or treat," Nicki says, opening a bag and holding it out. "Do you like my costume?"

The smile is genuine because I do like it, even though I'm sure the eyes watching from the walkway a few feet behind expect otherwise. "I love it, Nicki. You make a very handsome soldier."

He shakes his head and taps the name attached, then a few other noticeable patches that I recognize from my past. "My dad had it custom made just for me and gave me everything from his to make it more real."

My lips twitch. "I'm so sorry, *Lieutenant Colonel*. Forgive me?"

Dominic says, "You're supposed to salute me, but since you probably don't know how that works, I'll let it slide without making you do pushups and stuff."

A surprised, bubbled laugh comes from me as a deep sigh sounds from the other adult nearby. "Dominic," his father murmurs.

His son doesn't seem apologetic. "It's true, though."

I nod, dropping some candy into his bag. It's more than most kids got, but after he leaves, I'll be turning the light off, so I don't have too much candy around to snack on. "You're right, Nicki. I should have saluted."

"You knew?"

Another nod from me.

"Was your dad in the military too?"

My lips twitch. "No."

"A friend?"

Fletcher clears his throat. "Nicki, it's rude to pry into people's lives."

The well-dressed mini commanding officer in front of me turns to his father. "You said it was good to make conversation with people to get to know them better. Which is it? 'Cause I can't do both."

It's tough not to smile over that, but I manage. "I do have a friend in the military. Army. I don't know a whole lot about the policies and procedures, but I know some stuff because of him. The basics."

My student turns back to me, not quite looking me in the eye but not totally avoiding my general direction either. "Oh. That's cool."

Simply stated, like his father.

"It is," I agree. Sort of.

"He's probably not as cool as my dad, though," he decides on, nodding in agreement with himself.

I snicker this time.

Fletcher sighs loudly. "Nicki..."

I wave it off. "It's fine. My friend—" The word comes out a little choppy, probably not believable to Fletcher but passable to the little boy whose eyes are still on me in full attention. "—and I don't talk that much, so I suppose your dad is probably cooler. He helped me clean my rain gutters, after all."

"And your friend never did?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

"Does your friend have a dog?"

Another head shake. Hunter with a dog? Been there, tried that. “No.”

“Wow,” Nicki breathes like he really can’t believe it. He looks over his shoulder at his father. “Did you hear that, Dad? Ms. Foster’s friend is lame.”

The snort comes almost instantly, but it turns into a choking sound because I try stopping it.

Fletcher palms his face and shakes his head.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, he is pretty lame.” For a lot of reasons that this ten-year-old doesn’t need to hear about.

Or his father, for that matter.

“Come on, Dominic,” his father finally calls, extending out a hand. “We need to get home to let Admiral out, then I’ll check your candy.”

“Have a good night,” I tell them as Nicki walks back to his father.

There’s a low, “Good night,” from the oldest of them that I almost miss because it’s spoken so quietly.

It’s Nicki that puts a smile back onto my face when he calls out, “We’ll work on your salute and stuff some other time.”

His father cusses.

I laugh to myself.

Then eat my weight in chocolate the rest of the night without feeling that bad about it.



The next day starts out like any other. My students all look tired to some degree in the morning and wake up as the day goes on. Half-lidded eyes watch me as I go through my lessons. Sometimes, a hand or two will go up in questions or volunteer to answer something I ask. Then, after lunch and recess, everyone seems energized and ready to go.

But by the middle of the afternoon, something changes in Dominic. His usual relaxed demeanor deteriorates as he chaotically searches his pockets, panic seeping deeper and deeper into his facial expression until he’s standing in the middle of my lesson until his chair falls backward.

“Nicki?”

“It’s gone!”

“What is?”

His peers all watch as he starts tugging at his pockets and then searching through his things, tearing apart his space until there's a mess of papers, folders, and other things everywhere.

"Nicki—"

"My ribbon is *gone*!" His voice is much louder, causing a few students to widen their eyes as they look between him and me like I'm about to yell.

I set my book down and walk over to him calmly. "I'm sure it's somewhere around here. We can all help you look during—"

"No. Now."

That gets a few murmurs from the people around us.

I sigh. "Dominic, I can't have you disrupting my lesson. We're a little behind already, so I need you to focus. I promise you that we'll help you look soon for your ribbon."

He keeps shaking his head, not paying attention to anything except finding his good luck charm. I try to be reasonable, but if I know I can't let him do whatever he wants, it sets a bad example for the others.

"Nicki, listen to me."

More head shaking.

"You need to sit down."

"No. No, no, no, *no*." His eyes snap to the window. "I must have dropped it outside. I need to go look!"

I can't help but gape. "Dominic, you can't go outside. We're in the middle of a lesson."

When his eyes turn to me, I almost don't recognize the otherwise friendly brown color I usually meet. Not this time. "I'm not doing anything until I find my ribbon."

A few students "*ohhhhh*" when I stand a little straighter and say, "I need to speak with you outside the room."

Nicki blinks as I turn to the rest of the class. "Read pages 82 and 83, please. We'll be right back."

I guide my frustrated student outside, my hand gently on his shoulder, and stop a few inches away from the closed door so the others can't eavesdrop. "I know it must feel very frustrating to have lost something like that," I begin with, "but right now, you're being rude and disruptive to me and the others. I give you my word, Nicki, that we will all help find your good luck charm. But we can't do it on your terms when you want us to. It's

a nice day out. I can take you all outside so long as there isn't another class on the playground when we have our free period."

His head goes back and forth, and I'm worried he'll get dizzy.

"Tell you what." I dig into my pocket and produce the round, blue marble. "Why don't you hold onto this for me?"

He eyes the marble.

Stares.

Blinks.

"Go on," I encourage, passing it to him. "I think it may do you some good. And, just in case we don't find your ribbon when we look, you can even keep it."

"Keep it?" he repeats.

I nod once. "That's right. It's done me a lot of good over the years. I'd really like you to have it. But only if we go back into the classroom and finish our lesson. Okay?"

He thinks it over, brows still pinched and expression still unsure and flighty.

But, eventually, he mumbles, "Okay."



I get home late after having an all-staff meeting that ran over because of funding concerns that left some staff needing extra clarity on their positions. If they hadn't provided coffee and snacks, I probably would have been caught rolling my eyes a time or three.

When I walk up the pathway leading to my front door, I notice a vase of flowers resting there. Red roses with some sort of white weed-looking things mixed in. I'm picking it up when I hear, "Can I talk to you?"

Turning toward the gravelly tone, I shift the flowers to one arm in a cradle as I look between Fletcher and Admiral, who's sniffing something on the ground. Since I have a feeling this is about his son, I nod. "Sure. Do you want to come in?"

His eyes go to the flowers for a second before going down to his dog.

I say, "He can come in too."

As if Admiral knows, he instantly starts wagging his tail and looking up at his owner. Said man holding the leash says, "If you're sure."

“I am.” I grab the key to the front door, turn to unlock it, and add, “You should really wear bells or something. I didn’t even hear you.”

I only pause a brief moment when he replies, “I’ve been trained to be quiet. Wouldn’t do my men or me any good if we gave away our positions.”

Cracking a small smile, I nod and push the door open. “You’re right. I suppose that’d be counteractive.”

He and Admiral follow me inside, and I close the door behind him. Although, like the other times he’s been inside my home, we wind up in the kitchen. I set the vase down next to the sink, then my purse and keys on the counter before sliding off my jacket and turning to him.

His eyes study the flowers. “Admirer?”

Looking over my shoulder, I lift my shoulders. “I’m not sure, honestly. I doubt it. My friend Vickie sends me random things all the time. Fruit, candy, stuff that makes me happy.”

“And flowers make you happy?”

I smile at him. “Sure. Who doesn’t like flowers?” His lips tilt the tiniest bit upward. “I usually get presents from Vickie if she’s apologizing for something. The flowers are probably for the bar incident, not that she really has anything to be sorry for.”

He makes a noncommittal noise, eyeing the flowers again, before his eyes focus back on me, more specifically, my cheek. The red mark went down hours after I stopped icing it. By the next day, you wouldn’t have even known I’d been hit at all. “Dominic told me about what happened.”

I figured that’s what this was about. “I didn’t want to get him into trouble by sending him to the office. I’m sure Ms. Clifton wouldn’t have made too much of a big deal out of it, nothing like when he was suspended, but I wanted him to see what he was doing wasn’t appropriate.”

Fletcher nods.

I smile down at the cold, wet nose that nudges my hand. Then, petting Admiral’s head, I say, “I know he’s going to have bad days. We all do, right? But he calmed down after I spoke with him, so it wasn’t a problem.” I pause briefly, tapping Admiral’s nose. “We never found his ribbon. I’m not sure what happened to it, but hopefully, it winds up somewhere.”

For a long period of time, Fletcher watches as I fuss over his golden retriever. I don’t know what he’s thinking because, as usual, his expression gives nothing away. I’ve never been great at reading people in the first place, but I can typically get some idea of what’s going on in their mind.

He breaks his silence. "He showed me the marble you gave him."

I glance up at him.

"You didn't have to do that."

I lift a shoulder. "I didn't need it anymore. If somebody else can, great. Nicki is a good boy. He just needs a little guidance."

Fletcher stares off, seemingly lost. "I don't even know where he got that ribbon," he admits after a few long heartbeats pass between us. "He just suddenly had it and wouldn't go anywhere without it. The behavioral therapist we saw said it was his comfort item. Something he used when he needed to cope, to always have nearby."

"I've read about that." I'd taken a few courses in adolescent psychology in grad school that focused on children with autism—behavioral traits and characteristics, therapies to help them, and how to handle them in situations like the ones today. I think that's a big reason why Ms. Clifton liked me so much and hired me within a few days of our meeting. "Does he still see her?"

He hums. "It's been a while. His mother and I..." He gets that faraway look again before blinking it away. "We've been talking about having him see someone again. Do check-ins. We should've done it sooner than now, but he's gotten better..."

I don't have to tell him that Nicki's autism will never go away. He knows that. So, I offer the next best comment. "Therapists can be very helpful."

"You've seen one?"

Not ashamed, I nod. "I still go once a month to see her. I used to go more frequently when—" I cut myself off, wincing. "After the divorce, I wasn't quite myself. She helped talk things out with me. Helped me heal to some degree. Or, rather, helped me let myself heal."

He only stares at me.

"But therapists for children can be a huge, positive impact on their lives. Even if it's only once in a while, it may do Nicki some good. He'll see someone trained to guide him, and it'll probably give you and Dominic's mother peace of mind."

"You're right."

I smile.

He stares.

Then he says, "You're probably never getting that marble back."

Laughing lightly, I wave my hand in the air. “That’s fine. I told him he can keep it anyway. Like I said, if it helps, then I’m happy.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s no big deal.”

He shakes his head, his hands gripping the counter he stands behind, making the muscles in his arms twitch and stretch. “Why do you do that? It is a big deal. To me. To Nicki. No teacher has to give their students anything, much less genuine compassion, but you’ve done it more than once.”

Feeling uncomfortable with the compliment, I give him another shrug. “Teachers are supposed to be compassionate.”

“Doesn’t mean they all are.”

Well...true.

“They don’t have to give students their favorite good luck charms either,” he points out.

I don’t say anything because I’m not sure what there is *to* say. I like Nicki. I like all of my students. I forgot how much I missed being able to do this until I started working at Stanton Central. In the pit of my stomach, starting to become unburied slowly, is a little bit of resentment toward Hunter for making me feel like I shouldn’t do what I wanted even after getting my degree and taking all the certification exams.

But I don’t let myself think about that.

“It is a big deal,” he repeats, drilling his point across as if I hadn’t heard him the first time. “I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of your other students go home and tell their parents that you’re their favorite teacher too.”

Emotion clogs my throat. “Nicki told you I was his favorite?”

Lips pressed together, he nods.

I fight off the onslaught of tears that want to form in my eyes. “That’s very sweet. I want my kids to have a good time when they’re at school.”

Another noise rises in his throat.

I give another pat or two to Admiral before sighing lightly. “Well, in any case, I’m glad he’s happy with me. All teachers love hearing that from time to time.”

Fletcher’s eyes are focused on something behind me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s the flowers again. I’m not sure why, but I don’t let myself think about it for long. His next words don’t let me. “I know you don’t want

to talk about it, but I always told my men to get their heads out of their asses before they ruined a good thing.”

My heart nearly stops.

His eyes go to Admiral. “All I’m saying is that you’re a good person, Peaches. You deserve to be happy too, not just making everybody else feel that way.”

That was the second time he called me that, but I can’t really focus on that for long before the rest of what he says settles in.

Then, I blush.

Hiding my face, I clear my throat. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

No response.

He tugs on Admiral’s leash, the dog reluctantly standing and backing up until he’s standing next to the man’s long legs planted firmly on the ground across from me.

“I’ll show myself out.”

All I manage to do is nod.

It isn’t until he’s gone that I manage to snap out of whatever trance I lock myself in, sigh, and turn to the flowers on my counter. Expecting a note from Vickie with something funny on it, which I could use, I grab the paper attached to the holder and read it.

Then gape.

Stare.

Gape some more.

My heart lurches into my throat.

I’m sorry.

~H

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dad's kitchen smells like slightly burnt stuffing, but the perfectly browned turkey makes up for it. If that hadn't, Mom's famous macaroni and cheese might have saved the holiday lunch we've gathered at Dad's house to have.

"Can you mash the potatoes?" my dad asks as he pokes at the turkey.

I've always helped my parents with holiday meals, so I know where everything is as I get to work across the kitchen. The caramel apple cheesecake I made is sitting on the counter next to Mom's peach cobbler. Dad thinks we don't know that the chocolate peanut butter pie beside those is store-bought even though he moved it to a glass pie dish, but we all know his baking skills are nowhere near his cooking ones.

"Is Vickie coming later?" he asks. Vickie sometimes stops by for dessert and drinks while they yell at the TV over whatever football teams are playing.

"I don't think so. Her family is in town for once, so she was planning on seeing them." I don't expect to get an SOS text or a reason to call and make her come here, but my phone's sound is on just in case. She's had a lot of problems with her parents over the years, but nothing that's ever stopped her from seeing them when they're around.

"Too bad," Dad comments. "I was looking forward to rubbing it in her face when the Lions lose."

I snort. "Great sportsmanship."

"Like she's any better."

"True."

Before he can pick on my best friend anymore, Mom walks in. "What are we talking about?"

I finish the potatoes and turn to her as she presses a kiss against my cheek. "Dad is trash-talking Vickie and her love for the Lions."

She rolls her eyes. "You said she's with her family today, yes?"

"Yep."

"Did she bring anybody?"

Internally, I groan, knowing where this conversation is going. "Nope. Just her."

“Hmm.”

Dad chuckles to himself from where he stands in front of the stove.

“Have you dated?” Mom comes out and asks. “You’re still young, Stevie. Plenty of men would be more than happy to take you out.”

I know she means well, but that doesn’t make me want to talk about this. “I went out on a date once not that long ago. It didn’t work out.”

“Why not?”

“Because it didn’t.”

“Did you even try?”

“Mom,” I groan in disbelief that we’re having this conversation. “He wasn’t right for me. Please stop trying to push this on me.”

She frowns. “I just want to see you get out and live your life. What’s wrong with that?”

“I go out with my friends,” is my reply.

That’s still not good enough for her. “But going out with Vickie and your coworkers isn’t going to get me a grandchild anytime soon, now is it?”

I stop what I’m doing to stare at her, in awe that she’d say that to me, knowing how badly I wanted to get pregnant once upon a time.

To make it worse, she’s oblivious and keeps going, driving the knife deeper into my heart. “All I’m trying to say is that Hunter may not have wanted kids, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t a nice man out there who isn’t willing to go down that road with you someday.”

Unlike Mom, Dad notices the tension in my shoulders. “Sandy…”

Mom’s brows pinch as she looks between him and me in confusion. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“No, what is it?”

I eye her. “He texted me.”

Her eyes widen.

Dad makes a disgruntled sound from behind me.

“And he sent me flowers,” I add.

It effectively shuts her up.

“I didn’t reply or thank him for the roses.”

Both my parents are staring now.

I grab the bowl of potatoes and turn to my mother with the dish tight in my grasp. “I love you, Mom, but you of all people should know that when you spend years with somebody, suddenly forgetting about them and

moving on isn't as easy as it sounds." Eyes going to Dad, who looks a little uncomfortable, I shake my head. "I know you two love me and want me to be happy, and I appreciate that, but you need to let me live my life at my pace. Jumping into a relationship with somebody when I'm not ready will only make me miserable."

"Oh, Stevie..." Mom reaches out and touches my arm.

I shake it off. "I know, Mom. Really. It's fine. But don't you think it's a little hypocritical to urge me on dates when you've been divorced from Dad and still see him all the time and act like you don't have feelings for him? Everyone in this room knows that's not true."

"Stevie," Dad warns quietly, playing devil's advocate as usual.

"No. I'm not trying to be rude. I'm simply stating a fact. You guys are my parents, but that doesn't mean you're always right. We're all adults and should be able to say how we feel without being reprimanded. But you telling me that I need to find a man to have children with is going too far. You knew how much I wanted that life and how badly it hurt that I wasn't given it. So maybe, just maybe, put yourself in my shoes and think about how that makes me feel."

They're both quiet. Mom's face looks flushed, and her eyes start to glaze, but I can't make myself feel bad for hurting her feelings when I'm being honest. "I'm going to set the table."

The rest of the day is slightly awkward, but we all make conversation so it's never silent. About work. About Vickie. About what they're up to. New hobbies.

I never bring up Hunter again, and neither do they.

And when Vickie comes over right before the game starts, I almost send a thank you to the sky because it distracts my parents from me and lets me sink into the background for a while.

Sitting in an armchair in the corner while my dad and friend argue about something sports related, I open my text messages and stare at the one Hunter sent me.

Hi, smalls.

I tap my finger against my phone in contemplation.

Bounce my knee anxiously.

Then, I delete the message.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The look Bex is giving me makes it impossible to say no, and she knows it. Wrapped in winter clothes since the early December weather has brought snow showers and single-digit temperatures, she wiggles the bribe in shape of cookies and then gives me the puppy dog eyes.

“It’s one night.”

One night.

“It’ll be fun.”

If she thinks it’ll be fun, she wouldn’t be begging me to tag along with her. “Bex, the idea of speed dating sounds...” *Awful*. It sounds awful. I barely even liked the idea of online dating but have been considering it for a little while now, thanks to Vickie’s encouragement. “It doesn’t sound like it’s for me.”

“It’s for anyone,” my neighbor disagrees.

“Don’t you have to sign up for this type of thing?” I ask. She says the event starts in two hours, hardly enough time for me to register that way there’s an even number of participants.

When my neighbor’s face, with laugh lines and the start of crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes, shifts a little, I know she’s leaving something out. “I may have signed you up when my friends made me sign up.”

I gape, processing her words.

“I’m sorry!” she rushes out. “I know it isn’t a respectful thing to do. Truthfully, I thought I’d talk myself out of this by now and not even have to tell you, but then I thought that it may be time. And, who knows, it could actually be fun.”

I want to be angry, but the hopeful look on her face is making that hard. Plus, she’s holding gingerbread cookies that her daughter made. They’re even decorated in a way most skilled culinary students would decorate them.

Bex keeps going. “There will be a range of men there, all different ages and types. It isn’t like it’s only for people my age.”

That has me rolling my eyes. “You aren’t that much older than me, Bex.”

“Twenty years,” she reminds me, almost sadly. She lets that go quickly, though. “I could have birthed you.”

The thought of it slightly disturbing, so I brush it off.

“I’ll make it up to you somehow. Anything you want. My daughter is a great cook, too, so if there’s a dish you love—”

“Bex—”

“Please, Stevie?”

Oh God, she broke out the magic word.

I sigh, wanting to close the door, turn the TV onto something mindless, and devour my weight in sugar. But I don’t. “I’m only doing this one time, okay? I’ve never really been comfortable with the idea of this.”

She claps. “Oh, you’re the sweetest. I won’t do anything like this to you again.” Bex makes a cross over her heart and then passes me the cookies. “I’ll leave you to get ready and then come pick you up in an hour or so.”

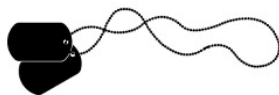
My reluctant agreement comes in a barely-there voice as I close the door behind her and instantly regret my decision the second I let myself think about it.

Maybe she’s right.

It could be fun.

Something I need.

If nothing else, it’ll get Mom off my back for a little while, knowing I at least tried again.



I wake up sore. Head sore, mouth dry, and body aching as I crack my eyes open. The usual sunlight I’m greeted with in the morning is too much for my eyes, and I groan and turn over trying to remember what happened last night.

Speed dating.

There’d been guy after guy that left me even more in a panic. Each one of them vastly different than the man I’d said my vows to all those years ago, yet, I still found something similar with every man that sat down across from me. My neighbor must have sensed my impending meltdown because she pulled me out of there despite talking to a silver fox she seemed into. I’d have to apologize for that, but hopefully he given her his number before we left.

We'd gone to a bar nearby the event after leaving. One I hadn't been to before. And I'd drank. Way too much. Something that, if the hangover plaguing me right now is any indicator of, I won't be doing again for a very long time.

There's a noise from beside me that locks up my entire body. A sound too deep to be Bex, and certainly not one that came from me.

When I open my eyes again, I see a naked back. A naked back that looks lean and smooth and unfamiliar, and the back of head with long brown hair that I don't recognize.

Then it comes back to me.

Everything.

The drinks.

The music.

The guy who was dancing with me.

Bex told me we should go, but I'd wanted to stay. I was finally letting go after one too many drinks, and I stopped feeling like I was going to cry. It's a little fuzzy, but I remember the guy touching my hips, hooking his arm around my lower back, and then suggesting we leave.

And I'd agreed to that.

Why did I agree to that?

There's a familiar ache between my legs that I haven't felt in a long time, one that tells me exactly what happened even if I only can grasp bits and pieces at the moment. The feeling of soft sheets against my skin, and *only* my skin, reminds me that I went too far.

The smart choice would have been letting Bex drive us home after I convinced the bartender to give me another margarita, but the buzz had loosened my tense shoulders and eased the pain settled in my chest. With each sip of my drink, I'd started having more fun—stopped thinking about how embarrassed I was of myself for freaking out over something as simple as speed dating.

The man groans again, breaking apart my memory and reminding me of my poor decision.

Panic starts wrapping itself around every nook and cranny it can get its claws into. Darting out of bed with the blanket despite the protest of the other person laying on my mattress, I bolt to the bathroom and lock the door behind me.

When I meet my eyes in the mirror hanging above the sink, I take in my disheveled appearance. Makeup smeared. Brown hair a frizzy, bed-headed mess. Bloodshot eyes with dark circles underneath. I'm paler than usual and my cheeks are flushed, and I can barely breathe.

Leaning over the sink when I start to feel nauseous, my eyes capture what's in the waste basket between the sink and toilet.

A used condom.

My bottom lip trembles.

Tears sting my eyes.

"I just want to forget," I'd told the stranger. *"Help me forget."*

My head drops forward as I suck in a shaky breath, then another. It's hard to control the stiffness in my chest. The tightness. With each inhale, it becomes even tighter, suffocating me slowly.

Slipping on the robe I keep hanging on the back of the door, I tie it around my waist and inhale slowly before counting to five and heading back out. The stranger is still sleeping, an arm draped over his face, the remaining top sheet resting low on his stomach and revealing the skin I saw far more of last night if my foggy memory is correct.

"You need to go," I tell him, voice raspy.

Nothing.

I step forward, willing my voice to raise even though I want nothing more than to let out the tears welling behind my eyes. "You need to leave."

This time, he wakes, grumbles, and moves to his side.

Nostrils flaring, anger rises from the pit of my stomach all the way up until it gathers on my tongue, tasting sour. "If you don't leave, I'll call the cops. Get up. Get dressed. And get the hell out of my house."

I don't care that my voice cracks.

Or that he calls me a bitch when he finally moves, reaching for his clothes scattered across the bedroom floor.

Or even when he says I was more fun last night.

If anything, I want to vomit for putting myself in this situation.

Once he's dressed, I make sure he really does leave, following him downstairs. He's not that much taller than me, dressed in jeans and a long sleeve sweater. A nice pair of black shoes. His face is nothing special, not that I let myself look long.

He isn't my usual type, though. That I can tell. Maybe that's why I let him bring me home. Why I let him touch me. Do things to me that only one

other man has before.

Help me forget, I'd all but begged.

We don't say a word as he walks out, though he does mumble something under his breath that probably isn't nice.

My arms are crossed over my chest as he gets into a beat-up car in the driveway and backs out, speeding down the street like a jackass.

Then I hear, "Hi, Ms. Foster!"

But instead of returning the greeting to the boy who's playing with Admiral while his father watches from their open porch, I turn around, close the door behind me, and walk upstairs to turn on the shower.

I spend twenty minutes scrubbing my skin until it's red and raw.

Ten minutes crying on the shower floor with my knees tucked into my naked chest.

And five minutes drying off while avoiding the reflection in the mirror.

Help me forget.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bex shows up that evening holding two cups of coffee and a smile on her face. But after one single question, an inquiry that millions of people are asked daily, my will completely crumbles, and the floodgates open.

“Are you okay?”

One question, and suddenly my neighbor knows every single bad thing that’s happened to me over the past two years. The ups, the downs, the struggles I’ve had coping. She gets it all while passing me tissues as I sob and snot and shake my head until my voice is hoarse.

And when it’s all out in the open, floating between us, she pulls me into her arms and hugs me as tightly as she probably does her daughter after a bad breakup. “Oh, Stevie. I had no idea.”

I sniffle, pulling away and dabbing a tissue under my eye. “I don’t like talking about it. It’s embarrassing.”

Her eyes soften. “Sweetheart, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. These things happen all the time. Divorce is hard, but you’re a strong person. Look what you’ve done for yourself!” She gestures around the house. “You bought a beautiful home, have a great job, and you have a support system with you every step of the way.”

I blink back more tears. “I’ve only ever been with one man my whole life, Bex,” I admit aloud, feeling my face warm. “One man who I’ve shared everything with. And then I get drunk and just let some stranger into my home? Let him...”

She doesn’t need to know the details, and I don’t feel like reliving them. Not that I remember everything. Bits and pieces that I hope I can forget about soon enough. “I’ve never been that kind of girl.”

“You feel guilty,” she states.

“I guess.”

She grabs my hands and squeezes them while giving me one of her famous smiles. “I don’t know if you’ll believe me when I tell you this but hear me out. What you did is natural. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a strong, independent, grown woman having some fun. You’re trying to move on, Stevie. Last night was a step in a direction you probably

needed to do that. And if you learned that those types of relationships aren't for you—" She means one-night stands, pointless flings, but I'm glad she's choosing her words carefully for the sake of my sanity. "—then you learned something about yourself that you wouldn't have known otherwise. Right?"

I think about it, then eventually nod. "I never thought about it that way."

Another hand squeeze. "I know it's tough to move on. Speed dating was..." She searches for the word. "It was difficult, to be honest. Talking to men who weren't my Billy. But it was something I needed to jumpstart other possibilities. And I met some nice men who seem like good people."

I think about the one she was talking to before she helped me bail. "Did you get that guy's number at the end of the event? The one who looked like a sexy Santa?"

She laughs loudly. "A sexy Santa," she repeats, her smile widening. "That isn't too far off, is it? I didn't. But he got mine, so I figure if it's meant to turn into something, it will. Don't you worry about me."

Looking down at our hands, I let out a long breath-turned-sigh. "When you first told me about your husband, I kept thinking to myself that I shouldn't be so sad about what happened to mine." I feel bad telling her that, so I give her an apologetic look, expression wary. "I've been grieving my marriage for two years now, always wondering what I did or how I could have made it better. Hunter was good to me. I was happy. Taken care of. Everyone said we were the kind of couple people wanted to be like."

"Look at me," she says gently. When I do, she's giving me the same look my own mother gives me when she wants to make a point. "There isn't one single relationship out there that doesn't have its problems. Everybody struggles from time to time, and sometimes it's fixable, and other times it isn't. And if it isn't, and a choice has to be made, then grieving that loss—that change—is part of the healing process. Just because Hunter is still out there doesn't mean you can't feel sad every once in a while because he's not here with you. Then you'd be depriving yourself of the memories you shared with him, and they weren't all bad, were they?"

I shake my head.

"Exactly. Take it from me, sweetheart. Death isn't the worst loss in life. It's not living that's the most tragic thing any of us can do. So, don't make excuses as to why you can't go out and have some fun and don't guilt yourself for doing things out of the ordinary. You're young, beautiful, and

smart. You deserve to make friends, date, and be happy however you can find that happiness. Do you understand me?"

I feel like I'm getting lectured by my mom, but it's oddly comforting. "I understand."

She pats my hand before letting go. "Good. Now, I have to ask, what are you going to do about Hunter sending you things? How does that make you feel?"

Cracking a small smile, I ask, "Are you doubling as my therapist now?"

She grabs her coffee and winks at me. "I think we all have a built-in therapist in our friends, don't you?"

I huff out a tiny laugh. "Yeah." Thinking about it, I lean back in my chair. "I don't know what to do. Or how to feel. It's been over two years, so why now? I promised my family and friends I wouldn't wait around for him. I've done everything in my power to take control of my life, and I don't want him reaching out to derail anything."

She nods. "Sounds reasonable. You said that you stopped working after you got married, right?"

I press my lips together. "I finished school, took all the tests I needed, and started applying for jobs when I got a few substitute teaching positions for the experience. I liked being in the classroom, and my professors told me I'd make a great teacher. When I was about 25, I'd gotten an offer to take over a second-grade class, but Hunter had just gotten back from overseas and was being relocated to a new base. Taking that position would have meant staying separated for even longer, and neither of us wanted that. So, I turned down the job and moved to a house on base with him. We talked about it, and he said he'd provide for us. That I wouldn't have to worry about anything."

Truthfully, I didn't mind being a stay-at-home wife. My cooking skills improved, I learned how to crochet, and I had time to read again since school and work always took up most of my free time. I'd even made friends with a few other military wives who lived nearby and would go out with them occasionally for drinks and dinner. I didn't hate that life.

Bex lets me keep talking, absorbing every little realization I come to. "Ever since taking the job here in Stanton, I've realized how much I would have loved being in charge of a classroom. The kids always make me laugh, and I love being able to teach them new things. It wasn't that Hunter wasn't

supportive necessarily, but I think he preferred being the one who took care of everything. And it made me feel..." My words fade as I lick my lips.

Inadequate.

My husband, the man I loved and vowed to in sickness and health, made me feel inadequate.

"I like working," is what I tell her with a lift of my shoulders, voice thick. "I like knowing that I can take care of myself, because for too long, I let somebody else do it for me."

That's the truth.

Hunter wasn't a bad man. He just held on a little too tightly, and I was the woman—the wife—who let him.

I'm not willing to do that again.

That sinks in deeper and deeper as I stare off and repeat those words. "I don't want him back in my life if he's not going to change," I tell her in a tone above a whisper. "Just because he's sorry doesn't mean he's willing to do things differently."

Bex's smile is light. "I think you made your decision then."

I blow out a breath.

Then nod. "I guess I did."

We finish our coffee, I offer her dinner, but she says she needs to get going. When I wave her goodbye at the door, I notice a line of different cars parked along the street in front of Fletcher's and Dominic's house. It's the first time he's had a ton of people over from what I know, and a familiar red BMW is one of them in the lineup, driven by a woman who sometimes drops off Nicki.

Fletcher's ex-wife.

I try not to wonder what's going on over there because I know it isn't any of my business. With a weight off my shoulders thanks to Bex, I close the door, lock it, and take my first real breath since...I don't know when.



Sonia practically bounces into my classroom after a long day of teaching. My hormones have been dragging me down thanks to my period, so when she gives me a pleading look like she's about to ask me for something I don't want to do, it only makes me wary.

“Hear me out,” she begins with. “A bunch of the teachers are going out —”

I groan. “Sonia, no.”

“I asked you to hear me out,” she cuts me off, stopping at the edge of my desk. “Miles won’t be there because he’s going to some concert with a blonde he met who’s apparently in grad school to become a teacher. So, he’ll be too occupied to hit on you.”

That *does* make it a little more tempting, I’ll admit.

“And I won’t try setting you up with anybody or anything. We’re not even doing the bar thing this time. The winter carnival is in town, and we thought it may be fun to go together. Since this is your first one, you shouldn’t miss it. There’s food, games, and homemade hot chocolate and cider. Please come?”

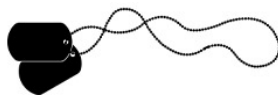
She doesn’t do the puppy dog face thing as well as Bex. Still, the idea of this carnival I’ve seen advertised on flyers around town and in the grocery store does make me interested in checking it out. “It’s outside?”

Sonia nods. “Yeah, you’ll need to bundle up because there may be a cold front coming this weekend. But, the food is hot, the drinks hotter, and we’ll have fun, so we’ll be too distracted to think about the chill. So, are you down?”

I’ve made plenty of excuses as to why I couldn’t hang out with her since the last time we got together, and I have been feeling a little bad about that. “Can I ask my friend Victoria to go? I think you two will get along.”

She beams. “Absolutely. The more, the merrier. It’s a town event, so I’m sure we’ll see parents and kids too. Half the proceeds go to the tri-county food bank, so it’s a good time for a good cause, too.”

I smile at that. “Count us in then.”



“You owe me a new shirt,” my best friend grumbles, hugging herself as she looks around the town square where booths are set up and people are lingering and chatting in groups. “It’s so cold I think I tore through this one with my nipples.”

I snort, smacking her when a few younger kids pass by us. “Behave yourself. We’re in public. I’ll take you shopping another day.”

I spot a few people from the school and wave when I get their attention. Anton and Maggie, another newer faculty member, wave back.

Vickie sighs, her breath forming in front of her. “You’re buying me hot chocolate too.”

“Deal.”

Anton greets us first when we make it to where they’re standing. “Glad you could come. Sonia said she’s running late, but I think once she’s here, that’s all of us.”

Ten minutes later the woman in question shows up disgruntled with twice as many layers on as Vickie. “Mother Nature couldn’t hold off for one more day, could she?”

Vickie nods. “Such a bitch.”

The group laughs, I sigh, and Sonia instantly perks up at my friend. Wrapping her arm around Vickie’s, my coworker says, “I like you already.”

Forty-five minutes later, the group has their second warm drink in hand and some sort of food bought at one of the many vendors, when we all start splitting up. Vickie and Sonia gossip about some celebrity I’ve vaguely heard of while my eyes search the various games, all of which I’d be horrible at playing. When we were teenagers, Hunter and I would do date nights at the local fairs in the summertime, riding every ride, eating as much fried food as possible, and trying to win prizes. I always failed but buried in a box somewhere in storage is probably the stuffed penguin he’d won me years ago.

I’m walking toward a booth selling jewelry when I hear, “Hi, Ms. Foster!” Turning at the sound of my name, I smile when Nicki walks up to me, holding a caramel apple in one hand and a stuffed bear in the other. “Look what Dad won me.” He wiggles the bear that’s wearing a red bow tie.

“Hi, Nicki. Cute bear. Having fun?”

The little boy bundled in a thick jacket, gloves, scarf, and knit hat nods. “I had to beg Dad to bring me because Mom couldn’t come even though she promised.”

Fletcher catches up to his son, sidling up behind him and putting a hand on Nicki’s shoulder. “I’m sure Ms. Foster doesn’t need to hear all of that.”

I don’t say either way. “I’m glad you were able to come. If you haven’t had the hot chocolate yet, it’s delicious.” I stop for a moment, flicking my

eyes upward to the much taller man, before adding, “As long as you’re allowed to have that sort of thing.”

Fletcher chuckles, the first real low laugh I’ve ever heard from him that makes the corners of my lips curl into a pleased smile. “I think he’s had at least three cups already on top of the candy he’s convinced me to buy him.”

“I have a sweet tooth too.”

Nicki takes another bite of his apple. With his mouth full, he says, “It’s good my mom isn’t here because she’d never let me have all of this stuff.”

His father murmurs, “Nic.”

Nicki shrugs. “It’s true.”

“She probably just doesn’t want you to get cavities. My mom used to limit how much sweets I had too. It’s because they love us.”

Nicki gives that some thought then nods. But it doesn’t stop him from saying, “True, but I’m still glad Dad is the one who brought me.”

My lips waver to stop a smile from forming when Fletcher sighs. I love how carefree Dominic is in his responses. Most kids are, but I know his case is slightly different. His dad is lucky that it isn’t worse. At least Nicki is honest in a kind way.

“Are you having fun?” asks the man with a deep voice. I don’t realize he’s looking at me until I lift my gaze.

“Yeah, I am. It’d be nicer if it were warmer, but I’m glad some of my coworkers convinced me to come. I think I ate a little too many sweets myself, though.”

A ghost smile tilts his lips. His eyes go to the jewelry displayed on the table next to us. “His mom wanted to come, but she works as a nurse in the city over. Keeps her busy.”

I’m surprised at the free information he gives me. “You don’t have to tell me anything.”

Fingertips brushing the homemade necklace closest to him, he clears his throat. “I know.”

We fall to silence.

For some reason, I feel the need to ask, “Was it somebody’s birthday the other day? I saw some cars around your house.”

He stops searching the table and looks back over at me, an eyebrow arched. I instantly feel stupid for asking. Fletcher probably thinks I spy on him in my off time.

I blush, looking down at the slightly browned grass I'm standing on.
"Sorry. That was rude. It's none of my—"

"I have poker nights," he tells me, cutting off my rushed apology. "It doesn't happen often, but I like to try getting some people I know together to play a game or two."

Oh.

He adds, "I would have invited you. A few other neighbors come over once in a while, but I didn't think you'd be comfortable. Some old colleagues of mine like to show up and try emptying my pockets as payback for the drills I used to make them do."

Colleagues.

Double oh.

He means some of the men he used to be in charge of. "That's okay." My voice sounds funny even to me. "I've never even played poker before, so I wouldn't have been any good."

I don't expect him to say anything, so when he does speak, all I can do is stare. "I would have taught you."

He stares back.

A moment passes.

Two.

The wind picks up, blowing some hair into my face that I tuck back behind my ear.

Fletcher murmurs, "I *can* teach you."

Can. Present tense.

"If you want," he tacks on.

I blink. "To play poker."

He nods once. "If you want."

He can teach me to play poker if I want.

Huh. "I suck at simple games like Go Fish," I inform him.

That smile reappears.

"Most games I suck at," I murmur.

Vickie shows up at my side. "It's true. It's almost painful to watch her play anything. I think her dad still lets her win out of pity when we have game nights."

I'm not sure how much she heard, but I have a feeling she was eavesdropping for a while.

My friend sticks her hand out. "I'm Victoria, Stevie's best friend, and wing woman. Not that she seems to need one."

Face heating, I shoot her a look. "Not now. You promised you'd behave."

She smiles innocently. "I promised no such thing. You just assumed I would."

Fletcher takes her hand and shakes it. "Fletcher Miller. I'm a neighbor."

Vickie's eyes fill with interest. "Are you now?" Subtly, she turns to me. She must remember the few times I've brought him up because something clicks in her head. When she glances down at Nicki, who's eating his apple and not paying attention to the adults around him, she glances back up at the man her hand is still connected with.

And I don't like that.

Why don't I like that their hands are still touching?

"And is this your son?"

Fletcher nods before letting go and lowering his hand back down to Dominic's shoulder.

I nudge Vickie. "Dominic is in my class."

I hope the comment is enough for her to drop whatever scheme is rolling around in that brain of hers.

Thankfully, she gets the hint. "Well, it was *very* good to meet you both." She shoots me a wink as she wraps her arm around mine. "And I'm sure Stevie would love to take you up on your offer to teach her poker, and whatever else you're willing to show her. I have a feeling your talents aren't limited to card games."

Oh God.

The implication isn't lost on me, but I hope to Jesus it is on the man whose eyes slowly move between Vickie and me. His gaze lands on me and stays there before he dips his chin.

All he says is, "Have a good rest of your night, ladies. Try to stay warm."

I offer a smile before pulling my friend away and squeezing her arm. Once we're out of earshot, I hiss, "What was that?"

"That," she replies with a mischievous grin on her face, "was me trying to hook a girl up. The way that man looked at you had even my ovaries quaking."

Fletcher? "What?"

She groans dramatically. “You were always blind when it came to other men. Hunter broke you or something, but don’t worry, something tells me that man will fix you right up.”

I’m too busy thinking about what she said to absorb the rest of her commentary.

Patting my arm, she guides us to another food booth where we load up on more sugar that neither of us needs. “Sweet, naïve, Stevie,” my friend sighs.

The rest of the night, all I can wonder is, *how was Fletcher looking at me?*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The invitation comes in the morning when I'm out getting my mail. Like most mornings, Fletcher is out walking Admiral. This time, Nicki is absent from the routine, and I wonder if he's with his mother.

I don't get a chance to wonder for long because the man who I used to see in military greens stops in front of my driveway in his usual jeans, boots, and T-shirt, but this time, with a bulky jacket on over top of it. A similar shade of green as the trademark he was trained in. "Do you want to come over later? For poker. Dominic is with his mom this weekend and won't be back until tomorrow night."

I'm unsure why the nod I gave him was slow and hesitant because he'd seemed serious when he offered at the carnival to teach me. But when the slightly confused, "Sure?" came out, he'd simply nodded, told me what time, and then said he'd see me later before walking away.

That's how I find myself standing in front of a door I've never knocked on before, staring at the doorbell off to the side, and wondering if I should have brought something with me.

Alcohol, snacks, something.

But I don't get a chance to turn around and go back to find something before the door opens and Fletcher appears. "Come on in."

He sounds casual, maybe even a little looser than his normal higher-strung tone. Trying to forget about my previous concerns, I follow him inside and unbutton my jacket while looking around. It's clean, open, and spacious inside. Lots of natural lighting that I kind of envy, and cool tones with darker furniture that's tidy, like a fifth grader doesn't live here at all.

"I can take that," he offers as I slide off my coat. Giving him an appreciative smile, I pass it to him and return my eyes to the pictures hanging on the wall.

Along the foyer is a timeline of images of Dominic from birth to what looks like he might've had taken during picture day this year. "He looks a lot like you," I note, stopping at the newest photo. Their facial structure and noses are practically identical, same with their hair and eye color, except Nicki has flecks of gold in his that I haven't noticed in Fletcher's. Both with

darker hair, too, except Dominic's is longer than the buzz cut peppered with silver that Fletcher keeps.

"He's got his mom's eyes," he notes, standing next to me. "But the poor kid looks more and more like me every year."

Speaking honestly, I reply, "Trust me, that's not a bad thing."

I can feel his eyes dipping down to look at me, but I clear my throat and change topics before he can make a comment. "So...poker?"

He shows me where he set up some cards at the table. "Want something to drink? I've got water, beer, milk, or—"

"Water is fine, thanks."

He nods and disappears into the kitchen connected to the dining room where his polished round table is. Sitting down, I listen to him rifle through things as I stare at the cards and colored chips, wondering if I know any of the men that come over and play poker with him.

For a hot second, I wonder if Hunter does.

But I think Fletcher would have told me that unless that was what he was trying to get at by thinking I'd be uncomfortable. Last I knew, Hunter didn't know how to play poker. He'd participate in family game nights, but usually not for long because he was like Vickie.

A sore loser.

When Fletcher walks back in, he has two glasses of water in his hand. "Should have asked if you wanted something to eat. I don't have much. I swear Dominic cleared me out of all the groceries I just got."

I laugh. "I ate before I came here, so that's fine. He must be going through a growth spurt." I've noticed he's sprouted up a little more compared to some of his peers. "Do you know Bex, the woman who lives next to me?"

He nods, taking a seat across from me.

"She was telling me her son was always eating when he hit a certain age. She'd have to go grocery shopping once a week, sometimes more, because he'd always have something in his hand. He went from like 5'10" to 6'3" practically overnight, I guess."

His lips curl up. "I think Nicki is going to be tall. It's common in my family. Even the girls are."

"Do you have siblings?"

He hums. "Two younger sisters. They're both 5'10" or over. Our mother always complains that she's the short one in the family and curses our father

for giving us the gift of height.”

“How tall is she?”

He sizes me up. “Probably your height.”

I make a face. “I’d probably be bitter if I was the shortest in my family too,” I admit, shrugging.

“Siblings?”

Shaking my head, I grab the glass of water and pull it toward me. “I think my mom wanted another, but my dad was...struggling.” I hesitate only a moment before saying, “He’s an alcoholic. Recovered now but had some problems getting things together then.”

Something flashes in Fletcher’s eyes. Understanding, maybe? Sympathy? “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not.” Dad’s alcoholism may have been hard to deal with at the time, but he’s a lot better since reevaluating his life. “He’s the one who used your mower that one time. I think he still says it runs smoother than any other mower he’s used, whatever that means.”

I feel like I deserve a gold star when I hear another light chuckle come from him. “I’ll let him borrow it again if he needs it.”

Waving a hand in the air, I reply, “I hired someone to take care of the lawn. Dad will just have to go buy one like it for his own lawn.”

“I noticed you did,” is all he says before starting to explain to me the game. At first, I don’t understand anything he says. But five minutes go by, and he repeats a few things when he sees the lost look on my face.

Another five and I think I got it, only to realize I don’t and give him a few nods and “oohs” even though I definitely don’t get it at all. I’m a little surprised with how patient Fletcher is, though I probably shouldn’t be since he has a son he has to treat with the same patience. It makes me wonder things I probably shouldn’t, things I should know better than to ask.

But there’s a lot to Fletcher Miller that I never thought I’d know when I knew him in the past. The hard ass who Hunter sometimes complained about but usually looked up to was nothing like the man sitting across from me going step by step on how to play a hand of poker.

“Did you always want to be a father?” I’ll smack myself for asking the question later, but curiosity gets the better of me.

He blinks, stares at his cards, then eventually lifts his gaze. “No, not really. I’d considered it a time or two but kept busy with work. Never thought much about having a family until it happened.”

Did I see him flinch a little?

He scratches his jaw. “That makes it sound like Dominic was a mistake, but that’s not the case. When Traci, his mom, told me she was pregnant, it was a surprise but a happy one. I was old enough to know that I could support her and my child and was happy to be part of their lives, even if it wasn’t planned.”

“I know how much you love him,” is all I can think to remark.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” he starts, and I know what he’s going to ask. “But have you considered being a mother?” When I’m quiet for a stretch too long, he shifts in his seat and sits a little straighter. “Hunter never seemed to talk about it with the guys. Not even when some of the other men were becoming parents. It was never anything I asked about. Wasn’t my business then and still isn’t now. But...”

My nostrils twitch over that. I guess Hunter wouldn’t have talked about it, would he? He always knew he wasn’t interested. He just refused to tell me that. Instead, he dragged me along because he didn’t feel like hurting my feelings about the one thing I always told him I wanted. “Yes, I’ve always wanted to be a mom.”

The thought sucker punches me in the chest, and I offer him a wavering, watery smile as I try fighting off the emotions that want to well in my eyes. I brought this on myself.

“That’s inevitably where it went wrong.”

This time, he’s quiet.

So, I decide to elaborate. “We talked about it. I’m not sure if you know this, but we got married pretty young. I was nineteen and he was twenty. Everyone told us to wait because it probably wouldn’t work out, but we ignored them. We were in love, and that makes people feel invincible.”

If he agrees, he doesn’t say so.

Shaking my head, I look down at my nearly empty glass. “Anyway, it wasn’t like me wanting to experience motherhood was some sort of secret to him. Hunter knew it’s what I’ve wanted my whole life. I should have known that something was wrong when he’d always find ways to change the subject or give noncommittal responses if I brought it up. I was love blind, I guess. When it came down to making that move, to really trying, he finally told me it’s not what he wanted. I won’t lie. It broke me a little. It’s what made me realize I couldn’t settle or pretend to be happy if he wouldn’t at least consider it.”

Fletcher's eyes darken, and his lips purse. I don't know what he's thinking, and I'm not sure I want to.

Sighing lightly, I lift a shoulder. "I keep reminding myself that things happen for a reason. He was my first love, but that doesn't mean he was *the* love of my life. Because if he were, then he would have tried harder, wouldn't he have?"

I'm not sure if I expect him to answer me at all, much less honestly, but he does. "I think if you truly love someone, you'd be willing to do whatever it takes to make them happy."

The truth is hard to hear, so I swallow the lump in my throat before nodding. "Yeah, you're right."

He must hear the weakness. "I'm sorry if I hurt your fee—"

"No." I quickly shake my head, smiling at him even if it does hurt. "You didn't. In fact, I needed to hear that. Because I was probably so consumed in him being this great big love and building up expectations in my head that he was never going to fill. And that's on me."

There's a pause between us. "Any man who has a decent partner in his life that he admires should be willing to go through hell for them, not put them through it. Hunter was a good soldier, somebody a lot of people could depend on, so I'm sorry that you couldn't."

I can't look him in the eyes. "Thank you."

"He's an idiot," I swear he mutters, but I can't be positive. Because instead of me asking him to repeat it, I chicken out and let him move on with showing me the ropes of the game.

I try pushing past the feelings that creep up my throat, but they build higher and higher until they're choking me. It's hard to ask him where his bathroom is in a level tone, and I doubt he believes I'm okay when the rasp of the question comes out, but he tells me where to find it and watches as I walk away while holding in tears.

Keep it together, Stevie.

One tear slides down my cheek as I reach the door.

A second follows it on the opposite side as I close the door behind me and lean against the wood.

A third.

Fourth.

Fifth.

I swallow the pain and the silent sobs that try escaping as I walk over to grab some toilet paper to press against my damp face. A choked noise rises up my throat despite my better efforts, then another as I attempt to press my lips together to conceal it.

The knock on the door has me locking up where I stand in front of the sink looking like a mess, but it's the "Stevie?" that has the tears flooding my face uncontrollably. He waits a few seconds before saying, "I'm coming in."

I'm a wreck when the knob turns, and the doorframe is filled with a bulky, muscular man whose face is the softest I've ever seen it, even noticeable through the tears streaming down my cheeks.

"I-I'm sorry," I blubber, grabbing more toilet paper before wiping at my cheeks. I shake my head, sniffle, and try controlling myself, to no avail.

"Stevie," he breathes, walking over and turning me, so I'm facing him. He takes the toilet paper from me, throws it in the trash, guides me to the closed toilet seat, and sits me down. I watch as he grabs a folded washcloth from the shelf off to the side, runs some water, and wets the fabric before squatting in front of me. "I'm sorry that I upset you."

He thinks *he* did this? "It's n-not you. It's me." I cringe at the ridiculous line. "I asked you the question first. You were only returning the favor. It's stupid. I'm just being a baby, Fletcher."

I swear his lips tilt as he begins pressing the cool cloth against my cheeks gently. "You're not being a baby. Don't call yourself names. You're hurt, and you're justified. You warned me before that you didn't like talking about him, so I should have listened."

Shaking my head until he holds me still, I try turning this around. "I'm the one who pried. I-I should be the one apologizing. I asked about Nicki and your personal business. It was rude because you don't owe me any explanation, especially knowing it'd lead to this. And now I'm crying in your bathroom like a train wreck, making you clean my face."

"I don't do things that I don't want to."

I'd heard those words before. "You've said that to me before."

"Because it's true." He switches the cloth to the other cheek, the cool fabric feeling good against my overheated, puffy face. "I don't like seeing women cry."

"But you like seeing men cry?" I sniffle.

His lips lift slightly at the corners. "It depends if they deserve it or not."

More sniffing. "They probably did."

Those lips lift a little higher.

"It's going on three years," I sigh. "I shouldn't still be breaking down in people's bathrooms and letting them oh-so-kindly wipe my face off and calm me down."

He stops what he's doing for a minute. "I don't think there's any real timeline on getting over someone, Peaches."

"Why do you call me that?"

Now he's full-on grinning. "Nicki came home one day and started rattling on about how you'd be a peach if you could be any fruit in the world. It seemed fitting."

I blink. I'd forgotten all about that conversation and didn't even think any of the kids would think about it past the last bell going off. "I didn't know he remembered."

"He remembers a lot."

"It was a silly question."

"Yet the answer still matches the person."

I scrunch my face. "Do I look like a fuzzy piece of fruit or something?"

Fletcher chuckles as he stands up and puts the washcloth on the counter. "Peaches remind me of sunshine, and you're a very warm person to everyone. I see how you are with the kids, but I also see how you interact with other people when you're out. You treat everybody with the same kindness and respect. It's refreshing."

I don't say anything to that, just stare at my feet and tile floor that they're resting on.

"Like I said," Fletcher tells me. "There's no timeline for getting over somebody. Because if you rush it, then you won't find the right person who's still out there waiting for you."

I pick my gaze up to meet his.

He's looking at me with some sort of expression on his face that I can't dissect.

"Do whatever you need to in order to get past this," he says, eyes burning holes into my face with his delivery. In a tone lower than before, he adds, "With whoever that needs to be. But just know that there's somebody still out there who will be a better match to you than what you had. Count on that, Stevie."

I swallow my words and wonder what types of things I should be doing, but when I study his firm face and those intense eyes, I think I know.

Miles kissing me on my doorstep.

The man doing the walk of shame.

He knows.

And suddenly, my face is hot for a whole different reason that I don't want to acknowledge.

Because I shouldn't be worrying about what Fletcher is thinking, but I am.

I'm worrying a lot.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next time I stop in front of the raised ranch is a few weeks later, only this time it's covered with white Christmas lights. I saw Dominic supervise as his father put them up last weekend. Then, a few days after, I saw the two of them carry a very real tree inside to decorate.

I knock on the red door after nobody responds to the doorbell. It's noisy inside, a reminder of why I'm here. I tug on the collar of my jacket, then flatten the fabric out like I messed it up and try to ignore the negative emotions swirling inside the pit of my stomach. There are twice as many cars as there was last time he'd had company, which means anybody could be behind that door.

People I know mixed in with those I don't.

And when the front door finally opens, it's not Fletcher behind it. It's another man, slightly shorter, with a dirty blond buzzcut like the homeowner's who's standing there smiling at me in jeans and a black Henley. "You hear to see boss man?"

Boss man?

I blink.

His lips stretch into an amused lopsided grin. "Sorry, sometimes I forget he has a different life now. You here to see Fletcher?"

This time, I nod at the man who must be around my age, if not a little younger. His face is kind, covered in light stubble, and offering a welcoming warmth that Fletcher's expression rarely does unless a woman is sobbing in his bathroom.

Internally, I cringe at that reminder.

"I'm Ethan," the man says, stepping aside and waving me in. "He said there'd probably be a few more people showing up. You a neighbor?"

I nod again. "I'm Stevie."

"Huh. Like Stevie Wonder?"

Lifting a shoulder, I smile as he closes the door on the cold breeze behind him. "Or like Stevie Nicks."

He simply stares, seemingly lost.

Definitely younger. Much younger.

Ethan brushes it off. “Well, boss man, Fletch, is in the kitchen. There’s plenty of food, drinks, whatever. You play cards? Come to think of it, he said someone new will be joining in this time. I thought he said Stephen, but...”

Oh. “Well, I’m not very good.”

His laugh is loud, rocking his shoulders, and earning us a couple of curious glances from other men around the room. “Probably shouldn’t admit that to the competition, babe.”

Babe. My nose scrunches a little as a new person appears behind Ethan, this one taller, casting a shadow on where I stand. “Enough with the flirting, peon.”

My eyes go up to the man who invited me to his little Christmas party poker game. It’s not just men here, but some women too. Based on how they’re grouped, maybe significant others of the men who look pretty similar to Fletcher and Ethan. Army men. I know them when I see them.

Ethan grins at me, winks then looks at Fletcher. “Sorry, boss. Didn’t know the territory had been claimed. I’ll scram. It was nice meeting you, Stevie. Can’t wait to beat your ass at poker later.”

He’s gone before I can process any of that, and Fletcher steps forward. “Glad you made it. Want some water? Or something warm?”

“I’ll take some coffee if you have it.”

He nods, gesturing toward the back. I follow him through the crowd, hearing him greet a few people, slap a few shoulders, smack one or two younger men upside the head before we’re in his kitchen.

It’s bigger than mine, with a lot fewer decorations and a lot more storage space. Like the rest of his downstairs, the cabinets are dark wood, the countertops a beautiful marble, appliances all stainless steel, and everything is neat and tidy even with the various food lining the countertops for guests.

“It’s a force of habit to keep everything super clean, isn’t it?” I ask as he grabs a coffee mug from one of the cabinets and walks over to a green thermos.

He looks over his shoulder. “I’ve always liked things organized. Being in the military definitely helped keep me that way. I’m lucky enough to have a kid who’s the same way, though it’s in his nature. He’s meticulous.”

“He probably learned to mimic you,” I guess, accepting the mug he passes me.

“Milk, creamer, and sugar are all over there.” He uses his chin to direct me over where there’s an assortment of things. “And yeah, Nicki has always tried doing whatever I did. Didn’t mind it so much when he was younger, now...”

My brows pinch as I pour vanilla creamer into my cup. “You don’t want him to now that he’s older?”

He looks contemplative. “Not sure I want him to follow in my footsteps, is all. Being autistic doesn’t make it impossible to enlist or join the military if he decides to. But there’d be rigorous tests he’d need to go through to figure out if he’s capable.”

He’s worried about his son. “I think you have a few years before you really need to worry about that, Fletcher.”

The noise he makes is doubtful. “You know, that’s only the second time you’ve called me by my name.”

I turn to him. “It is?”

A chin dip.

“Oh.”

“I like it,” he informs me, making me stare a little without blinking. Then, he moves on. “Do you want food, or do you want to play some cards?”

It takes a second to gather my bearings. “I think I’ll wait to eat.”

Following him over to the dining table set up similarly to when he showed me the game, I see a few other people sitting around it already with beer and food.

Feeling a little intimidated, I look at Fletcher and murmur, “Maybe I’ll watch this round.”

He looks down at me before nodding. “If that’s what you want. C’mere.” Pulling a chair up beside the one he sits on, he pats the cushion on it. “Sit by me. You can be my good luck charm.”

I stare at him in disbelief.

Then, he adds, “Figure if the marble can work for Nicki, having the real thing could up my chances at emptying these sorry ass’s pockets tonight.”

And then he grins.

Grins big and wide and cocky in a confident, sexy sort of way. One that makes it hard to turn down.

So, I sink onto the chair, suck in a breath when he hooks a foot around one of the legs and yanks it closer to him and hold my breath when our

knees stay pressed together under the table.

He wins the first game, shooting me a wink that makes my ovaries quiver, and chuckles when the guys all groan as he collects his earnings.

Later, I overhear one of the other players grumble to another, “That fucker always loses.”



I never ended up playing a game, but sitting through two more rounds—the second where Fletcher won again, and the third when he finally lost—before I’d noticed Bex walk in. As soon as I spotted her, Fletcher bumped my arm and in that low tone, said, “I know you two are friends. Used to play poker with her husband. Thought it’d be good if you had some company here.”

I’m still thinking about his consideration even days later while I’m in my room preparing for winter break. I can’t help but smile. And as soon as Sonia caught the look on my face, she wouldn’t relent in prying as to what caused it.

“Maybe I’m excited about having some time off,” I tell her, looking out the window where small snowflakes start falling.

“No, it’s definitely not that.”

I eye her. “How do you know?”

She grins knowingly, sitting on the edge of my desk. “Because I know what it looks like to have a crush, and that look on your face is all about a guy.” Instantly, heat surfaces under my cheeks, making my coworker laugh. “I knew it! Who is it? Is it somebody from the school?”

The face I make makes her snort. “No. I don’t want to get another talk from Ms. Clifton about dating coworkers.”

Sonia tries holding in her laugh, but she fails. “Sorry, sorry.” She blows out a steady breath. “Does this mean you won’t be crushed when I tell you that Miles and that grad student he took out are going steady?”

I roll my eyes but smile. “I’m happy for Miles. He deserves someone better suited for him, and that wasn’t me.”

“Fair.” Her eyebrows arch. “So, are you going to tell me who the lucky guy is or not?”

“Sonia, there isn’t a guy.”

Which is true.

“You’re not crushing on *anyone*?” The doubt in her tone makes me want to laugh, but all I do is shake my head.

Whatever thoughts I’ve been having toward my neighbor don’t necessarily classify in the ‘crush’ territory. Fletcher Miller is a kind man, a loving father, and has a lot of passion for things I respect him for. No matter his past with things I’d like to forget about, I admire him and can see why my ex did as well.

“No,” I tell her. “No crush.”

Her shoulders drop, and disappointment takes over her face. “Damn, I’m usually not wrong about these things. Maybe it’s good break is coming up. I can catch up on sleep and get recharged.”

I feel a little bad that I didn’t divulge anything about Fletcher or my personal life, but I haven’t even told Vickie yet that I’ve been spending time with him. She’d flay me alive if I held out on her while I gossiped with my coworkers about men.

Men with nice biceps and pretty smiles, and intense eyes that look at me a little too closely for comfort.

I go with, “I think we all could use a little recharge. Do you have plans with family for Christmas?”

She makes a face. “Yeah, we’re all meeting at my sister’s place this year. It wouldn’t be so bad if her satanic children were taught manners Her daughter doesn’t know the word ‘no’ and my sister gets all fed up whenever somebody scolds her for doing something she shouldn’t.”

I frown. “That’s not good.”

“And what’s worse,” she drones, “is that they’re all vegetarians. Can you believe that, Stevie? So, instead of delicious honey-glazed ham or golden-brown turkey, we’re getting tofurkey, and this nasty broccoli casserole that everyone pretends is great, even though we all secretly want to spit it out into our napkins.”

My lips threaten to waver into a smile over her dramatics. “Why don’t you bring side dishes for the people who aren’t vegetarian?”

She waves it off. “We drown out the taste in wine, get buzzed, and finally start having a decent time. Plus, I bought my niece a karaoke machine that way she can sing to her cold heart’s desire and annoy the living hell out of my sister since she thinks her kids so perfect.”

I snort. “That’s evil.”

“But well deserved,” she replies with a devious smile. Pushing off the desk, she asks, “I know you said you were going to your parents, so I hope you have fun. Eat some turkey and try picturing my miserable face knowing I’ll be downing wine to get the taste of the fake kind out of my mouth.”

Shaking my head, I wave her off and get back to finishing up for the day. I’m looking forward to the mini vacation. Sleeping in, doing things around the house, and seeing my family. Vickie wants to check out a new restaurant that opened close to my hometown, so I promised I’d go with her since she refuses to go out to eat by herself.

Plus, it may be good to get away from the house and the neighbor that I find myself checking on from the window like some sort of curious creep.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“**M**aybe we should do this another day,” I tell my friend as she pulls into a parking spot at The Penny, a new Greek place a few miles from the house I grew up in.

“Would you quit complaining?”

I put my hands on my stomach and rest my head back on the headrest. “I still feel stuffed from Christmas dinner.”

She eyes me skeptically as she unbuckles and turns her body in my direction. “We used to stuff our faces with more food than we ate on Christmas. And that was two days ago. Get with it, Foster.”

I blow out a raspberry with my lips. “We aren’t twenty anymore, though. We’re old.”

My friend gasps. “We are no such thing. Take it back, bitch!”

I laugh when she smacks me and makes me get out of the car. We both stop by the side of her Challenger and stare at the newly renovated restaurant that looks fancier than anywhere I’ve been before. I’ve always preferred diners and smaller, more homey establishments. For how short a time The Penny has been open, it’s already gotten rave reviews which makes this trip worth it.

“Come on!” Vickie grabs my arm and tugs me to the door, where something delicious wafts in the air.

When my stomach rumbles, my friend’s eyebrows pop up in an, *I knew you were bullshitting me* kind of way. I give her a loose, unapologetic shrug. I skipped breakfast this morning, knowing Vickie would probably order way more than necessary here, forcing me to try everything she does. Out of the two of us, she’s way more adventurous with what she’s willing to try. Evident by that one time she bought chocolate-covered roaches and tried bribing me with \$50 to eat one.

I didn’t care how much I could have used that fifty for something. I turned it down.

After we’re seated with our drink orders in front of us, I look around the room as my friend scours the menu. I’m not necessarily broke, but I already know that I’ll be crying internally when I see the amount printed on the check.

“This place is nice,” I tell her, eyeing the festive decorations and delicious spices coming from where the wait staff is entering and leaving the back.

“My boss told me about this place,” she says, looking up from the menu.

A small smile creeps up my face. “The hot one?”

She grumbles under her breath.

“Are the women you work with still trying to get with him?” I ask, interested in the way her eye twitches. She always does that when she’s irritated.

“Not as much. He hasn’t shown them much interest.” With a lift of her shoulders, she points to something. “This lamb dish sounds delicious. What are you thinking about getting?”

She’s avoiding the conversation, which I find more interesting than anything. She could pass as a supermodel with her lean body, silky hair, and plump lips, so it’s not surprising that her boss isn’t paying much attention to the other women she works with. “Did your boss randomly recommend this place, or did it come up in conversation?”

Vickie grabs her lemonade. “I don’t remember.”

I don’t know why, but my best friend is lying to me. About a *guy*. Which, in her opinion, is the worst offense a friend could make against another. But unlike her, I don’t pressure her for more. “I’ll let it go for now because unlike you, I’m not pushy. But one day you’ll tell me whatever is going on there because something tells me there’s a story you’re not sharing.”

She makes a noise in her throat that makes me grin as I finally study the menu. About ten minutes later our orders are placed, and my friend gives me a solemn look after something behind me catches her eye.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Vick.”

Her lips press together.

“Victoria. If this is about the boss thing, I already said I wouldn’t say—”

“Don’t freak out,” she begins, making me want to instantly do that. “But some people just walked in...” Something crosses her face that I’ve seen before.

A scowl.

One she used to direct toward—

“Stevie?” someone asks from behind me.

My shoulders tense.

My spine straightens.

My eyes widen as I stare directly at my best friend, unable to turn my head to see the person standing behind me even though I know—I know—that voice.

I swallow slowly, Vickie looking both apologetic and angry all at once.

“Stevie, is that you?”

That voice. Low, but not as low as the one I’ve become used to hearing over the past few months. Slightly husky, but mostly...young. If I’m honest with myself, it’s a little unremarkable, though if you’d asked me six months ago, I would have found something attractive to say about it. Something nice to say about the tone I’d spent years listening.

I close my eyes for a second, take a long, deep breath before finally dealing with the reality of the situation.

Hunter.

“It is,” he murmurs, stopping at the side of our table and looking down at me.

Hunter is still as beautiful as any man can be. Tall, lean, confident. Well kempt, in a baby blue button-down that looks vaguely familiar, and a pair of black pants that fit his long runner legs. He always felt the need to dress up, even if we weren’t going anywhere that required it. His baby face is clean of any stubble, something he used to do a lot during the first few years of our marriage before he’d began growing out his dirty blond facial hair. The dirty blond hair on his head is a little longer than he usually keeps it. But he’s still the same man I remember from over the years, smiling that easygoing smile as he watches me with those damn blue eyes that I always got lost in.

My ex-husband shakes his head as he stuffs a hand into one of his pants pockets, then rubs the side of his neck with the other. “Wow. You look beautiful.”

Vickie snaps to attention. “Like that’s surprising?”

Slowly, Hunter looks at my friend. “I see some things never change. Always a pleasure, Victoria.”

The only person she lets call her that is my mother. Everyone else she glares at like she’s doing right now.

Hunter turns back to me. “I didn’t hear from you...” His lips rub together for a moment before he looks me over. “You really do look

beautiful. Did you get my flowers?”

Oh no. I can feel the look being burned into my face from across the table. I’d never gotten around to telling my best friend about the text or flowers. Mostly because I didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t feel like getting lectured about how I’m better off without someone like Hunter in my life when I knew I did.

I’d forgotten all about it.

“I did,” I answer cautiously. “Thanks.”

Thanks. I’m sure I could be nicer, but I don’t know what he expects from me. I’ve been avoiding this conversation since he reached out the first time, and the last place I want to have it is in the middle of a restaurant.

“What are you doing here?” I find myself asking.

“I’m in town for the holidays.”

Makes sense. Our families live close by to each other, which we used to take advantage of back in the day. Shared holidays. Sneaking out for midnight meetups. I’m pretty sure both our families knew, but they never said anything.

Hunter shifts his weight. “I saw your dad in the grocery store.” He pauses, clears his throat, and in a notch lower than before, adds, “He flipped me off.”

Vickie snorts. “Remind me to high-five him next time I see him.”

I sigh. “Vick.”

She rolls her eyes.

Hunter ignores her. “Look, I—”

“Can we not?” I cut him off, a panicked look on my face. “Listen, I hope you’re doing well and that you had a good holiday. You look...you look great too. But I don’t want to do this.” I take a deep breath and sit a little taller. “I don’t have anything I want to say.”

That makes him gape. “Nothing?”

Help me forget.

I shake my head stiffly. “Nothing.”

Why he looks surprised, I’m not sure. Maybe because I always did whatever he wanted. I was quick to agree and jump on whatever he said. But that girl couldn’t survive on her own, so something had to change.

“She’s too nice to tell you to fuck off,” Vickie chimes in. “But I’m not. We’re trying to enjoy ourselves, so fuck off.”

I close my eyes, not having it in me to scold her or ask her to play nice for my sake.

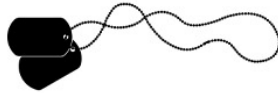
Hunter says, "I'll go for her."

I open my eyes and meet his. They're full of sorrow and other things I don't want to read into or dissect, so I nod silently.

"I would like to talk to you eventually, though," he adds quietly, but not pushing it before he taps the table a couple of times. "I'll get out of your hair. Have a good meal."

When he walks away, I stare down at my lap to avoid the look I know Vickie is shooting me right now. A look that probably includes daggers.

She says, "You have some serious explaining to do."



I make Vickie wait until after we're done eating, paid, and back in the car before spilling everything I've let myself forget. The text message. The flowers. While I was at it, I told her about Fletcher teaching me how to play poker, having an emotional breakdown in his bathroom, and then going back to his house for an early Christmas celebration with some of his friends.

Thankfully, I didn't recognize any of them from my other life with Hunter. None of them seemed to know me either beyond being dubbed "neighbor girl" or "Dom's teacher".

She'd let me get it all out in the open while she drove us back to my neighborhood, soaked it all in, before saying, "I can't believe you never told me."

I'd hurt her feelings and felt bad.

But in the days following, we've made up. Instead of her sending me apology gifts, I sent a gift card to Sephora to her job, and then some of her favorite chocolates to her house. We never stay upset with each other long, especially with the bribes we offer one another, so she was texting me again in no time.

I'm lounging on the couch in my favorite pair of pajamas that say *pizza is my favorite love triangle* across my chest when there's a knock at the door. And even though I tell it not to, my heart does a little jump when I get

up and glance out the window to see a wagging tail, then two other bodies beside it.

Fletcher's eyes go to my shirt before his lips quirk up after I open the door. "Morning." He gestures toward my pajamas. "Like your shirt."

Dominic holds up a plate of cookies covered in saran wrap. "We brought you cookies! My mom made them."

My eyes go from Nicki to his dad when Fletcher explains. "Trace wanted to say thank you for always helping out with Dominic at school. She's sad she keeps missing you. Surprised she hasn't just shown up here, to be honest."

The mother of his child just randomly showing up at my doorstep? That'd be... I don't know how I'd feel about that. "Oh." Hesitantly, I accept the plate and smile. "They look good."

"Mom is a great baker. Not like Dad."

Holding in a laugh, I see the amused look on the man in question's face. "I've been known to burn a few cookies here and there."

"And brownies," Nicki adds. "And my birthday cake that one time."

Fletcher sighs.

I can't help but smile. "It took me a while to get things right," I tell the youngest Miller, who's looking at something in the house. Admiral is sitting beside Fletcher, nose pointed toward the plate, head cocked as if he's waiting for me to feed him something. "Tell your mom I said thank you for the cookies."

The little boy's eyes go up to me before quickly darting away again. "I need to use the bathroom."

Fletcher puts his hand on his son's back, shaking his head. "We're almost home, bud."

"But I need to go really bad now."

I look between them, my eyes focusing on the man when I say, "I don't mind. I've got a bathroom right off the kitchen he can use."

He gives me a nod before I show Nicki where to go, Fletcher and Admiral walking in and closing the door behind them. It's the first time he's been inside since I put up my Christmas tree, a cheap find at a store that looks like I found it on clearance. There are gaps and missing needles and sadly strung lights around it. Most of the ornaments were on sale too, except the ones of mine that my parents collected over the years.

“It’s not much,” I note when his eyes go to the single stocking hanging off the TV stand. Then to the few cards I’d gotten from friends and family that are taped to the archway between the living room and dining room. “I thought I’d be more in the spirit since this is the first time I’ve really decorated a place by myself, but...” I shrug.

It’s the first house I’ve ever owned that I could have decorated any way I wanted. When I was little, I’d always beg my parents to let me start putting up Christmas decorations the day after Halloween. Dad would usually crack, helping me string up lights and put window decals up on his enclosed porch, but Mom would make me wait until after Thanksgiving.

“I could have helped,” that rumbling voice cut in, eyes coming back to me. “I’m sure I wouldn’t have needed to twist Nicki’s arm as much as I would yours.”

I fidget with the saran wrap-covered plate, glancing at the various treats beneath. “You’re probably right. It’s fine, though. My friend Vickie came over and helped a little. And when Bex was here, she did too.”

We’re quiet for a while.

So, I ask, “Did you and Dominic have a good holiday? Did Santa bring him everything he wanted?”

Fletcher’s lips twitch. “Santa may have gone a little overboard, but it produced a happy kid in the end.”

“That’s what matters.”

“Got to see some family, so it was nice,” he adds, eyes going in the direction of the bathroom before turning back to me. “What about you?”

I tell him about my Christmas. The food, the presents, and Vickie coming over and getting slightly drunk and arguing with my dad about which football team deserves to go to the Super Bowl while Mom and I watched with wine.

When Nicki comes back out, he stands by Admiral and pets him. “How come you live by yourself? Don’t you get lonely?”

Fletcher stares down at his son. “Nicki, we don’t ask people things like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s rude.”

“How am I supposed to get to know people unless I ask them questions? It’s a big house. I’d be lonely here all by myself too.”

He makes a valid point. "I do get lonely sometimes, but it's not so bad. I have friends and family who visit me, and I go see them at their places. I'm never alone for long."

From the corner of my eye, I see Fletcher's jaw tick.

Nicki cocks his head. "You should get a dog." He keeps petting Admiral. "Or a cat, but I think dogs are way better."

"Yeah?"

He nods enthusiastically. "I can help you choose one! There's a pet store in town that Dad won't let me go into because he says we don't need any more animals."

Fletcher grumbles, "We don't."

Nicki tugs on his dad's arm. "But Ms. Foster does! She's lonely."

I wince despite trying to hold it back.

"Dominic—"

"Please, Dad?"

I cut in. "That's very sweet of you to offer, Nicki, but I don't think I'm quite ready for an animal. They're a huge responsibility."

"If I can do it, you can," the child responds with confidence that reminds me a lot of his father. "I'm autistic, but I own a dog, and I feed him and take him out and play with him. So, you can do that too because your brain is wired right."

Fletcher's hand curves over his son's shoulder and squeezes once. Quietly, he says, "I told you before that there's nothing wrong with your brain."

"I'm not like other kids."

"Doesn't mean you're not normal," Fletcher tells him firmly.

"You're a great pet owner to Admiral."

The dog barks in acknowledgment.

"Tell you what," I proposition the youngest Miller. "I'll think about it. Okay? Does that sound like a deal?"

Dominic presses his lips together, looks around the house for something before returning his gaze back on me. "Deal. But I get to help pick the pet out, okay?"

"Dominic," Fletcher murmurs.

My lips waver. "Deal." I lift the plate. "I appreciate the cookies. Remember to tell your mom I said thanks."

“I will. Maybe next time she’s here, I’ll bring her over! She keeps saying she wants to meet you, but Jacob tells her that she needs to mind her business.”

I blink. “O-kay?”

Fletcher clears his throat. “Jake is her fiancé.”

Dominic nods. “I’m not going to call him dad, though, because he’s not. But he’s okay, I guess. He wants to teach me how to throw a baseball, but I don’t really want to.”

All I can do is stare and absorb the information they just gave me.

“Come on, bud,” Fletcher urges. He lifts his eyes. “Have a good rest of your day.”

“Bye, Ms. Foster! Hope you like the cookies. And think about the dog. Dad says you’re a good person and that he likes you just fine, so he’ll probably let me go with you to the store without him when you decide.”

A strangled laugh raises from my throat as I take that in, waving to them as Fletcher walks them out. He doesn’t acknowledge what his son just said, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t hear.

Fletcher Miller likes me ‘just fine’ whatever that means.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Want to go for a walk?” The question has me looking up from the pathway I just finished shoveling. I see the furry paws first, then the work boots next, eyes raking up the jeans and jacket I’ve seen plenty of times before at this point.

I smile. “Hi.” Glancing at my work, I lift a shoulder. “Sure, I wouldn’t mind a walk.”

Putting my shovel away, I pull my zipper a little higher up, make sure my door is locked, and my keys are safely in my coat pocket and meet Fletcher and Admiral at the end of the driveway.

He gestures toward the driveway I spent the last twenty minutes clearing. “I was planning on taking care of that for you after I walked Admiral.”

I shove my hands into my pockets and smile at him thoughtfully. “That’s why I have a shovel. I knew I’d have to take care of it when I moved. No big deal.”

He looks forward as we walk down the sidewalk, letting Admiral guide us as he sniffs around and stops every so often to mark his territory.

It’s a few comfortably quiet minutes of only our boots crunching against the salted pavement, and the sound of a gentle breeze rattling the snow-covered tree branches before the man beside me decides to speak. “You said something a little while ago that stuck with me. That when you’re in love, you feel invincible.”

His eyes remain forward while mine sneak a peek at his profile, curious about why he’s bringing this up now. I barely even remember saying it, but it’s obvious he’s thought about it for almost a solid month by now.

“I never felt invincible.”

I blink. He never...?

Looking down at me, he scans over my face. “Trace and I were never that serious. Hate to be one of those guys who admits that I found someone to have fun with, but that’s what it was, and that’s the kind of guy I’d been. I was looking for casual. Whatever you want to call it.” His eyes go back to Admiral again before glancing around us. I notice his shoulders tightening as they square off. “When she found out she was pregnant, I’d wanted to

make it more serious than it was. Settle down. Have a family since it was going to happen either way. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

He got married to her because she was pregnant. That’s...I don’t know quite what to think. It isn’t uncommon. It’s even a little admirable in a way.

“Can’t say we were miserable, but I can’t say either of us were completely happy either. Jacob, the man she’s with now, he makes her smile more than I ever could. I’m not an easy man to get along with sometimes. I like routine and don’t take change well. Doesn’t mean I won’t give it a shot. I’m just...”

“Stubborn,” I supply.

He cracks a smile. “Stuck in my ways.”

“Same thing.”

We share an amused look before he lifts a shoulder in reluctance. “She met Jake when we were still together. Dominic was about three. I could have been angry, should have been furious, to find out she’d been talking to somebody behind my back. I believe her when she said nothing happened between them. Traci’s a good woman. Always has been. She was just thrown into trying to make something work that we should have never bothered with, same as me.”

I wait for a few long heartbeats before I ask him, “Are you sad about it not working out?”

He shakes his head without hesitation. “I think when I realized I wasn’t upset that she met someone else, I knew. In fact, I was relieved that she found Jake.”

My brows go up.

“Pretty fucked up, isn’t it?”

“No,” I reply quickly. “No, I mean, as long as there’s no big heartbreak. I don’t know much about her or you two, but it seems like you get along well enough. If there’s one thing vital in any co-parenting relationship, it’s that type of civility. I’ve seen a lot since starting at Stanton. Heard even worse during my college years when I did teacher observations and student teaching in different school districts. If you get along with Traci, if you’re happy for her, then I don’t think that’s messed up at all.”

We stop when Admiral starts sniffing at the base of a tree on the curb. Fletcher looks at me, head cocked, those impressive, intense, dark eyes narrowed slightly. Half of his lips quirk up like something I said is funny to him. “You don’t swear much, do you?”

I snort unattractively before I can stop myself. “I do, actually, but I try to be good about it. The last thing I need to do is drop an f-bomb in the middle of my classroom with a bunch of fifth graders there to witness it. And I’ve come close.”

I almost miss the snicker. *Almost*. “Hard to imagine you dropping the f-bomb, honey. I kind of like that about you.”

The back of my shoulders tingle, sending the sensation all the way up my neck and down to my fingertips as I replay what he called me.

Honey.

He said it in such a soft tone that I have to do my best not to make a face or become too confused with the flutters filling my stomach—a feeling I haven’t had in a long, long time.

“Well, sorry to say that I’m known to indulge in more than that. On occasion, I’ll drop other classics like ‘ass’ and ‘damn’ or the big one.” His eyebrows raise in amused inquiry. “H-E-L-L. Or, as the kids like to say, h-e-double hockey sticks.”

The loud, boisterous laugh coming from him shakes his entire torso, and the sound...it does something to me. I’ve never known a laugh could be so attractive because I’ve never reacted to one the way I am with his rumbling. But the way he tosses his head back unapologetically makes me stare in awe, feeling my heart quicken a few beats faster than normal as I watch those broad shoulders shake.

The man who usually looks like the weight of the world is stacked on his shoulders, the soldier who’s always plotting the next move, figuring every way out of a scenario while weighing his options, looks carefree for once. Not one time have I ever seen him like this. Certainly not when I visited Hunter on base or lived there briefly with him and would cross paths with the man in civilian clothes beside me, and rarely since moving here.

His new decorum—looser, eased—is sexy.

There’s no denying it.

No pretending that I don’t find him attractive. Not just in this state, as he chuckles to himself and shakes his head, but in every state he’s shown me. The stoic, stone-faced one, the version that’s closed off, and everything in between.

I don’t know what to do with that realization. That acknowledgment. Because there’s got to be some sort of rule book that says you can’t find

your ex-husband's old boss sexy, much less like him in a capacity more than platonic.

And I do.

God, I do.

Because Fletcher Miller has so many layers to him that I doubt many people see, but I do. He's *let me* see them, experience them. He's shown me kindness and respect, treated me with warmth, helped me when he could have looked the other way. And, sure, there are times his bluntness irritates me, but it shows that he's been looking out for me from the start.

"What is it?" he asks, his voice calmer now, level again as he studies my face.

I have no idea what my expression must look like, so I quickly collect my thoughts and file them away for now. "Nothing. Just...it's nice to hear you laugh, is all. You don't do it very often."

Whether he believes that's all I'm thinking or not, he chooses not to call me out on it. "I'm like you with swearing. I do it, but it depends on the situation. Nicki makes me laugh all the time."

My heart warms even more for this man.

It's not until we're walking back toward my house a solid fifteen or twenty minutes later, our arms practically touching because we inched ourselves closer to one another at some point when I decide to ask him something I've never let myself think about for too long before.

"When Traci told you that nothing happened between her and Jacob when you two were married, and you said you believed her, did you have any doubt at all?" My voice is quiet, hesitant, knowing I shouldn't be poking this bear.

"Trace was a lot of things, but she was never a cheater," he answers simply, firmly.

I nod, my head bobbing up and down slowly as I think about that.

"Fletcher?"

We stop at the end of my driveway, his eyes on my face, mine struggling to stay on his when I want to look away. "I was wondering if...maybe you knew if..." Not able to say the words, I drop my gaze and let hair cascade over my face like a waterfall shielding the emotions building in my expression.

Warm fingers brush my cheekbones, combing the hair gently behind my ear before they tip my chin up to meet his eyes. Tingles linger from the

ghost of his touch. He studies me, first one eye, then the other, then my face in its entire frailty over my inquiry.

He knows what I'm asking. "I wish I could tell you the answer, honey, but the truth is, I told my men that what they do is on them. I made it clear that I wasn't responsible for any of the poor decisions they made, as long as it didn't impact the team as a whole."

I swallow, not able to look away because his fingers still have my chin held in a gentle lock. "He told me he never cheated, and I want to believe him. I *do*. But..."

He waits patiently for me to finish my thought, the pad of his thumb brushing my jaw and raising tiny goosebumps over my skin in the process.

"Sometimes I wish he did," I admit weakly, teeth grinding and shame taking over where the butterflies had resided only minutes ago. "Because then I could hate him. I would have been able to move on long before now because I had nothing to hold onto."

Fletcher does what I least expect.

He steps into me, wraps those thick, hard-earned muscular arms around me, and pulls me into his warm body.

A hug.

He's hugging me.

And even though I tell myself not to, I melt into his hold anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I try not to think about the hug, but I fail on many occasions. When I'm left alone to my thoughts, I think about how one of those big hands had moved to cup the back of my head and thread those long fingers through my hair. He'd brushed the strands with gentle strokes, never pulling, never rushing, as he held me into his body. His other hand, still holding the leash, had made circular motions on my lower back.

My low, lower back. At one point, his knuckles had grazed the top of my butt.

Those thoughts are what have me sitting at Bex's kitchen table with a cup of warm tea in my hand as she sits down across from me with another small cup for her.

"I think I like Fletcher," I tell her.

My neighbor blinks her soft, maternal eyes once, twice, a third time. The way she watches me makes me squirm, my fingers wrapping a little tighter around the teacup.

Then, she says, "Well, of course, you do, sweetheart." Her laugh comes next. "He's a good man. It's hard not to like him. And anyone at that party could see how he looked at you. I'm surprised he even let you leave his side. I swear that man gave every male in the room a warning look the second you walked over to me."

Why do people keep saying that?

Bex lowers her cup to the table. "Why does that make you look like you want to puke? Is it because of your ex? Are you still not ready? Because there's nothing wrong with that, Stevie. Fletcher is the last person who would pressure you into anything, I'm sure of it. My husband would always say he had an iron will. I think it actually frustrated poor Billy whenever he would suggest Fletcher get out and date. Fletcher would never agree, no matter how nice the woman was that Bill found for him."

Heaviness fills my chest over the thought of him with another woman. I have no right to be jealous, especially because of what I've done over the past few months. "It's not that. I mean, yeah, it's part of the reason why I'm not sure how to feel. Fletcher was one of Hunter's commanding officers.

Once, I remember him telling me that he admired Fletcher. And it makes me feel..." I make a face. "Dirty."

Bex's shoulders loosen as she leans back in her seat. "I don't think you should feel that way at all. There are people in our lives for every phase of it. Those who remain, no matter in what form, are the ones meant to be in it. A lot of people admire Fletcher, and you can too. Your husband, *ex-husband*, doesn't have a claim on him. Or anyone, for that matter."

I know she's right, but the feeling in my gut tells me I should still feel bad about liking the man who was in my ex's life for so long. "I saw him right after Christmas. Hunter came to the restaurant I was at with one of my friends." After telling her about how I stood my ground, she got a prideful look on her face, and I admitted it felt nice to tell him no. "Our entire marriage, I did whatever he wanted, and telling him I didn't want to talk at that moment was...is it lame if I said empowering?"

She smiles. "It'd only be lame if you called it lame."

I blush. "I'm new to all of this."

"Oh, honey. Aren't we all?"

We finish our tea and talk about her and the Sexy Santa who called her a couple weeks ago to ask her out. When she told me that she had a date this weekend, I squealed and made her tell me all about what she was wearing and where they were going. When we were gossiped out, I found myself walking back over to my house, but bee-lining last minute to one across the street where the man I want to see is squatting down in his driveway tinkering on something with his truck.

He stands when I approach him, giving me a smile as he wipes his hands off on a red rag stained with something black before stuffing it into his back pocket. "Peaches." One of his arms reaches out, tugging me into his side in a one-armed hug. "I was going to drop by later," he tells me, keeping an arm wrapped around my shoulder as I hook mine around his trimmed waist.

"Oh yeah?"

He hums. "You mentioned you wanted to take your decorations down. Thought I'd be able to help."

I know Nicki is with his mom because I'd watched Fletcher and his son leave last night, and when the truck pulled back in, it was just the man currently keeping a solid hold of me. "I did say that," I agree.

"Thought maybe I could cook us something," he adds quietly, hesitantly.

When I look up at him, he's already watching me with a tentative expression. "You want to cook for me?"

His lips curl. "I was hoping maybe you'd share it, but yeah."

I press my lips together for a second. "I'm kind of greedy when it comes to good food just so you know."

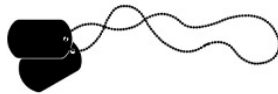
He chuckles, rubbing my arm with slow, steady strokes to create warm friction. "Then I guess I'll just have to convince you."

And that low-spoken promise paired with the way his eyes stay on my face does way more than his laugh did to me.

"Seven," he murmurs.

I almost miss it.

Clearing my throat, I nod. "Seven."



I don't realize it's sort of a date until I find myself changing my outfit three times until I'm basically in the same thing I started with. A nice pair of jeans that hug my hips and butt, and a sweater that's warm and emphasizes all the right curves while hiding all the ones created by Bex's daughter's baking.

How long has it been since I've been on a date that I've actually wanted to be on? I don't count Miles and definitely don't let myself think about the man I met at the bar. In fact, I got rid of my sheets and bought new ones because I could barely stand to look at the bed for days.

He'd definitely helped me forget.

Because all I can think about is the guilt from our one-night stand instead.

Tonight may not even be a date. Fletcher is probably just being nice by offering to help me. He's definitely seen the number of baked goods Bex has given me. If it's not her, it's his ex-wife's treats that I accept through Nicki and Fletcher's visits to my house with Admiral to drop them off. For all I know, he thinks that's what I'm living on and need something with more sustenance.

It's easier to think that because if I believe that he considers this more than a casual dinner between neighbors, then I'll sweat through this sweater and need to change into a different one. And I'll go back on a cleaning

binge until my house is even more spotless than it is now, even though Fletcher has seen it in all its various stages of untidiness.

Walking downstairs, I do one more glance around each room before blowing out a breath. Then, a few minutes before seven, there's a knock at the door, jumpstarting my heart and making my hands clam up as I turn the knob and greet the man behind it.

And I swear I stop breathing for a second.

The man whose wardrobe consists of mostly T-shirts, plaid button-downs, and probably an old dress uniform or two stored away, is in dark denim and a dark green sweater with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows that hugs his fit body beautiful. He doesn't look that different than any other day, but there's still *something* that makes him look ten times more attractive, and that's...dangerous.

"Come in," I say, smiling and stepping aside so he can pass me. It's only after checking him out that I see the bag hanging from his hand.

He lifts it. "I brought over some things to make seafood pesto, but I brought alternatives if you don't like shrimp."

I quickly shake my head. "That sounds fine to me. What can I do to help?"

Fletcher pulls out a bottle of wine. Red. An expensive brand that I occasionally treat myself to when I have the extra money. "Open this and relax. I'll handle dinner."

Even though I want to fight him, to offer some sort of help, I don't. I highly doubt I'd get far with a man like Fletcher Miller anyway.

After pouring two glasses of wine, passing him his, and settling onto a chair, I watch the taut muscles of his back flex as he empties the bag and organizes the ingredients.

"Cutting board?" he asks, looking over his shoulder at me.

I point. "Bottom left cabinet."

He grabs it, then a knife from the rack next to the sink. "How was the rest of your day?"

His casual demeanor as he chops up garlic makes me try to ease my tense muscles as I sip my drink. I don't tell him that I spent the day tearing apart my house and cleaning it or that I sent my best friend three different outfit options for tonight and didn't go with any of them after an hour of back-and-forth. He probably grabbed his outfit ten minutes before he left, and...

Did I smell cologne on him?

Date. It's got to be a date.

I clear my throat. "It was good." Why does my voice sound like that?

As if he knows where my head is at, he looks over his shoulder again with a smug grin on his face. "Good, huh?"

"Mmhmm."

Giving me his back to finish chopping the garlic clove, I hear a quiet chuckle. Staring at my wine, I roll my shoulders and return the question, hoping he'll be better at keeping up the conversation than I am when I'm so in my head.

"I fixed a few things on my truck, talked to a few people I work with about repairs on some of their vehicles in the next few weeks." Like I thought, there's no waver to his tone, simply contentment. "When I retired from the military, I couldn't just stand around. I like staying busy. Still help out with some things old colleagues ask of me back on base but have experience with automotive that keeps my hands busy the rest of the time."

My eyes trail down to the hands in question, fixated on how he holds the knife handle and slices with exact precision. "What got you into fixing up cars?"

One of his shoulders lifts as he wipes off his hands and grabs one of the frying pans and a saucepan that's hanging on the sidewall. "I've always liked fixing up cars. Trucks, mostly. Older model restorations. My dad and I used to bond over that before I enlisted."

"How old were you when you enlisted?"

"Eighteen."

Just like Hunter.

My lips twitch at the thought. "Were there other military members in your family that made you want to join?" Hunter's three uncles were all in the air force, and his grandfather was in the Navy. He talked about enlisting ever since he knew what that was, according to his mother.

"No, just me." His voice is low as he focuses on what he's doing, filling the saucepan with water and setting it on one of the burners to heat. "I didn't come from a well-off family. They always struggled to pay the bills every month, and I knew I'd be no different unless I did something about it. Thought about going to college but didn't want to take out loans that I'd regret later in life when I had to repay them."

I nod slowly. "So you joined the Army."

He hums in confirmation.

“Did you ever go to college?”

Slowly, he turns and props a hip on the edge of the counter. “Would it bother you if I said no?”

I sit straighter. “Of course not.”

He stares for a second. Two. Three. Then, slowly, his chin dips. “Had some people in my past who felt strongly about that.”

People... “Family?” It’s a poor way to fish for answers, and based on the small curl to his lips, he knows as well as I do that it isn’t family he’s referring to.

“Exes. Girlfriends.”

I’m proud of myself for not reacting in a way that would give away my thoughts. That cement feeling settles into my stomach, and I don’t want to acknowledge it. So what if he’s had girlfriends? An ex-wife? He’s ten years older than me, which means more experience than I have. His split with his wife was mutual, unlike mine, so I’m sure he was able to move on far easier than I have been.

“Well, it’s your life. College isn’t for everyone anyway. My best friend didn’t go, and she’s happy. You seem happy too.” I lift my shoulders and play with the stem of my wine glass as he studies me.

Eventually, he agrees. “I am. And it’s not. When I was younger, I thought I’d want to go to school and learn more, but nothing really captured my interest enough to study it that closely.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a teacher.”

My lips form into an easy smile at the memories of Christmases where my parents would feed the fantasy. Stickers, a white board, a chalk board, colorful chalk, and even a small desk that looked like the one’s schools supply their teaching staff would be given to me. Every day after school, I pretended to teach my parents the same lessons I learned, and they’d always play along even if they knew how to do basic addition and subtraction already.

Meeting his eyes, my smile grows. “I was in high school when one of my guidance counselors told me she thought it was a perfect fit for my personality. I went back and forth on what grades to teach but decided I’d prefer working with children. Older students are too...” I can’t find the right word. “Challenging, I guess. Not that I couldn’t handle it, I’m sure.”

“You would have found a way,” he agrees simply, turning back to the food and grabbing pasta noodles. “Is this your first teaching position? Or have you had others?”

The topic sours any good feelings I was having, and my long-winded hesitation has him looking over at me with an arched brow.

“Ah. Forbidden topic?” he guesses, his voice low but understanding.

My gaze lowers. Ever since I told Bex about my past with Hunter, a weight was lifted off my chest. Of course, some of it is still there from time to time, but I realize it’s only when I choose not to address my past. “Can we forget about what I asked you that first time I came over?”

He stops what he’s doing and turns around to face me.

I sit back, pulling my hands into my laps and fidgeting with my fingers. “I thought not talking about it would help, but it just makes me feel worse. Bex knows, my best friend knows, and one of my coworkers knows some stuff, but it feels like I’m living some sort of lie or double life by not addressing why I came here. Fresh starts can still have old memories attached, right?”

Silent, he nods once. My tongue slowly wets my lips, the movement caught by Fletcher’s eyes as he follows the pattern I set before his gaze moves back to my eyes.

I pull my shoulders back. “We lived on base,” I say quietly, a fact he knows because he was there too toward the end. Somewhere, maybe not far, but more than likely in a private area because of his rank compared to Hunter’s. “When I was with Hunter, I wasn’t Stevie Foster. I wasn’t a teacher or the independent woman who’s too stubborn for her own good sometimes.”

His lips waver into a small smile for a second before going back to neutral.

“I was just Hunter’s wife. The one who cooked, and cleaned, and sometimes went out with the other women around, but I didn’t have a job outside of that. I had the degree and the knowledge, but...” It sounds pathetic the more I say it, especially with Fletcher watching me, absorbing every word, and observing every little movement I make—the shift of my weight, the twitch of my hands, the bouncing of my leg on the stool. “The truth is, I settled.”

Once the words are out, I let them sink in.

Really sink in.

Because they're true.

I may have loved Hunter, but looking back now, after getting a taste of the freedom I never had before, I settled for the comfort he'd given me. The affection he handed me. And while I adored him and those moments, the memories we shared together, I also have to accept that he'd only give me what he could when it was convenient for him.

He's the one who started everything between us. Talking to me in the hall at school, showing up to my locker and offering to drive me home, asking me out on a date. He gave me his number and told me there was no pressure to use it, which made me want to use it more. He was the one who leaned in to kiss me the first time, and the first one who'd suggested we take things farther as our relationship progressed.

Hunter proposed.

Hunter suggested I take time off work.

And, inevitably, Hunter is the one who decided to end it.

Every part of our relationship was controlled by him. I never thought twice about it because I was happy—content with the life we lived. The attention he'd given me.

And I let him break me.

Take it away.

Move on like it was never him who wanted what we'd had in the first place.

My heart *thumps, thumps, thumps* heavily in my chest until I feel the sadness flow throughout my body and weigh down my limbs.

"Hey," Fletcher says softly, suddenly in front of me. He's eye level, one hand cupping my upper arm, and the other tipping my chin up to meet his eyes like he did the day when we'd taken a walk together. "Whatever is going through your head is not worth letting it consume you. Our pasts are pasts for a reason. They're meant to be lessons we learn from. Maybe you did settle for him, but you know better than to settle for anybody now. Right?"

His 'right' doesn't offer me much room to tell him no, or that he's wrong. It's his delivery, soft yet firm, sure, and determined to make me see his way, that has me nodding. But even after I do that, I let out a small breath and admit, "I don't want to be put through what I was with him."

Fletcher's eyes go black.

His right eye twitches.

He straightens to full height, maybe twice as tall as he normally stands. "He do something to you, Stevie?"

"No!" I quickly shake my head. "No, it was nothing like that. Hunter never laid a hand on me in any way that hurt me or anything like that." I can tell that loosens his shoulders a little, but he doesn't move from the taut stance. "I just meant that I was in a relationship with one man since I was fifteen, and he always made the choices. He was the one who decided what we did, what we didn't, and I thought that was...normal. I never really cared if he called the shots. Even in our marriage, that's what he did. He lived the life he wanted, and I lived the life he wanted me to."

"I never want to be controlled by another person, Fletcher, and I think that's the biggest reason why moving on scares me so much. Because I don't know how to be the one in control or share my time with someone and not be afraid that they'll take over. I'm finally doing what I want, teaching, living on my own terms, and the thought of anyone walking into my life and changing that terrifies me."

Squeezing my fists after my fears are spoken aloud for the very first time, I shake my head and stare at my lap. I'd never realized how long I'd bottled that up. I don't even know when I realized it's what I've been afraid of. Seeing Hunter, knowing he wants to talk, telling him I didn't want to, fed something deep inside me that was starved for so long.

My independence.

My right to *choose*.

And now, the man standing in front of me, looming big and tough and confident and so many other things at once, is watching me in a way that makes me afraid I'll fall back into something for the same reasons.

Comfort.

Attention.

Affection.

Attraction.

I swallow. "I'm terrified of you."

His entire body goes rigid, and in a strained voice I've never heard from him before, he says, "I would *never* do anything to hurt you."

Another swallow, this one getting stuck in my throat thanks to the ball of emotion wedged in my windpipes. "I know," I croak. "I'm not afraid of you like that. I'm afraid because you're the type of man that any woman would

be so lucky to have. You're the man that women would kill to have all the attention from because you're wonderful, kind, and caring. And I'm..."

Broken.

Healing.

Lost.

Searching.

"I'm still trying to figure it out," I whisper, more to myself than him.

For the longest time, it's quiet. Nothing but the water boiling on the stove and the sound of our breathing fills the room. Then, Fletcher lowers himself, so he's right in front of me. Not touching me but showing me he's here.

Giving me space while owning it too.

"I'm not here to take anything away from you, Stevie. The only thing I'm here for is dinner, then helping you take down your Christmas decorations, and maybe, if you're willing, we can do it again. Dinner. Lunch. Breakfast. We can go on walks with Admiral and talk about anything or nothing at all." His brown eyes pierce mine. "If we do this, we do it on your terms. We take our time. Because there may be other women who want my attention, but it's not them I'm looking at."

I suck in a small breath.

"Just dinner," he repeats.

I manage to nod slowly.

"Decorations," he adds.

Another nod.

"I want to be clear here, honey. I'm not stepping into your life to tell you what to do or how to do it. Your decisions are yours alone, including whether you'll let me be a part of them in the future. Get me?"

I'm quiet, stunned speechless.

"Who you choose to be in your life," he looks away, "what you decide to do with your body—" His jaw gets tight. "That's only going to be my business if I'm the one invited to do something about it."

When his eyes get dark, they're dark in a whole different way than they were when he thought I was being hurt. This time, it's lust fueling those dilated orbs. "And trust me, Stevie. If you give me a chance, I'll make sure your body, your mind, and everything in between is handled right."

We stare at each other, a stuttered breath escaping my lips, while he keeps an even expression on his face the whole time. When his eyes move,

they trail over mine, then down to my nearly straight nose, and finally my parted lips.

He doesn't make a move.

Doesn't take what I can tell he wants.

He's waiting.

For me.

"I'm too old for games," he concludes, voice serious. "Too old to not be honest about what I want, and what I hope to get in return. Because that's what a relationship is. Equal and mutual respect for the person you're giving yourself to. It's never letting one person become bigger than the other. So, I'm laying it down right here, right now. I like you, Stevie. I respect you. And I'll wait until you're ready because I have nowhere else to be. I'm in no rush."

Fletcher stands again, giving me one last look, body looser than my shocked-still posture, before dipping his chin once and then going back to the food.

He cooks us dinner.

Pours me more wine.

And after we're done, we wash the dishes together and start working on taking down all the holiday decorations in peaceful silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I stare at the email that had come through my phone during one of my lessons and scan the screen for the third time to be sure I'm reading it right. The salad in front of me is neglected, the smell of the light ranch coating the leafy greens unable to draw my attention back to the slight hunger that'd gnawed at my stomach an hour leading up to my lunch period.

HCross88@hotmail.net: Stevie, can you find time to meet me and talk?

I scored an 800 for both reading and writing on my SAT exams back in high school, so I know I'm not reading this wrong. Still, I can't help the feeling that bubbles in my stomach seeing an email address I haven't since we'd communicated about lawyer fees and legal representation amid our divorce.

As if that's not enough, there's a second one waiting for me sent eighteen minutes after the first was sent and delivered in my inbox.

HCross88@hotmail.net: Please?

He hasn't used my number since the first time or sent anything to the house. I'd hoped after seeing him at The Penny that he'd understand. That, somehow, telepathically, he'd know I didn't want to address anything that had to do with us.

But I know that's not realistic.

Setting my phone down, I poke at my salad, moving around a crouton and piece of chopped carrot before blowing out a breath.

The problem is, Hunter is persistent. Another trait I blindly admired during our time together. If he wanted something, he went after it without giving up. He did his best to train and beat his fitness scores and build enough muscle to bench press 300 pounds when he was challenged. Once, he'd managed to convince one of the most stubborn elderly women I'd ever met in my life to let us build a fence between our properties. We'd talked about getting a dog, one I could take care of and have near me when he was away.

He never did get around to building the fence, using it as a reason not to get a dog. His mother had told him to hire somebody to come to get an

estimate to do the work and then talked him out of that when she'd suggested holding off from investing money in it in case we moved. It wasn't until much later I'd wondered if they'd talked about moving long before Hunter had brought it up to me.

Then again, it wouldn't have been the first time I was the last to know something.

"Whoa, what'd that salad do to you?" Sonia asks, poking her head into my room. "You look like I do when the Starbucks lady gets my order wrong in the mornings."

I can't help but laugh at that. "That's dangerous. I've seen you without coffee before and it's frightening."

She walks in and settles across from me at a desk too small for even her lean body. "So, why do you look mad like your salad isn't magically turning into a pizza?"

Smiling a little, I give her the roundabout answer. "Just some things on my mind about my ex." I can tell she wants to ask more, but I don't give her a chance to. "How are things going with you since you decided to go on a diet for the New Year?"

Sinking into the seat, she groans. "I failed on day three. It wasn't my fault though. I couldn't let the chocolate in my house go to waste. Or the leftover pizza I may or may not have ordered on day one and then felt slightly guilty about, so I only ate one piece."

I snicker.

"Now I see why you didn't make any."

That's not entirely true. I made some resolutions but kept them to myself. Some things are too personal to post online or share with coworkers.

All I say is, "We all strive to be better than the year before."

She snorts. "Not everyone. Miles is engaged."

If I were eating my salad, I would have choked. "Engaged as in...to be married?"

"What other kind is there?"

I blink. "Haven't they only known each other for a couple of months?"

She nods, looking way more excited than anything. "Barely. It's going to be a total shitshow."

Instantly, I give her a look. "Sonia, that's horrible. Take it from somebody who rushed into things with a person. It's not fun."

Guilt takes over her expression. “Sorry, I forget sometimes. But, I mean, you dated for a while before getting married.”

She’s right, but that still doesn’t stop me from wondering if waiting would have changed anything. “True, but we were still young. Too young. Maybe if we’d held off, if we listened to everybody, things wouldn’t have turned out the way they did.”

Her head tilts. “Do you think you would have gotten married if you waited?”

Rubbing my lips together, I contemplate my answer. “I don’t know. If we’d waited a few more years, maybe we would have matured as two separate people before becoming one unit. Or maybe we wouldn’t have worked out because we’d lived our own lives and got a taste for that.”

“You talk about it easier than you did.”

She means I don’t cry anymore, which I’ve noticed too. So, I give her the best explanation I can. “Turns out, it takes knowing the right person to realize the wrong ones don’t matter as much as you thought.”

Her lips part.

Close.

Then part again.

But, for once, Sonia is speechless.

I smile to myself, pull my salad toward me, and pick up my fork.

It doesn’t matter that I’ve known Hunter Cross for seventeen years or that we’d been together for the majority of those. Because nothing compares to what I’ve learned in the short time that I’ve gotten to know Fletcher Miller.

Sometimes you meet the right person at the wrong time. I think about all the times I’d seen the man living across the street in passing. It may not have been often, but he was there. Nearby. In Hunter’s life, and because of that, in mine.

The truth is, you’ll never meet the right person until you fully let go of the wrong one.

So, I forget about the email and stab a few pieces of lettuce. “So, how’d you find out about Miles’s engagement?”



Dad grumbles when I show up at his house with groceries that consist mostly of fresh produce and a few other healthier options since last time I was here, the only things he had around were Little Debbie snack cakes, sodium-packed premade microwavable meals, and whatever Mom would give him to heat up. He can cook, he just rarely does it. He says he's "too busy" to worry about getting his vegetables in.

Helping me unload the bags of food, he decides to focus on other things. "You're about due for an oil change," he says, huffing over the low-fat yogurt I'd picked up for him. "I can get what I need tomorrow and do it then."

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop my lips from curling up, and he notices it since he's trying not to scowl at the head of broccoli and bananas on the counter. So, I tell him that it's been taken care of already.

He doesn't hide his surprise, his furry white brows arching up on his forehead. I'd had the same reaction when I woke up to a noise outside my house early this morning. I'd slept in for once, so when I'd adjusted to the light and looked out the window, I saw Fletcher underneath my car. I'd watched Dad change my oil enough times to know that's what my neighbor had been doing.

I got dressed, brushed my hair, and poured two cups of coffee, bringing them outside to have with him. He'd sat up, accepted the mug, and simply said, "Morning."

Then he went back to work.

I forgot I'd even mentioned having my dad do my oil when I visited. Apparently, Fletcher decided to take care of it knowing I'd never ask him. I'd even offered to repay him for what he'd bought to do it, but he'd given me a look that said *shut up, Stevie*, a look I'm sure many of his soldiers had gotten over the years, and that was that.

Giving Dad a lesser version of that, simply saying a neighbor with experience working on cars had done it for me, I finish putting away his groceries. I know he wants to ask for more information, but unlike Mom, he doesn't pry. Instead, he lets it be, picking up one of the oranges I bought and says, "Why are these so damn small?"

"They're called Cuties," I explain, smiling to myself in amusement. "They're popular with kids because they're smaller and easier to peel."

I think he said, "I'm not a damn kid."

Simply patting his shoulder, I nod and watch as he peels it anyway and starts picking apart the pieces while I think about the man who'd left my house this morning with oil staining his hands.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When I arrive at the bar, it's loud. My phone's battery on a low charge and not delivering any messages since I left the school. I frown at my empty inbox when I check it to see if Vickie or Sonia texted.

Stumbling when someone bumps into me, I get a soft-spoken apology from the man before his eyes do a doubletake and trail up and down my body with a look of interest crawling over his face as he swigs his beer. I'm nothing to look at, today, especially. I look disheveled and probably as tired as I feel after a long workday and back-to-back meetings. But I know the jeans I changed into fit my legs snugly, and the sweater and jacket covering my torso aren't too baggy or too tight, showing off what little curves I have. And based on the stranger's slow curling smirk kicking up the corners of his lips as he lowers his bottle, I'd say he appreciates it.

Even if I don't.

I offer a civil smile and look around the crowded room, glancing between the patrons and phone to see if I can get a message from my friends about where they are. I'd wanted to back out and get their forgiveness another day, but Vickie wasn't having it. She'd said if Sonia could come after having just as long a day, I could too.

So, here I am. Reluctantly.

"Wasn't expecting you here," a low voice says from right behind me.

When I turn, I can't help but let the civil smile grow into a larger, more genuine one when I see the man standing there. Without hesitating, I step into his side, and he wraps a bulky arm around my back and draws me in closer. Something presses against my head, and I know after a moment that it's his lips.

Stepping back, I look up at him. "What are you doing here?"

He gestures toward the bar. "Meeting an old...friend. He's not here yet. Want a drink?"

Fletcher's mild hesitation over who he's meeting makes me want to glance at him longer than I do, but instead, I give another look around the room before turning back to him. "I don't see my friends yet either, so sure."

I follow him to the bar, where he parts the crowd with ease, nobody standing in his way once they see him coming. His hand reaches behind him, clasping mine and making sure I keep close instead of getting eaten by the amount of people demanding drinks and waving money at the two bartenders behind the counter.

Staring at our threaded fingers, his long ones interwoven with my short makes the exhaustion I was feeling when I arrived disappear. In its place is something energetic and exhilarating, stirring the beat of my heart in a heavier rhythm until I can feel the *thump, thump, thump* in my eardrums. I don't know why, but I find myself squeezing his palm, getting the same response back and absorbing the warmth his hand offers as he gives one of the bartenders our order.

He doesn't have to ask.

Red wine for me.

Beer for him.

I know from the times we've hung out at one of our houses when Dominic is with his mom that he prefers Samuel Adams IPA over Bud Light even though he'll drink whatever is offered to him because he's "not picky". I could tell the kind I'd given him at my place wasn't as good as his normal because I caught the face he made when he took his first sip. Since I like keeping things on hand for our visits, I replaced it with Sam Adams, catching the small smile on his face when he accepted it, popped the cap, and told me about the newest automotive project he was working on for a friend of a friend.

Since the dinner, we'd seen each other a few times a week. Sometimes, I'd find myself waiting for him hoping he'd come over even if we didn't make plans. Usually, he didn't disappoint, like there was some mutual feeling that told him to knock on my door, sometimes with Admiral, other times by himself.

Either way, we always sat down, had something to drink, whether it was coffee or something stronger, and found things to talk about. Movies, which Fletcher isn't a fan of. Books, which he likes to read during his down time, and his family, which he talks to regularly and sees a few times a month with Dominic. He's closest to his mother and one of his younger sisters, and they all adore Nicki.

Not that I'm surprised by that.

Fletcher hasn't told me whether or not Nicki knows of my friendship with his dad. I don't know what I'd even say, considering he's giving me time and space, letting me be the one who sets the pace of whatever this is. Friendship. More. He made himself clear the day he made me dinner for the first time, and each word he spoke to me that night has stuck with me since. If I ask him what his son knows, it could jumpstart something that I may decide I'm not ready for.

Something beyond the platonic nature of our back-and-forth conversations, slightly longer-lasting hugs, and house visits.

Maybe it's because Valentine's Day is right around the corner, but I can't help but wonder what I am to Fletcher or what he wants me to be to his son. Even though there's no real policy against teacher's dating parents, something I found myself looking up two weeks ago when the hug Fletcher had given me had lasted a lot longer and felt a lot tighter, than any of the other ones we shared, I still can't help but feel like waiting would be a better option.

I'm sure Ms. Clifton would have something to say about it if word got out that I was romantically involved with a student's parent. I'd like to avoid that conversation for as long as I can.

Not to mention Mom. She's avoided the dating topic since the holidays. Nevertheless, I can tell she wants to ask, especially when she brings up her friend's grandbabies and how much she'd love to be able to hold one of her own someday. "*When you're ready, of course,*" she had made sure to add when both Dad and I gave her the same exasperated look.

Fletcher hands over the money and takes the drinks set in front of him, turning and handing me mine. He leans forward, lips brushing my ear until goosebumps cover my arms from his warm breath, and says, "There's a table over there."

With his free hand, he pulls me along with him, shooting looks at the few people who nudge me to get by and nodding at others who seem to know him by name before we stop at a small two-person table in the back corner. Then he does something no other man has.

He pulls out my chair for me.

When it takes me a few moments to sit down, amusement flickers in his eyes and curls his lips before he pushes the chair in and walks over to the other side. "See your friends yet?" he asks, his voice not as loud now that we're in a quieter section.

My eyes do another scan, but I'm too short to see past the people standing around. "I don't think so. They'll find me. What about your friend? Somebody you served with?"

He nods. "Someone I used to know. It's been a while."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

Fletcher stares off. "Too long." His eyes narrow. "Not long enough."

I try not to dissect his vague response or the way his jaw ticks. "Sorry if I'm prying."

His sigh comes next. "You're not. It's hard seeing people from back then. A lot has changed over the years. Me the most."

"Were you close with him?"

A shoulder lifts as his fingers wrap around the bottle in front of him. "I wouldn't say we were great friends or anything, but we had our moments. It was like that with a lot of the men."

"Rank didn't matter to you?" Hunter usually hung out with people he worked the most with, others in his rank. Last I heard from hometown gossip, he was about to be promoted to Staff Sergeant.

The man across from me shakes his head, swiping a palm down his stubbled jaw. I'd noticed the shadow he was growing out last time we saw each other but didn't ask if he was growing it out. Some men couldn't pull facial hair off. Hunter and his baby face was one of them, but Fletcher...

"The way I see it, there's always going to be somebody ranked higher and lower than you. I didn't necessarily have many friends there, but brothers in arms around my age that I knew I could depend on. That was enough for me."

His answer is exactly what I expect it to be, which is nothing like how my ex would have replied. It's dignified.

The way he shifts in his seat in some form of discomfort tells me to move on, so I pick up my wine and swirl it. "Nicki has been missed this week. Traci made sure to email me asking for his homework assignments to be collected for when he's better."

His eyes finally come back to me. "When she called me on Sunday, I'd wanted to pick him up, but he wanted her." His voice sounds...off. Hurt. "From what she told me, he's doing better. Could've gone back to school today, but she wanted to keep him at home for an extra day. Give him the weekend to fully recover."

I reach out, touching his hand. He stiffens before loosening, flipping his hand, and capturing my fingers. Looking from our linked hands on the table to his face, I smile. “I always wanted my mom when I was sick too. Most kids are like that, boy or girl. Have you seen him?”

A nod. “I went to see him last night. Trace didn’t want me to risk catching anything before he was acting like himself again. I brought Admiral and watched them play.”

“Sounds like he’s definitely better then.”

Whatever shadowed his features before lightened with the remark. “Barely anything can get between that boy and his dog. Did I ever tell you how we got Admiral?”

I shake my head.

He leans back, looking a lot more carefree than he did as he takes a sip of his beer before chuckling. “I’d just moved to the house, and Nicki had come over and picked out his room for when he would stay there—this was a while before we decided to move him in and change districts. We were walking into town to do some shopping for a few things I didn’t have when we passed the pet store.” A smile quirks at my lips, remembering Nicki’s insistence on helping me pick out a dog. “He saw the puppies through the window. Before I knew it, he was running inside. Admiral walked right up to him and started licking his hands, trying to climb out of the playpen he was in with the other dogs to get to Dominic.”

Fletcher’s head shakes as he remembers the memory. “When the owner of the store let me pick him up, damn dog pissed all over me. Marked his territory and made Dominic laugh louder than he had in...a long time before then. When I heard that, I knew we had to get him. He was our dog, and he chose us for a reason.”

Warmth cascades over me, and it’s not because of the alcohol flowing through my system. “Some things are destined to be in our lives,” I tell him softly.

He looks at me, then at our hands.

And squeezes.

“I’m inclined to agree, honey.”

One drink becomes two as the conversation flows, then three after the second drinks are finished sometime later. He orders us food that we split, tells me about the early years of his military career, and almost two hours

later, he leans forward, brushes his thumb against my lip in the softest, most intimate caress I've ever felt, before he murmurs, "You had a crumb..."

I swallow.

His eyes stare at my mouth.

And I want to tell him to kiss me.

Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me.

But then his focus trail to something behind me, and the hope deflates in my chest.

"The person I'm meeting just walked in." His eye twitches as he leans back, staring at the watch always perched on his wrist. If he takes it off, there'd be tan lines even in the winter, but even those tan lines would be darker than my pale skin. "I'd ask if you want to join us, but..."

Nibbling my lip, I look at my nearly empty glass of wine. I'm a little disappointed he doesn't want me to but choose to let it go for now. "I guess I should go anyway. I don't think my friends ended up coming."

And I'm not that upset about it either.

"I'll walk you out."

"Your friend—"

"Made me wait this long to grace me with his presence," he grumbles coolly. "He can wait for a little while longer while I walk my girl to her car. As long as you're okay to drive."

"It takes more than two and a half glasses of wine to get me drunk, Lieutenant Colonel."

His eyes narrow.

"Sir," I tease.

We walk to the door, his hand lifting from where it rested on my lower back and toward the direction of the bar to let his friend know to give him a minute before we head to my car parked in a decent spot, considering how many people were here when I arrived.

Stopping at the car door, I look up at him. "I had fun tonight, even if my friends ditched me."

He gives me a small smile. "I'm glad they did. Maybe we can have a second date somewhere quieter."

I blink. "This was a date?"

Fletcher laughs, reaching forward and taking loose strands of hair, and brushing them out of my face. "Not a good one if you have to ask."

My face heats. “I just meant...” I heft out a little laugh myself. “We’ve already had more than two by now in my mind. The dinners you’ve cooked me and all that.”

His eyes darken, scoping out my face. “Is that right?”

Slowly, I nod.

His hand stays on my face, fingers dancing along my jawline and chin. “Then let me take you on another. Somewhere nice, just the two of us. I know a place.”

In a breathy tone, I whisper, “Okay.”

Sucking in a short breath when he leans down, I let my eyes close as his lips brush against my cheek. They linger for a moment, then two, before moving to my forehead and disappearing altogether.

“Goodnight, Stevie.” He opens the door for me, then closes it when I’m safely inside with my keys in the ignition.

Rolling down the window, I reply, “Good night.”

He waits until I drive away before walking back inside the bar.

And all I can wonder is, *why didn’t he kiss me?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I shoot the two women a narrowed gaze when I show up at the community center that holds our yoga class and get unapologetic grins back from both Vickie and Sonia. Ever since the two met at the winter carnival, they've been thick as thieves, making our usual twosome a very energetic and mischievous threesome. "You ditched me," I accuse, holding open the door for them and following them inside.

Our mats are all tucked under our arms, and we're all in some form of yoga attire. I know when Vickie strips off her coat, she'll be in a tight sports bra that shows off her impressive, perky C-cups and tight pants that hug her bubble butt and curvy hips. She always winks at the older guys who come in and set up next to where we do, and I'm pretty sure the only reason they attend these classes is because of my flirty friend. Sonia has only been to one other class, but we decided then it'd be a good way for all of us to hang out and relax after long weeks since the classes are always on Sunday mornings. Unlike Vickie, Sonia and I usually wear something a little more modest. I can't speak for my coworker, but I just don't have the confidence to wear what Vickie does. There'd be a little too many rolls on view in plenty of the poses.

"We didn't ditch you," my best friend says, unzipping her jacket once we set out mats down in our usual spots by the door.

Sonia nods. "We were trying to get your attention because you weren't texting us back."

"But then," Vickie continues, a grin stretching her lips until she looks like the Joker's demented sister, "we saw a certain man take you to the bar and buy you a drink."

"And we couldn't interrupt." Sonia gives me a knowing look. She's seen Fletcher at the school a handful of times by now and knows who his son is. "You totally lied when you said there wasn't a man, by the way. I knew I wasn't losing my touch."

Vickie pauses what she's doing to glare at me. "You told her about him before me?"

"No, I didn't tell her anything."

"Because she lied," my coworker confirms.

I sigh at their dramatics. “I didn’t lie.” I peel off my jacket and set it against the wall with my bag. “There wasn’t anything going on when you asked. There still isn’t. We had drinks and talked.” *And have had dinner and hung out.* “I’d hardly call that anything special.”

Even though deep down, there’s a flutter in my stomach over the possibility of it. Especially after how we left each other. He’d asked me on a date. A proper one.

Both girls eye me down as I roll out my mat and sit cross-legged on the end of it. “Stop looking at me like that,” I grumble.

“We’re just trying to figure out when you’re going to realize that you’re being a little chickenshit.” That comes from Vickie, making our other companion snort, but not disagree.

I click my tongue. “I’m not being a chickenshit.”

Neither says a thing.

“I’m not!”

Vickie sets her mat up and sits down next to me, giving me a weird look. “Fine, let’s say you’re not. But you are holding yourself back. I want you to be happy.” She gestures toward Sonia, who’s joined us on the floor. “We both do. And we know that you’ve been struggling, so we want to make sure that you’re not isolating yourself just because you’re afraid of getting hurt again. It could happen, but you know what you want and what you don’t. You’ve learned from the past, right?”

I give her a tiny nod.

“Then don’t hold yourself back. If you want to like Fletcher, then like him. You don’t need to lie or act like you don’t, especially not to us. We’re going to support you with whatever you choose. We just hope you choose to get fucked every now and again.”

Sonia nods enthusiastically when a couple of snickers and knowing grins come from some of the guys walking in. My face turns red since it’s obvious they heard. And it doesn’t help when Vickie turns to them, puts on her flirty smile, and bats her lashes, and asks, “Am I right, boys?”

To nobody’s surprise, they agree.

I mutter, “I hate you sometimes.”

She shoves my arm. “Stop lying to yourself, bitch. You love me and my foul mouth and amazing advice.”

It’s true.

Unfortunately.



I know who the woman is that's standing at my classroom door even though we've never met before. But it takes one look at her to see the same soft features that a little boy who sits front and center in my room every day has. Dominic definitely doesn't get the softness from his dad, even if he gets plenty of other traits from him.

"Ms. Foster? Stevie Foster?" the woman asks, smiling with big red lips. She has pin-straight black hair that goes well past her shoulders and colorful tattoos peeking out from the sleeves of her black peacoat jacket that go up her hand. I never let myself wonder too hard about what Nicki's mom looked like or what Fletcher's type was. Because if he has one, he's definitely wasting his time with me after being with this beautiful woman with long legs, lean body, and perfectly done makeup that's standing in my classroom doorway.

The woman in chunky heeled boots that are tucked into her black jeans walks forward when I offer her a smile and say, "That's me."

Instead of sticking her hand out, she opens her arms and wraps me in a tight hug the second I stand up to greet her, getting a startled "*oh*" from me that makes her laugh as she squeezes one more time before letting go.

"Sorry, I'm a hugger," the ex-wife of the man I may or may not be interested in dating tells me.

When she steps away, I laugh too. "I see that. It's nice to meet you finally."

Her smile widens, going all the way up to her eyes. "I'm Traci Spellman, but I guess you already know that."

"Dominic looks a lot like you."

If she could beam anymore, she does with that compliment. "I don't hear that very often. People say he takes after his father more."

I shrug, trying to be casual over the topic of Fletcher. "It probably depends how much time they spend around Nicki."

"And his parents," she adds, her smile wavering with amusement.

I clear my throat. "Is there something I can help you with? I made sure Dominic got all of his assignments yesterday, and I'm sure his dad will help him if he needs it. But, of course, he knows he can come to me too."

Because speaking to this woman, who seems nothing but kind in the way

she smiles and carries herself with confidence, makes me nervous, I feel the need to blurt, “I mean Nicki. He knows *he* can come to me for anything he needs. I made sure to let him know that when he came back since there may be things that he doesn’t quite understand from our lessons that he missed.”

Her laugh is featherlight, not quite matching her exterior. Even though she exuberates a gentleness, her tattoos and dark yet elegant style screams biker chick. I’m a little envious. “I know what you meant, Ms. Foster.”

“You can call me Stevie.”

“I was actually having a meeting with the principal about Nicki. She just wanted to make sure everything was going well, especially since he missed an entire week. But, as you said, I know the school will ensure he catches up without complaint.”

There’s no doubt about that. “He’s a very smart kid. So, I don’t think there will be any issues with him catching up.”

Her eyes go from me to around the classroom to the window that has open blinds looking out the yard, then back at me. “I was sorry I missed conferences you hosted, but I got the letter about there being the end-of-year parent-teacher meetings that I hope I can come to. I’m sure Fletcher wouldn’t mind a tagalong.”

“We’d love to have you both,” I offer kindly. “Not that there’s much to talk about. Thankfully, we have great students this year. Nicki has been making friends with very few setbacks. And like I mentioned, he’s smart. A wonderful student all around.”

The humming noise she makes has me shifting my weight from one foot to another. Compared to her, I feel slightly underdressed in my gray work pants, purple button-down, and black flats. But with a meeting after school, I knew I needed something a little out of my norm since I’d be around the administration and other faculty.

“I like you,” Traci states firmly. “And I can see why my son and ex-husband do too. You’ve got that face.”

Not sure what she means, I reply with a slightly weak, “Thank you.” It’s a moment before I add, “I like them both too.”

The flicker of amusement is back. “This isn’t really my place,” she says quietly, the words making me stand a little taller in alert. “But I just wanted to meet you and see if you’re as great as the men in my life say you are. Because they deserve the very best, and I’d hate to have Fletcher settle for anything less than that.”

My tongue feels heavy in my mouth, weighted down by my uncertainty and heat under her strong gaze as she studies me with a watchful eye that's less friendly and more serious, like a warning.

"Fletch is...well, you know by now. He's not always an easy man to please. He's closed off and quiet and too stubborn for his own good most of the time. He looks at certain things like his duty, and I know from personal experience what that feels like. It's not fun to feel like somebody's responsibility, especially when you never asked to be. I've been worried that he'd find himself in a similar situation he did with me. Maybe not involving a kid—" Her smile becomes a little smaller, a little more sympathetic. "—but similar in the sense that he's old-fashioned. Stuck in his ways."

The sigh that leaves her loosens her shoulders as she looks around my room again, noting the various posters, drawings, and other creations that students have done since the beginning of the school year. "All I want is for him to be happy. Both of them. And it's not hard to see that they are. The way he talks about you..."

"Dominic?" I ask, genuinely confused. I know Fletcher has said that Nicki comes home and talks about his days at school, so it's not a far-off guess.

But Traci shakes her head, those painted lips curling upward slightly at the corners. "Not Nicki," is how she answers.

"Oh."

Traci reaches out and brushes my arm. "Meeting you in person, seeing you in your element, I know I have nothing to worry about. Maybe I should have never come to begin with, though it would only be a matter of time before we met anyway."

"We definitely would have crossed paths here eventually," I agree lightly.

Her laugh comes quickly, bubbled up with surprise. "Oh, Stevie. I wasn't talking about meeting at the school, but I suppose you're not wrong." I look down for a moment, taking in her implication before shifting when she says, "I don't know what your past is like."

My eyes dart back up, widening as I study her sincere expression. "Fletcher isn't the type of man to tell other peoples' stories even if someone begs him to. And trust me, I've asked him plenty of times what your deal is. He doesn't talk, gossip, or offer anything to anybody because he's a private

man with strong morals. So, whatever happened to you in the past, and based on the look in your eyes that I recognize, I can tell it's something. So, as much as I want to pry, I won't. Because my ex is right. It's nobody's business but your own. I just hope you can get past whatever it is before it stops you from something great."

She pauses, eyes narrowed.

"Someone great."

Swallowing down my reply, her hand drops from where it was placed on my arm before she takes a big step back.

I almost think she will say something else about the topic, but she chooses to go down a different route. "It was nice to meet you, Ms. Foster. I look forward to seeing you again." Her eyes twinkle like Dominic's does when he plays with Admiral. "Both in *and* out of school."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The house feels too empty, too quiet, reminding me of the reason I almost missed my shot at buying it.

I hadn't known what I was looking for or what to ask when I set up the appointment to meet the realtor, so I made my parents come with me. They both have experience with house buying, and while I should too, I'd always let Hunter take the lead on the homes we'd lived in. They were mostly rentals, anyway, with everything included—utilities, maintenance, lawn care. Being thrust into the world of homeownership responsibilities had hit me like a ton of bricks the second my parents drove us back to their place to discuss the pros and cons of the property after we'd seen it.

What's funny is that after leaving, I felt certain I'd put in an offer. I loved it from the moment I clicked through the pictures online that the realtor posted. I loved it even more in person—the open layout, the light color scheme, the beautiful hardwood flooring, and the location. It was quaint, not too far from work or from any major store or restaurant I liked, and it didn't have a lot of traffic besides residential.

But the second my mind started wrapping around the possibility of me putting in an offer, putting down the money, and making the huge step forward for myself...I chickened out. While my parents helped me talk out why to make a move or not, I'd been trapped inside my own head. I had a total panic attack the second I shut myself in my room after replaying something I'd said aloud to them during our discussion.

"Is it too big for me and where I am in my life right now?" I don't think Mom had heard the crack in my voice as I voiced the concern, but Dad did. He'd looked into the rearview mirror and gave me a comforting smile like he knew I was having second thoughts.

I always thought I'd have someone to share the experience with when I bought my first home—somebody else to take half the stress off my shoulders during the process that way I didn't feel so...helpless. Somebody to take on half the financial responsibility that way I didn't feel like I had so much piled on my shoulders alone. And knowing that I didn't have that, not Hunter or any other dating prospect that could truly be there for me, help

me grow, and fill the space that seemed so massive for one person, had been a hard pill to swallow.

It'd taken hours of conversation with Vickie, Mom, and Dad for me to finally make the decision to put an offer in. And even now, I'm a little embarrassed I'd let my loneliness get the better of me, let me almost miss out on something great. Because I'm stronger than that need for companionship, than that need to have someone in my life to help take care of me when I'm more than capable of doing it alone.

That's why I'm upset with myself for sitting in my living room, feet tucked under me on the couch, and warm coffee cup clenched in hand, feeling sorry for myself.

Feeling like the house is too big.

Too quiet.

Too *much*.

There are rooms I paid to furnish and pay to heat that goes untouched. Areas that collect dust because of lack of use and other spaces are probably *too* clean because nobody goes in them.

I'm confined by four walls with nothing but my thoughts and the soft hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen, and that gives me time to think. And thinking isn't always the best way to spend time because then I start remembering things—old memories of people no longer in my life. Experiences. Comparisons.

I start thinking about how the house I used to live in was 500-square-feet smaller than the one I'm in now, except I shared that space with someone, which made it seem tinier, cozier, compared to the vast space I have all to myself here.

I think about the time I learned how to fix the leaky kitchen sink all by myself after watching a YouTube tutorial, even though Hunter told me he'd handle it when he got home. When I showed off my handy work, he'd kissed me, grabbed my butt, and showed me just how impressed he was with my handy skills by offering a few of his own in the bedroom.

Then I think about how even that space, smaller than this one, started to feel too empty. I was surrounded by things, but those were material. Meaningless. Nothing compared to the people who owned them, who rarely spent the same amount of time there to enjoy them properly like I had.

I find myself lingering on thoughts of me wandering around my old house, faking a smile when colleagues of Hunter would swing by, and

giving off forced laughs at something one of the military wives would say as if I was happy. But what those people didn't know was that the couple they thought were "goals" was actually falling apart at the seams.

Suddenly, I found myself watching more YouTube videos to fix things Hunter would constantly say he'd do but didn't. I'd catch up on TV shows that we used to watch together when he wouldn't come home on time and learn how to cook for one because cooking for two started becoming wasteful.

I guess it wouldn't have mattered where I lived, how big or small the house was because I'd always be hit with the same hollow feeling in my chest as I have right now.

But then my eyes trail to the window, and my mind drifts to the man I saw leave in his big, expensive truck this morning. The brawny man behind the steering wheel had lifted a few fingers to wave as he passed, giving me a small smile through the window.

And my thoughts...change.

No longer do I focus on the silence I'm consumed by because my mind screams at me to open my eyes.

To figure out what's in front of me.

A house that I bought on my own. That I maintain, for the most part, by myself.

A job that I love that pays the bills.

Neighbors who have become friends.

A family who drives me crazy but is always there when I need them.

And a man who helps me even when I don't want him to.

I look down at my hand that he patched and see the faded scar from the rain gutter.

I remember the drunken man who'd hit me and how cold the frozen vegetables were on my face that he had given me.

Fletcher's words aren't always pretty.

They can be annoying.

Grating on the nerves.

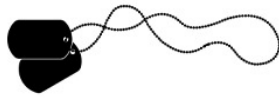
But they're unapologetically his own, and his brazen nature only makes me realize that I'm sinking into the same pit of depression as before for no reason at all.

Because I have him.

His interest. His attention. His patience.

Suddenly, the last thing I'm thinking about is this house or the past that led me here.

I simply think about him.



The first date I ever went on was hot, and the ice cream we'd gotten had melted quicker than I could eat it. It was late afternoon on a school day when I remember constantly fidgeting with my hair and feeling my face redden every time the boy across from me looked in my direction. Of course, I blamed the sun and the heat, but Hunter knew how nervous I was, how he'd been the first guy who'd ever asked me out because I'd embarrassingly admitted as much.

Even on date four, I'd felt the same thing I had the first time, except maybe more intense because the boy with pretty eyes and a prettier smile had held my hand throughout the movie we'd seen and told me over and over how beautiful I was. My heart soared, my stomach fluttered so much I couldn't eat any of the popcorn he'd gotten for us to share, and I worried he'd let go of my hand because of how sweaty it was by the time the credits rolled.

I'd waited for those feelings to go away as a sign that it'd run its course, but they never did. I tried convincing myself that Hunter could see any girl he wanted, but he never paid any attention. Not in school when they'd wave or bat their lashes at him, or in classes when they'd try wiggling their way into our twosome or try convincing him to become partners for projects or lab assignments.

Hunter always chose me.

He'd given me a beautiful heart-shaped silver diamond necklace when I turned sixteen and told me I was his "forever girl."

Dad had rolled his eyes when I told him.

Mom smiled at the gift but looked wary.

And I thought I'd never come down from how high up I floated knowing someone like Hunter could love me as much as he did.

But tonight, those feelings I felt so heavily the first few years of my relationship don't even compare to the ones swirling inside my body. They're not contained by only my stomach or ribcage but curling around

every muscle, nerve, and fiber of my being as the stoic man across the table watches me closely. His eyes dip when my hand curls around the lemonade I ordered, traveling up to my mouth when my lips touch the glass to take a sip, and glances at my throat as I swallow the sour-sweet liquid.

There's not one thing he misses.

Like at the bar, he'd pulled my chair out for me when the hostess showed us our table. He passed me the menu and suggested I try out the loaded cheese fries because he knows how much I love the ones at the bar and suggested what burger to give a shot when I asked him what he liked getting since it's his favorite spot to escape to outside Stanton Springs.

And nothing prepared me for the spark shooting through my body, awakening every nerve-ending in my body when he'd given me a name of a famous burger option The Shack was known for and adding, "But it's your choice, get whatever you want."

I guess when you've been neglected from making so many choices in your life, the ones you're offered mean ten times more.

Fletcher Miller, whether he knows it or not as he sips the water he'd ordered and watches me watch him back, took part of my heart in that instance. Or, more likely, I'd handed it to him.

Freely. Willingly.

Because I'd *chosen* to.

I'll always think about the firsts I had with Hunter because I've had nothing to compare it to all this time, but I already know from the short time I've spent with Fletcher tonight, riding in the passenger seat of the truck he picked me up in, talking about Nicki and Admiral and my parents and Vickie, and everything in between, and sitting down across from each other in a well-lit, quiet little wooden establishment that smells like grilled meat and spices, that this is only the beginning of something far greater than what I had before.

My breath...it catches at the thought.

"What is it?" he asks because he notices.

Of course, he notices.

Not knowing how I could put it to words properly, I shake my head and give him the dulled-down version of every little thought going through my mind. "I'm just having a really great time, that's all."

He simply stares, his eyes softening at the admission that makes me blush for sounding juvenile.

“That sounds silly, right?” I shake my head at myself. “I don’t know about you, but I haven’t done this often. And not in a long, long time. Date, I mean. Go on dates. This.” I look around again, soaking in the music softly playing and listening to the families and couples occupying other tables.

“I don’t either,” his voice cuts in, pulling my attention back to him. “Date that often. In fact, I couldn’t tell you the last time I even wanted to take a woman out.”

I blink.

One of his shoulders lifts, pulling at the material of his long sleeve black sweater. Neither one of us dressed up. When he’d asked to take me out on a proper date, he told me to dress casually and comfortably. I’d opted for a pair of leggings and a cute sweater dress with appropriate footwear for the recent snowfall and single-digit temps. He was in a sweater, jeans, and those famous boots that look more and more worn every day.

“Is there a reason?” I decide to pry, nibbling the inside of my cheek. It can’t hurt to ask, or else I’ll be wondering the rest of the night, and probably a long time after too.

He takes a sip of his water. “Truthfully, I’ve never been that interested. Can’t say I dated much, even before Traci. I sowed my oats like a lot of military men. Had some fun. Enjoyed my youth. And when Dominic became an outcome, I thought about what it meant for the future. Growing up, settling down, being a decent parent. I wanted to focus on those things and nothing else.”

“That’s very admirable of you.”

He shrugs, brushing off how true it is.

“Anyway, after Traci and I ended things, I didn’t really feel like putting myself out there or reverting back to old ways.” I swear his cheeks turn pink.

Sex. He’s referring to sex.

Suddenly, an image of him naked comes to mind, and I have to fight to keep my face from turning red too. “Nobody has caught your eye?”

A smirk quirks his lips. “You’re sitting here, aren’t you?”

The blush comes before I can stop it, making him chuckle. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Honey, I can’t pretend I stayed celibate since my split with Nicki’s mom.” His voice is low, gruff like he doesn’t want to admit it but chooses to for the sake of honesty, something I’m grateful for. “But it wasn’t often, and

not anything that I wanted to last longer than a few weeks at most. So, no. Not one woman has caught my eye until you moved in across the street. The second I knew who you were..." His jaw ticks as he grips his glass a little tighter and looks away. "Well, I probably shouldn't have let my mind go where it did, but it happened. I knew who you used to be with, knew you were married and knew I should have looked the other way and let you live your life peacefully. Then you became Dominic's teacher, and I saw what he did in you. Compassion and respect for everybody in your life, and I couldn't really ignore that. Not when I've seen how other people treat Nic. You're different. I wasn't about to let that go."

I argue, "You could have."

But the stubborn man shakes his head. "I couldn't. I've known a lot of people in my lifetime, Peaches. Crossed paths with a lot of great ones and a lot of shitheads in my days traveling and serving. You're one of the good ones, probably one of the best if we're being honest, and you can blush and give me that look like you want to argue all you want, but I've always been good at reading people. I know who you are and what you're about. I already told you that I like and respect you, but I'll remind you again in case you forgot. Somebody like you deserves to be told how important they are, because there aren't many like you out there."

"So, yeah. You caught my eye. Even if the mutual past we share tells us we should think twice. But if you're game, if you're willing to push past that, then I sure as hell know I am."

My shaky hands pick up my drink to quench my parched mouth.

"Hunter was a fucking moron for not treating you the way you deserved," he states firmly. "I'm not going to miss my shot because he had you first. If anything, I'm ready to prove to him and many other people you're for keeps and always should have been. I don't mind calling people out when they're wrong."

I know he doesn't, which is why yet another little piece of my heart is served up on the platter along with the burger and fries put on the table in front of him by our waiter.

Staring at my own food, I let out a small breath before glancing back up at him. "I should probably tell you that Traci came to see me earlier this week. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I don't really know why I didn't when I had the chance."

He's quiet for a moment, grabbing the ketchup bottle and pouring some on the fries. "I know. She told me."

I frown, feeling even worse that I didn't say something when I saw him the same night she'd visited me.

All he says is, "She likes you, and that's not an easy feat with Traci. Can't say I'm surprised, though. There's nobody who wouldn't."

I can think of a few people.

But I don't volunteer any names.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The truck pulls into my driveway, stopping right beside my car. His headlights hit the front of my blue house, and both of us look forward into the dark since I'd forgotten to turn on my porch light before leaving.

Driving home from dinner was peaceful. He took the long way back instead of using the interstate and held my hand the entire way. When I'd climbed into the passenger seat, he didn't give much warning before tugging me into the middle, so our thighs and sides were plastered together, buckling me in before doing the same for himself and taking my hand after we pulled out of the parking lot and threading our fingers together.

Even still, they're laced together, resting in the same place on my thigh. His large hand encasing my little one, and I can't help but look down and smile.

"Got you something," Fletcher says quietly, reaching over me and opening the glove compartment. I'm shocked when he produces a simple blue box with a white ribbon on it and straightens, holding it out to me. "I know Valentine's Day was a few days ago, but..."

We didn't get to see each other on Valentine's Day, something I told myself meant nothing. He and Dominic hadn't been home until late at night, well after Nicki's bedtime, I assume, and I wasn't sure where they'd been and didn't let myself think too much about it.

According to Dad, the holiday is nothing but "corporate bullshit" to boost the economy. Mom always rolls her eyes at the little rant and comes back with a teasing, "and you wonder why we divorced" as if his drinking wasn't really the issue at all.

"You didn't have to get me anything," I tell him quietly, wrapping my fingers around the box and brushing the ribbon tied around it.

He clears his throat. "Had it for a bit. I thought it was a good time to give it to you." When I undo the ribbon and lift the lid, I stare at the necklace inside, blinking, lips parted, and let out a tiny breath. Fletcher adds, "Bought it at the winter carnival. It reminded me of the marble you gave to Nicki, so I wanted to replace it with something you could wear."

My eyes go from the blue gem jewelry to the man who bought it for me, eyes glassy and heart dancing a little faster in my ribcage. "You bought this

for me at the winter carnival?”

His chin dips.

I swallow, stare back at the necklace, the item he bought me before I'd even know how to process what I was feeling for him, and let out another tiny, shaky breath. “It’s beautiful, Fletcher. Thank you.”

He takes the box, picks up the necklace, and murmurs, “Turn around. I’ll put it on.”

I give him my back and lift my hair up as his long arms circle me, settling the gift around my neck and struggling with the clasp. When I feel the cool metal against my skin, I look down, brush it with my fingers, and then turn my body back to face him.

“Feel like I’m too old to ask women to be my Valentine,” he admits in that gruff voice of his, his hand reaching out and tracing the line of my jaw until it rests against my cheek. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to show the woman I would ask that I care about her.”

Is this man even real?

“It’s a good way to show it,” I find myself answering, voice hoarse. I give him a watery smile before my eyes trail to the house.

I touch the necklace.

Take a deep breath.

And look back at the man who’s watching me with curious eyes. “Want to come in? Or do you need to go back home for anything?”

The question is out before I can regret asking it, and I don’t let myself worry about what’s going through his mind. All I can think about is what’s going through *mine*. Things I haven’t thought about doing in a really long time.

Not sober anyway.

“Stevie...” The husky way he says my name tells me he’s probably thinking very similar things. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s followed me inside my home, but it’d be the first time as more than neighbors.

“You can say no,” I whisper, inching forward and staring at his mouth. I wait for the two letters to form on his lips, a smooth, respectful rejection from a gentleman.

So, I’m glad when he doesn’t say it.

His hand, still cupping my face, twitches, his thumb brushing my bottom lip and feeling the hitched breath leave me from the subtle movement.

Before I let myself overthink it, I lean forward and make the first move. Whether he planned on doing the same or not, I can't be sure, but based on the way he was touching me, looking at me, I'd say I'm probably not wrong.

As soon as our lips brush, he releases a low groan from his throat. Then, when I apply more pressure, angling my lips to capture his, he moves his free hand around my waist and pulls me closer into his body. With the green light clearly given by me, he takes over.

His lips search for the perfect angle, the perfect taste, before inviting himself into my mouth and teasing my tongue with his. I can taste the lingering hops from the beer he'd had with his water and the smokey sauce that was put on his medium-rare burger and let out a breathy version of his name when that hand on my face moves to cup the back of my skull and thread through my hair, fisting my hair carefully to tilt my head back and give himself access to my exposed neck.

Lips moving from mine to my jaw, to my chin, to my throat, I arch forward until my chest brushes against his and feel teeth graze the skin above my pulse until I can't physically take it.

"Take me inside," I all but beg him, feeling the fingers in my hair tighten before he releases another groan.

He kisses me again, crushing our mouths together with a desperation that I haven't felt in forever. Maybe never. I don't remember ever feeling like I needed somebody's hands on my body and mouth on mine as much as I needed Fletcher's to completely take control.

I don't get lost on those thoughts before we're unbuckled and moving from his truck to the door, hand in hand, his body towering over mine as I unlock the door with slightly trembling hands and disappearing into the open living room until those hands that were on me before are back in place, capturing my hips before his mouth finds mine in the dark, bending down to make sure he can nip my lip and suck it into his mouth and back us toward the stairs.

He only pulls back as we walk up the steps to say, "We don't have to do anything."

The words comfort me, but don't tame the achy feeling between my legs that scream for this to go as far as it possibly can. "What if I want to?" I ask, stopping at my closed bedroom door.

He's never been up here before, never seen the place I fall asleep every night or wake up every morning. He doesn't know that I'd laid down in bed weeks ago with thoughts of him that sparked my body to life.

I never gave it to myself—never slid my hands past the elastic of my pajama bottoms, never thought of the man who was making me want to touch myself so badly, and never let myself go to a place I knew I'd never come back from.

Because the moment I would give in to the fantasies of those large hands holding me, and that muscular body hovering over me, on me, *in* me, I was done for.

Completely gone.

Looking up at him now, feeling the searing eyes he's watching me with, tells me that I'm already there.

Gone.

Desperate.

Needy.

So, I reach behind me and turn the doorknob, letting the wood crack open before drawing him forward. His arms around me, lifting me up to make up the height difference, with his lips pressing against mine, pecking once, twice, a third time, before moving down to my throat and licking, sucking, whispering beautiful words into my skin, before we stop at my bed.

He asks, "Are you sure, baby?"

And if I wasn't before, the way his soft voice turned me into mush did the trick. Because it was clear as day by the lust in his eyes and the long, hard pipe in his pants pressed against me that he was sure—he wanted me. This. But he was never going to force me into something I wasn't ready for.

That only made me ten times more ready.

Once the "I'm sure" was out of my mouth, his hands went to my hips, lifting me up higher before one of those impressive hands trailed its way up my spine until he was gently lowering me onto my back across the mattress. His body came down next, careful not to crush me but hovering, his lips caressing every exposed part of my face, neck, and collarbone he could get to.

We'd taken off our jackets downstairs, throwing them over pieces of furniture without care. Then our shoes along the way up. Now, the roughness of his jeans against my leggings, where his body is settled

between my parted thighs, gives me the perfect friction to arch up and feel the heat gather between my thighs. His erection only gets harder when my fingers slowly trail to the hem of his shirt, slip under the soft material, and begin lifting it up. Finally, he straightens on his knees, reaching behind him and yanking the piece of clothing off in one pull to expose the trimmed waist and hard-earned muscles sculpting his torso.

If I'm being honest with myself, I know from the few times I let my eyes linger in the past that he used to be a lot more muscular from all the training he did with the men on base, but I like him better this way—healthy and happy with skin wrapping around the muscles that remain from all the physical labor he still does. He's as beautiful as a man can be, with a V practically pointing toward the waistband of the denim hugging his hips, and when I reach toward the button to undo it, his hands capture mine to halt them from freeing the part of him tenting his jeans.

Our eyes meet, his blazing with a fire that I'm sure mine mirror before he slowly shakes his head. "Not yet."

Releasing me, his hands move to the gray knit sweater dress hitched at my hips before looking at me for silent permission to take it off. All I can manage to do is nod, arching up as he drags it up my body and over my head before disposing of it somewhere on the floor. First, his eyes roam over my body, taking his time as the dark orbs linger over my chest where my small breasts are pushed up in a soft pink bra. If he peels off the leggings anytime soon, he'll see the matching silk panties. Next, his gaze moves over the soft peak of my stomach, not totally flat but not overly rounded despite the amount of treats I eat and lack of exercise I do, and if he looks closely, he'll see stretch marks from the way my body changed as I got older. No longer is my frame lean and slim like it was as a teenager but curved with a mature definition that gives me a womanly shape I always wanted since the day puberty graced me with its presence as a pre-teen.

I've never been ashamed of my body or hated any piece of it, no matter my weight fluctuations or opinions from other people. And there'd been plenty over the years that I didn't like thinking about. This body has gotten me through a lot, and I'd never look at it in any way that showed my disrespect for it pulling me along, even when I felt like nothing but a shell of a woman.

The way it's being studied now as rough, callused hands move down my bare sides tracing the curve of my torso tells me that he appreciates it as

much as I do, maybe even more.

“Beautiful, Stevie.” He leans forward and presses a kiss above my belly button. Then another below it, before moving upward until his lips canvas the valley between my breasts. His fingers hook in the straps of my bra, lowering them and then reaching behind me to undo the hook with an easy flick. Maybe I should be hesitant over his skilled hands, and deep down, the nerves *are* bubbling, but there’s too much hunger for his attention that overpowers the fact I have little experience in comparison.

With my bra disposed of and breasts exposed, the cool air of my bedroom pebbles my nipples. His hands move over the peaks, flicking the hardened buds and making me moan and arch into his touch. His mouth covers one while his fingers play with its sister. I instantly wrap my legs around his waist and arms around his neck. At the same time, he teases, tweaks, and sucks me into his mouth until I’m trying to find the friction I need by rubbing my pelvis against his.

One of my hands cups the back of his head, feeling the grown in stubble of his jaw scrape along my skin as he switches breasts, paying attention to the other.

His “so fucking beautiful” and “so sweet, baby” and “so mine” leaves me undone as he stops focusing on my breasts and moves his hands to the elastic of my leggings. I help him peel them off, my panties coming along with them until I’m completely bare to him, his body towering over mine and dominating every inch of my space as his hungry eyes eat up the length of me stretched out beneath him.

I’ve never had a man speechless over my body before, but the way his lips part and close as he takes me in, then part again without one single sound coming out, builds my confidence enough to sit up and kiss his throat, the underside of his jaw, and trail my hands up the coarse hair on his chest, curling over his shoulders, before finally meeting his lips again to put them to good use.

Whatever the next level above beautiful is, is what Fletcher is making me feel as his hands wrap around my waist and hold me into his body as we slowly fall backward until we’re wrapped around each other, lips hungry, hands hungrier, and feeling every inch of skin until I finally get his jeans undone and down his thighs until there’s nothing but tight black boxer briefs between us.

“I want you so bad, baby,” he groans, rubbing his cock against my inner thigh. “Feel that? Feel how fucking hard you make me? It hurts. That’s how bad I need to be inside you.”

His words rack shivers down my spine until they become a pool of wetness between my legs that I want nothing more than for him to touch and explore. He doesn’t hesitate before his fingertips dance along my torso and abdomen until they land just above the lips soaked in arousal. It’s all for him. If he cares that I’m not completely bare, he doesn’t let on as he slips one of those long fingers along the trimmed curls and drags it along the seam of where I’m tempted to beg him to be.

As if he reads my mind, he presses a soft kiss against my lips the same time the pad of his thumb works the button of nerves that sparks instant shockwaves through my entire body. Then, using slow, careful precision to work me up, I pant out a string of incoherent words and mix in his name to coax him to move faster as I become wetter from the way his tongue twists with mine and his teeth bite into my bottom lip. Finally, his finger traces the entrance that’s so wet it slides right in, followed by a second.

“God, Stevie,” he says against my neck as he trails kisses down my body. He nips, sucks, kisses, and licks from my mouth to my lower abdomen, stopping right above where his hand and fingers are working me up, up, up, until my toes curl and hips lift to get more.

Deeper.

Faster.

Harder.

All things I think I tell him.

And when his mouth meets where his fingers were only moments before, it takes me no time at all to explode until I see stars. My eyes squeeze closed as my body arches and quakes through the intense orgasm that I feel all the way in my fingertips as I grip the blanket and sheets on either side of my body. Through it all, Fletcher sucks my clit and trails his tongue down until I’m clenching him as I come down from a high that I don’t think I’ve ever had so brutally before.

“Please,” I whisper, voice shaky and unfamiliar to my own ears. There’d been a handful of times in the past when I’d begged for more, but nothing like the intense need for it to happen as I want it to right now.

When his boxer briefs come off and the thick, hot cock bobs against my stomach once freed, I can’t help myself. One of my hands wraps around the

girth and gives it one stroke before Fletcher's head tips back, and a primal noise escapes him. Flushed from his reaction, I do it again.

Only the pleasure on his face becomes something I want more of because I want to be greedy for once. So, I slide forward and suck the tip of him in my mouth and taste the saltiness of his precum. My palms find his thighs and feel them shake under my touch as I suck him deeper, my mouth taking on the hard length of him until one of his hands is in my hair, threading through the strands, and tightening.

"Not going to last long if you keep doing that," he groans, but he doesn't pull me away as I continue bobbing over him, using my tongue to flatten against the underside of his cock until the fingers in my hair grip me to the point my skull stings. "*Fuck*. Honey, I want to take this slow, but I don't think I can. Stop so I can fuck you. I need..." His words get lost in the sensation as I lightly drag my teeth over him.

I give him one last suck before drawing back and looking up at him, shyness in my eyes, and meet the fire burning in his. If I thought the man was gorgeous before, nothing compares to the sexed-up, alpha version.

"Lie back, legs open," he all but growls, the tone of voice one I've never heard him use before. Not on me and not on the men on base he used to boss around. It was hotter, demanding, and I obey as he settles between my legs.

It's when I feel the hot head of him settle at my entrance and slowly, slowly push in that I tighten up. I don't know why, necessarily, because there's no question that I want this. Badly. I need it—Fletcher. His touches and kisses and love.

And that...that four-letter word is probably what's making my body want to refuse him right now. Fear. Of what this means and what's to come. The things we haven't said or talked about even though we should have.

I always had a plan.

Knew what to expect.

But now...

"Stevie," he murmurs, stopping and using his hand to brush hair out of my face sensing my sudden hesitation. "I can stop. We don't have to—"

"I want to," I croak, cutting him off and palming my face to hide the heat that must be coloring it red. I shake my head and suck in a breath as I wiggle my hips and feel him twitch from where he's partially seated inside

of me. “I want to, Fletcher. I do. I’m just...I don’t know. I can’t turn my thoughts off, and it’s ruining this.”

“Hey.” The word is so soft I almost miss it. He peels my hands away from my face and makes me look at him, his eyes the same gentleness of his tone. “Talk to me. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I swallow.

I can’t.

I can’t tell him that I’m thinking about one of the first moments I ever felt...shame. Shame in bed with the man I was with. And it’s not from the time I brought a stranger home from a bar and let him strip me and use me and get off without barely any memory of it.

It’s the time I was with Hunter, a man I absolutely should not be thinking about in this circumstance, when he made me feel like the confidence I had, the need for him I was trying to show him, was a joke.

Like it meant nothing.

Laughable.

I’d felt sexy. Wanted him to see me that way. And he’d crushed me—crushed what little piece of me I’d had left of us at that point. It was toward the end when I wanted nothing more than for our intimate moments to patch us up somehow and knew in that instance it never could.

It was early morning—I’d woken up before him, trailed my hands down his naked torso since he hated wearing shirts to bed, and stirred him awake using my fingers and lips. He’d groaned, and didn’t push me away, and something about the need I’d had deep inside me, not just for sex, but for *more* empowered me to look at him from where I was laying on my side beside him and say, “*I’ve wanted you to fuck me so bad since last night.*”

And Hunter, the man I’d been with for a decade, the man I’d been married to since nineteen, had laughed.

Not groaned with the same yearning.

Not encouraged it.

But laughed.

At me.

At that thread of *something*, I was holding onto so tightly, hoping it would mend us.

Instead, it snapped.

When my husband laughed at me, the thread frayed piece by piece until there was nothing left but emptiness and embarrassment.

I'm not sure when Fletcher pulled out or when his body moved to my side, still hovering using one of his arms to encase me in his scent and warmth. Still, when I force myself away from the memory, I look up at him with glassy eyes. I don't know when I started crying either, but the lust on his face is long gone and now filled with worry.

"I ruined this," I cry, turning my head away so he won't see the tears that start streaming down my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought I was ready, but I don't think I am because I can't stop thinking about the other moments I've done this and how bad I must have been and the things that happened and—"

"Stevie," he tries stopping me.

"And now I'm talking about my ex-husband and thinking about him when I shouldn't be thinking about any other man because I'm in bed with you means I'm a mess." I roll out from under him, pulling my knees up and grabbing the blanket to cover my naked body. "I'm sorry, Fletcher," I whisper again, squeezing my eyelids shut. "I'm so sorry."

I feel the weight on the mattress behind me disappear. I think he's getting dressed and leaving, something I wouldn't blame him for, but I startle when he ends up kneeling in front of me, still nude and unabashed, as he puts those big hands on my arms.

"I need you to listen to me," he says in a strong yet soft voice. "You *never* have to apologize to me for anything like this. If you're not ready, you're not ready. It doesn't matter why. All that matters is that we stop before you do something you regret. Understand? You're not a mess, Stevie. I don't ever want to hear you say that about yourself again. You're trying to move on, and sex is not an easy part of that. I understand. I'm not going to pressure you. I told you before that I'll wait however long you need until you're really ready. And I don't want you pretending you are for my sake or anybody else's. Get what I'm saying?"

It's hard to look him in the eyes when I give him a slow nod. "You need to know something. I..." My voice cuts off, the rasp and guilt thick in the words. "I was only ever with him until this one time I got drunk at a bar and..."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Did somebody hurt you? Force themselves on you?" His voice is no longer soft but murderous. "If somebody took advantage—"

“No, it wasn’t anything like that. I remember enough to know I’d been willing. But that doesn’t mean I’m okay with the decision. I shouldn’t have done it. I cried for days after it happened. I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror. Bex had to see me breakdown over it, and she said something that helped me get past it, but I still think about how much I regret doing it. It’s not me. It never had been. Not that...that I’d know. Like I said, Hunter was the only person I’d ever been with before then.”

His jaw hardens, and his eyes look away.

I know it’s not right to have this conversation, to bring up the man I was married to or the other man I’d had a drunken fling with, considering what almost happened between me and him. But I know if I want this to work with Fletcher, it needs to be said. Out in the open, or else I’d feel too guilty and have another breakdown later on for keeping it a secret.

But Fletcher does what he always does because he’s a good man. The best one I’ve ever known, if I’m being honest with myself. “I’m sure as hell no saint, Stevie. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of. Things we regret. But we can’t hold them over our heads or let them get to us. So, I’m glad you told me but know that I’d never judge you for anything you do.”

My nostrils flare, emotion threatening to come out any way it can. With sobs. Tears. Everything. “You’re too good to be true sometimes.”

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. When he shakes his head and squeezes my arms before dropping them, I can’t help but wonder what he’s thinking about. Where his head is at now that I spewed out my baggage. “Trust me, I have my faults. I’d hardly call myself anybody’s fantasy man.”

He’ll never take a compliment or accept that he’s exactly every woman’s fantasy. He’s either too blind or too humble. My money is on the latter.

Fletcher passes me my clothes, gives me his back to have privacy to change, and dresses simultaneously.

After we’re both covered again, I look at my bed, then back at the man who’s staring out the window at the lit-up street. “Can you stay? Not to... Just to sleep. If you want. If you’d prefer going home—”

“I’ll stay.”

He’ll stay.

He’ll stay.

He doesn’t take off his jeans again or his sweater. He simply peels off his black socks, folds them, and puts them on the floor beside the bed before laying back and opening an arm for me to settle next to him.

I take the invitation, curling my body against his and listening to his even heartbeat.

That's how I fall asleep.

And how I wake up eight hours later.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I don't realize I'm absentmindedly touching the necklace until my mom says, "It's beautiful. Where'd you get it?"

We both know I rarely buy myself things, least of all jewelry. The wooden box resting on my dresser at home was handmade by Dad and filled by Mom and Grandma and a few of my friends who've told me that I need more accessories in my life. Even my grandmother's diamond engagement ring is sitting inside there.

Looking up to see my mother watching me, I murmur, "It was a gift."

One of her eyebrows arches in curiosity as her gaze drops back down to the blue gem set inside a silver pendant. "From...?"

I reach for the coffee she'd poured us when I got to her house fifteen minutes ago. "It's from someone who's...special to me."

Mom blinks.

Blinks again.

Then...smiles. Beams would probably be a better term. "A male someone, I presume?"

I roll my eyes, something she'd usually scold me for but she's too busy trying to wrap her head around the thought of me with somebody again after so long. "Yes. His name is Fletcher."

It doesn't take long for that smile to twitch and waver until it's minuscule in comparison to the wide curve it was. "That's an interesting name."

"It's a military name," I offer, focusing on the coffee in front of me and not the face my mother is probably making.

"Military." Her tone is off but not completely displeased. Surprised, maybe. Definitely skeptical. But nothing I can't work with.

"Yes."

Then the sigh comes. "Stevie—"

I make myself look at her. "Before you say anything, know that Fletcher is a wonderful man. He treats me well."

Her eyes are sympathetic as she pushes her coffee away from her. "Sweetie, you said the same thing about Hunter."

My heart drops to the bottom of my ribcage. "That isn't fair."

“I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I’m simply saying that military men are not always the best to be with. I thought you’d learned that lesson already the hard way.”

Eye twitching, I take a long, deep breath before letting myself answer. “Mother, I love you. I value your opinion—” *Most times*. “—but you can’t compare Fletcher to Hunter. There is no comparison. Trust me, I’ve had plenty of time to think about it. And shouldn’t you be happy? You’ve been bugging me to date for a long time. I’m finally doing it.”

“But not with someone like *him*.”

Defense flares in my chest as I wrap my fingers tightly around the coffee mug and feel the slight bite of pain from the hot liquid inside of it. “You don’t even know Fletcher, so you can’t accuse him of being wrong for me. You’d like him, Mom. Really.”

“I just want—”

“What’s best for me,” I finish for her, almost coolly. “I know you do. You love me, you want what’s best for me, but sometimes that means letting me make my own decisions without inserting your opinion every step of the way or trying to deter me from making choices you don’t approve of.”

This time, she’s quiet.

My hand goes back to the necklace. “I can’t even begin to tell you how much I’ve thought about this. Fletcher. A relationship with him, and about relationships in general.” Eyes moving over to her distantly, I lift a shoulder. “I like him, and that scares me. I like that he respects me, but I’m afraid that will go away some day. He’s done nothing to prove it will. It’s everything that happened with Hunter that makes me feel that way. And it isn’t fair to judge Fletcher, to make any kind of assumption that he’d eventually treat me the same way as the first man I loved, just because of my baggage.”

I know I’d hate being compared to a man’s ex simply because she’d done him wrong in the past. But, if Fletcher can look at me without seeing Traci, without getting lost in whatever they had—even if it wasn’t nearly as serious as what I’d had with Hunter—then I owe him the same. It’ll be hard, and I’ve certainly failed way too many times already, but I can try.

Try harder.

Try because I know it’s right.

If he’s willing to be patient with me while I figure out how to deal with my thoughts, then he’s already somebody worthy of staying in my life. No

matter what Mom thinks.

“I want to be happy,” I tell my mother, my voice barely above a whisper. My eyes flick up, giving her a timid look. “And sometimes, even now, I still don’t know if that’s possible.”

Her hand reaches out, cupping mine. “It is. Stevie, you’re going to be happy one day. Look at everything you’ve already done for yourself since...things happened. If I haven’t told you recently, I’m proud of you. I want you to be happy too.”

I swallow, licking my dry lips and nodding. “Then you should give Fletcher a chance. For me. He’s already seen me breakdown on more than one occasion over Hunter, and he’s still here. Still in my life. Why, I don’t know. But he’s a great man. A wonderful person.”

“Is he...still active?”

I don’t feel like telling her what his role in the Army was, so I simply shake my head. “No. He retired to take care of his son.”

Her eyes widen. “He’s a dad?” Those widened eyes quickly narrow. “Wait a minute. Is this the man Victoria mentioned before?”

All I do is press my lips together.

“You teach his son, don’t you?”

I nod again.

I’m not sure what she’s thinking, but I don’t like the look in her eyes. They’re wary and full of concern, a look I’ve gotten used to seeing aimed at me by her and a lot of other people over the past couple of years. “Please be careful, Stevie. If you...if this Fletcher is who you want, then I’ll support you no matter what. I’m always going to be Team Stevie. Okay?”

Letting go of my coffee, I put my hand on top of hers and squeeze. “Thank you, Mom. That means a lot to me.”

We’re quiet for a few minutes as we hold hands, letting our coffees cool before her fingers twitch under my palm. “Can I ask you something, sweetie?”

Nervousness makes the nod I give her weigh down my skull as it moves up and down slowly.

She hesitates. “Do you think part of the reason you’re attracted to this man is *because* of his background? Because he’s a father.” My lips part by the question, but she quickly adds, “Please don’t take that the wrong way. I don’t mean anything bad by it. I want to make sure that the reasons are something you can live with and not something you’re searching for.”

I didn't expect her to ask that. I've never even given much thought to it. But the truth is, it has nothing to do with either of those things.

"I was actually hesitant because of his previous employment," I admit to her, staring at our hands. "I had no interest wrapping myself up in another military man. In fact, it scared me for a lot of reasons that I don't want to get into right now if that's all right. As for Nicki—Dominic, that's his son—he's a great kid, Mom. And Fletcher as a father is definitely a big reason why I...care for him. But it's not *because* he's a father. It's because of *what kind* of father he is. He loves Nicki so much. He'd do anything for him. Sacrifice his job. The life he lived for years, all to focus on his child. I admire him a lot for the choices he made to be a better man, a better parent, to Nicki."

Mom watches me carefully, absorbing my answer, dissecting it with her eyes and silent thoughts, before squeezing my hand. "Okay."

Okay.

She eventually asks, "Does your father know?"

All I do is shake my head.

A secretive smile reappears.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I'm finishing up dishes when the knock comes. My heart reacts instantly as I grab the dish towel to dry off my hands and walk to the door.

Fletcher and I haven't had a lot of time to see each other over the past week because he's been busy working on a new rush project for a man who's pushing to get his vehicle back quickly, and making sure Dominic receives plenty of attention without me butting into their one-on-one time—though Fletcher told me I wouldn't be if I wanted to join them for dinner or walks. He's tried convincing me to come over to hang out at their house while Nicki is there a handful of times now, but I haven't agreed yet. I still worry about my job and what Ms. Clifton, or others, might say if they knew where I was spending my free time.

Beyond his invitations we've only exchanged a few good morning and goodnight texts along with a few waves and smiles in passing outside. I tried not letting my mind wander as to why I was so hesitant to accept his offers to see him and his son. Even though I wanted to, I also want him to know that I understand he has his own life—a son, and small business he enjoys—just like I have teaching, and friends and family that I liked to spend time with too.

I didn't want to be clingy.

To feel like I'm moving too fast.

And considering the compromising position we found ourselves in not that long ago, I'm not sure if my hesitation is such a bad thing. Because if I can strip down and let a man rock my world the way he did and then cry after almost having sex with him, then there's a reason for me to go at a turtle's pace.

Even if that means only waving at him from a distance and sending him a text before I fall asleep in the bed, that sort of still smells like him.

I turn the lock and am about to greet Fletcher with a big smile on my face when that smile instantly drops.

Blond hair. Blue eyes. Square jaw.

Hunter shoots me that boyish grin that used to do me in and says, "Wow. I wasn't quite expecting that look from you."

I stand there, unable to speak. Unable to think. His hair is back to its regular short cut unlike when I saw him at The Penny, but nothing else has changed. He's still standing here like he never left, his clothes unwrinkled, probably ironed by his mother or some company he hired to do it, with a hand in the pocket of his expensive jeans. He never liked the clearance ones in stores like Target or Walmart, two stores I've always loved shopping in, and bought clothes that were three times as much as I'd ever spend on anything for myself.

Clearly, his tastes haven't changed in almost three years since we've been apart.

"Hi, Stevie."

Hi, Stevie.

He greets me with so much causality I almost wonder if the past few years ever happened. How has he viewed our time apart? It has to be different from how I have based on the way his lips kick up higher like my reaction is somehow amusing to him.

"Can I come in?" he asks next, finally snapping me out of my stupor.

I force myself to shake my head. "What are you doing here, Hunter?"

His stance doesn't budge from the straight posture and sure confidence that exudes from him, making me grip the towel in my hands tighter.

"You've been avoiding me."

All I do is stare at him.

So, he adds, "I told you before that I wanted to talk to you. Talk. That's all. Can I come in?"

For a brief moment, I weigh my options. I was raised with manners, told not to be rude to guests. But I know if my parents were here, especially Dad, he'd tell Hunter things that Mom would probably chide him for later even if she secretly agreed. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Only then do his shoulders drop a fraction, along with those lips. "Really?"

Is he kidding me? "Really, Hunter. I don't think it's a good idea. I already told you that I didn't have anything I wanted to say."

"Fine. But there are things *I* need to say to you. Will you at least hear me out?"

I want to tell him no. Tell him to go.

But, for some reason, I don't. "Whatever you have to say can be said right where you are."

The look on his face can only be described as disbelief, and I'll probably high-five myself for it later. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"Why would I be?" I challenge, lifting my shoulders weakly. "I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but I don't want you inside my house. This is my place, and I'd rather people from my past not taint it."

He blinks.

I blink.

He looks away for a moment, his jaw moving like his teeth are grinding a little. "Wow. I don't know what to say to that."

"Nothing. Tell me what you came here to tell me and then go. Please." The last tidbit is spoken more quietly than the rest. I didn't want to add it but do out of solidarity because I did spend basically half of my life with this man.

Hunter rakes a hand through his hair before dropping it to his side. "I..." His words fade, his eyes going behind me, then behind him like he's looking for something. "I'm back at Fort Drum. I don't know if you know that."

I *had* heard that town gossip on my many visits back home to see my parents, but I don't indulge him with that information. It isn't like I actively seek out updates on him. Not anymore, at least.

When I don't answer, he sighs. "Listen, I'm just going to come out with it. I've been hearing some rumors from some of my buddies. Guys still on base. Some who aren't active duty anymore but keep in touch."

Not liking where this is going, I grab ahold of the door and wait for him to tell me what it is he's been hearing. His blue eyes darken like a storm at sea, his lips twitching, which tells me whatever it is he doesn't like.

Too bad.

I repeat that to myself when he says, "Is it true that you're seeing my old C.O.? Miller? Because when Moe told me—" I *almost* scoff when I hear Moe's name mentioned, not shocked at all he'd be the one to spill the news to Hunter. He always did like gossiping about things that were never any of his business. "—I couldn't believe it. There's no way my wife would be hanging out at his house playing poker with him and his other buddies. You don't even play cards. I told him that, but he just laughed at me. So did a few others who decided to tell me firsthand accounts that you were at his house more than once."

My nostrils flare. My right eye twitches. The grip I have on the door, towel still in hand with it, makes my fingers turn white. “Ex,” I correct him. “What?”

It physically hurts to reply, but I do it for myself. For my sanity and dignity. “You said ‘wife,’ but you meant ex-wife because we’re not married anymore. Remember? You served me divorce papers after telling me you weren’t happy and stopped loving me a long time ago.”

Hunter doesn’t say a word. No defense. No confirmation that we have the same recollection of the events that unraveled between us. Nothing.

It gives me the confidence to keep going. “In case you’re wondering, that also means you have no right to know anything about what I do with my free time or who I spend that time with. And the fact you still listen to *Moe* even though we both know that man can’t be trusted considering the bullshit he’s put people through because of his talk says a lot more about you than it does about me. So, who cares if I learned how to play poker? So what if I’m playing it at Fletcher’s house?”

This time, it’s his eye twitching. “What do you mean ‘so what’, Stevie —”

“No, Hunter. The fact of the matter is that we got a divorce. You fell out of love with me and completely shattered my heart when you told me it was over. You broke me. I gave you everything, and you still hurt me.” He has the decency to flinch over that. “So, why even bother coming here and asking if talk like that is true when it doesn’t matter?”

“Because it matters to *me*!”

“But why?” I demand, voice cracking. In anger. In frustration. In hurt that he’d show up like this, demanding answers. “Why would it matter to you if I spend time with him or another man? You don’t love me, Hunter. You *stopped loving me* a long time ago. Those were your words, not ones I’m putting in your mouth. So, please, enlighten me as to why I shouldn’t be pissed off that you’re here asking me for answers that you don’t deserve to know.”

His lips part to answer, then close. His throat bobs with his heavy swallow as his eyes do another dart behind me. “Because.”

That’s all I get? After everything we shared together, ‘because’ is his reply to me. “As much as I would love to stand and listen to you berate me, I have other things to do with my time. So, I think it’s time you—”

“Because I love you.” He blurts, his hand going back over his shaved head. “Christ, Stevie. How could I not? I’m always going to love you, just like you’ll always love me.”

Everything...freezes.

Maybe two years ago, those words would have meant something. They would have jumpstarted my dead heart and brought me back to life. But now... God, now they mean nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

“You don’t mean that,” I whisper.

“Of course, I do,” he answers, eyes rolling like I’m the one being ridiculous right now. “I’m not just saying that for no reason.”

“You are,” I disagree, my voice lighter than I would have expected it to be during this conversation. Calmer, somehow. “You heard that your first girlfriend, your first love, was seeing somebody else. It’s not fun. Trust me, Hunter, I’d know something about that.”

For a second time, he flinches.

“Yeah, I know about your escapades. Do you know that people told me not to think too much about it? They said you were just grieving in your own way. That ‘boys will be boys’ when it comes to getting over women. I had someone say that you’d get over that phase and change your mind. And the saddest part of all is that I hoped they were right. Even after I found out that you’d started seeing other women shortly after we separated, I hoped there’d come a day when you regretted your decision and would find your way back to me. That’s what the saying is, isn’t it? If they love you, they’ll always come back?”

Hunter stays quiet, his eyes full of pain and maybe even a little bit of guilt knowing I know what he’s done.

“So, is it really fair for you to come here and tell me you don’t like that I’m seeing somebody?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it.”

I laugh, but the sound is short. “You didn’t need to. It’s in your tone. In the way you look at me like you don’t know who I am. You moved on and do whatever you want, so why can’t I? There’s no reason.”

“Because I—”

I cut him off, my patience nonexistent the longer he keeps this up. “No. Don’t you dare say it, Hunter Nathan Cross. You do not love me, and you’re not allowed to stand here on *my* doorstep, on *my* property, and tell me that I

love you too. I'm not naïve enough for you to control what I think, feel, and do anymore, but good try. God help the next woman you charm into thinking that's okay."

His eyes widen at my sharp tone.

"If that's all you had to say to me, you should leave. I appreciate your honesty, or what you think is honesty, but I'm done hearing it. We live two separate lives now. We're both free to do whatever we want with them."

I want nothing more than to close the door on him, but I don't. Not even when he opens his mouth again and keeps this up. Because like before, he doesn't listen.

Doesn't hear me.

Doesn't *want to*.

So, when he does speak, it's even harder to digest the words. "But *him*? I knew you'd move on eventually, but does it have to be him of all people?"

I close my eyes, my energy drained from this endless cycle he's putting me through that obviously isn't going anywhere. "What do you want from me, Hunter? Because last I heard, you've been living your own life however you want without me having a say in it. You don't see me butting in, do you? You don't know anything about what's going on in mine. You've been standing here for five minutes and haven't so much as asked how I am or anything that shows you really care, much less love me like you want me to believe you do. Like I've already told you, you lost that right when you gave me those papers."

His hands go to his hair. "I just..."

The sigh I release is heavy, tired. "I'm not saying anything is going on with Fletcher, but even if there was, what right do you have to have a say in it? Did you really think I'd pine for you forever, hoping you'd change your mind? Praying you'd realize you wanted more with me? I wasn't going to wait around for you."

Though, to some degree, I did. I'd just never admit to him how long or how badly I had wanted him to show up at my parents and beg for forgiveness. I needed to keep some of my dignity.

"Have you suddenly changed your mind?" I pry, not relenting. "Do you want children?"

He looks pained. Maybe even a little nauseous if the coloring of his face is any indication. "No..."

“Do you think you’ll ever change your mind about that? Because that’s a dealbreaker for me. I haven’t let go of that dream to be a mother just because you tried making me.”

“No.”

“Then what do you want, Hunter? Tell me.”

Finally, he sighs. A heavy, burdened, but also relenting sigh. “I want you to be happy. Always.”

My face softens at the words I know he means, so I give them right back with the same sincerity. “I want that for you too.”

We stare at each other.

He murmurs, “I’m sorry.”

I’m not sure for what, but when he looks me in the eye, I realize it’s for everything. He’s sorry for it all. Hurting me. Dragging me along.

“I forgive you.”

And just like that, a huge, heavy weight has been lifted off me.

“You should probably go,” I add just as quietly as I spoke before.

He looks like he wants to say something else, but he doesn’t. He gives me what I want, maybe for the first time, by nodding, taking a step back, and then another.

Until he turns around and walks away.

This time, I don’t cry.

I find myself watching him leave in a blue car that looks even more expensive than the old one he loved so much and lift a hand to wave him off. Whether he returns it or not, I don’t know because I’m about to close the door when two figures start walking up the pathway from the sidewalk.

“Hi, Ms. Foster!” Nicki greets, waving sporadically with Admiral barking and jumping at his hyper friend.

Fletcher’s eyes are on the taillights disappearing down the street before turning back to me as they stop a few feet from the door.

“Hi,” I tell them, smiling down at my student before my gaze lifts to his father.

It’s the smallest of them that says, “That man had the same haircut as my dad.”

The smile is small, but there, when I nod in confirmation. “Yeah, it was. He’s in the military.”

“Is that the friend you mentioned before?”

I have to think about it because I'm not sure what he's talking about at first. But I vaguely remember the conversation he's talking about that ended with him calling Hunter lame.

It makes me want to laugh. "Yeah, that's him," I confirm, looking to Fletcher. His jaw is ticking, but he doesn't say anything as he glances back down the street where Hunter's car went. I clear my throat. "I've known Hunter for a very long time. He was just stopping by to...talk."

The new set of eyes on me tells me I'll need to explain what that talk was about in more depth, which I already planned to do later.

"If you've known him for a long time, why aren't you with him instead of being alone?"

Too surprised by Nicki's question, I flatten my hand against my shirt while trying to gather my reply.

Fletcher palms his son's shoulder. "You can't ask those sorts of things."

"It's okay," I tell him. "The truth is, Nicki, I was with him at one point. Things change, though. People change. Sometimes they grow apart, that's all."

"Do you love him?"

Fletcher groans at his son.

"Well..." I make a face, trying to figure out the line I'm crossing by discussing this with a student. It's a fine one considering my relationship with his father. Or sort of relationship with him. If we make it work, it isn't like I won't be seeing more of Dominic in the future anyway, so there are things I'm sure he'd find out with time anyway.

When he doesn't get a reply, Nicki keeps going innocently. "Does he not love you anymore, and that's why you're alone?"

Fletcher blanches. "Jesus, Dominic."

"What?"

I press my lips together for a minute before offering Nicki a small shrug and thinking back to what Hunter said. "I think we'll both always love each other to some degree, but there's a lot of different kinds of love out there."

The child thinks about it. "I guess I get it. Mom says she loves Dad but not the way she loves Jacob. Plus, Mom said Dad really likes you, so that means you can't like anyone else anyway. Especially not another guy."

The snort comes out before I can hold it in as my eyes go from the shorter Miller to the much, much taller one.

And...his face is red.

Fletcher's blushing.

Domonic shrugs. "I like you too, so I guess that's okay."

He guesses that's... I swallow. "Thank you for telling me that," is all I can come up with, my voice a little hoarser than I mean it to be. "Do you know what I was thinking, Nicki?"

His head shakes.

"I was thinking that I'd like to get that dog we talked about, and I could really use your help if you're still interested."

His face blossoms with light and excitement as his eyes dart to his dad. "Can we go to the pet store?"

I laugh at his urgency, and even Fletcher chuckles. But when those dark orbs go from his son to me, he says, "I think that's a good idea."

"Yeah?"

His chin dips before those eyes go back to the road again. "Yeah. A dog will keep away unwanted guests."

I blink.

Blink again.

Stare.

Fletcher's tone tells me one thing.

He's jealous.

And I...

In a weird way, I sort of like it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

When lunch comes, I'm about to go to the teacher's lounge to get the salad I'd put in the fridge this morning when a familiar figure appears at my door holding a cardboard cup holder with two Styrofoam to-go cups in it and a brown paper bag hanging from his wrist with my favorite local diner's logo on the front.

"Have time for me?" he asks, holding up the drinks. "Brought your favorite hot chocolate."

I perk up. "Always. Come in. I was about to go grab my lunch."

He sets the bag on my desk. "I grabbed some for us if you don't mind having lunch with me. Got the chicken wrap you said you liked the last time we were there. But if you want—"

"That sounds perfect." Before I think about it, I peck his lips and smile. My hand touches his arm before I help him take out the to-go containers labeled with a black sharpie to indicate which is which. I can smell the burger in his before he even opens it after grabbing a chair and putting it beside mine.

After walking home from the pet store, where I didn't find anything I was ready to buy despite Nicki trying to convince me that the pug puppies looked lonely like me, Fletcher and I had a long talk. Nicki was playing with Admiral and the toy I'd bought their dog in my yard, when I'd turned to the man watching his world through the glass who'd said, "You don't need to tell me what happened."

When he pinned me with those intense eyes and added a quiet but firm, "I trust you," I knew I had to tell him.

Because he didn't expect it.

Because he trusted me.

So, I gave him a condensed version of my conversation with Hunter, watched him make faces at my ex's lacking admissions before touching his arm and saying, "Being let go by him was the best thing he could have done for me. It took meeting you to realize that."

Then, I'd kissed him.

Held his hand.

Felt his breath mingle with mine until he straightened and admitted, “Relieved to hear that, honey.”

He was worried about Hunter. More specifically, he was worried about me going back to him. So, I knew then I’d have to show him in any way possible that he has nothing to worry about.

Watching him pass me a napkin and then my hot chocolate, which smells like the sweet, salted caramel I love getting a little too often, I can’t help but wonder what he must have thought when he saw Hunter standing at my door. He told me Dominic is the one who noticed him first. It didn’t take long for Fletcher to realize who it was, even only seeing his back.

Hunter is like that, I guess.

Noticeable.

Memorable.

That doesn’t matter now, though. Both men know where I stand. I’ll always carry some weight over me when it comes to my past, but I won’t let it bury me anymore.

“How do you feel about a movie night?” he asks, eyes flicking up and scoping out my face as he dresses up his burger.

I think about it for only a moment before giving him my honest answer. “I think I’d like that. Will Nicki be there?”

His head dips. “I talked to him when we got home.” He pauses for a moment, wiping off his fingers with a napkin. “About us.”

Dominic hasn’t said a word to me about it. He’s been the same Nicki he usually is in class. During third period, I saw him staring at a familiar blue marble before putting it back into his pocket. During fourth, right before lunch, I’d seen him talking to the aide and even smiling a little at the kind older woman he’s warmed up to.

“What does he think about this?” *Us.*

Fletcher leans back in his chair. “He said the same thing to me that he told you. He likes you, Peaches. I don’t think he really has another opinion other than that one.”

My tongue drags across my bottom lip as I pick up a fry from the Styrofoam container and dip it into the ketchup from his. “Do you think he’ll be okay with things...progressing?”

Fletcher’s eyes heat. “I think once he sees how happy we are, he’ll have no reason not to be.” I swallow air as he pins me with that fiery gaze. “I

meant what I said, Stevie. He's okay with this. He has no reason to feel otherwise."

I can't help but ask, "And Traci? What are her thoughts?"

The smallest curl of his lips appears before disappearing just as quickly. "Not that her thoughts on this matter, but she likes you too. I know she said as much when she saw you."

I blush.

"Apparently, Nicki has brought you up quite often to her and Jake," he adds, picking up his burger and taking a bite.

My eyebrows go up.

He chuckles. "You're cute, honey. I ever tell you that?"

Cute? I shake my head.

"Well, you are. Worried about what Trace will think. I'm happy. I'd like to think you are—" His eyes focus on me like he wants a confirmation, which my smile gives him. "We both know Nicki is. That's all that matters. Not Traci, not Hunter." His tone is rougher when he says my ex's name, and I try not to smile but fail miserably. So, I hide it behind the wrap I pick up and take a bite of.

Fletcher keeps going, making me fall deeper without him even realizing that what he says means so much to me. "Dominic is interested in watching that play. The one about the founding fathers. He must have heard us talking about it." We had spoken about my love for the musical a time or two when I told him I'd seen it on Broadway years before it came out on a popular streaming service. I still liked putting it on as background noise when I cook and clean and quietly sing along to each number.

My lips part as I lower my food. "We talked about it in class a few times. I'd told them it was a great way for people, younger generations especially, to learn about how our country came to be."

He makes a humming noise before swallowing another big bite of his lunch. "I think I'd like to see it too."

The giddiness mixed with shock over that admission, since very few men enjoy watching things like this, overwhelms me. "There are some adult themes to it," I warn him. "Nothing too graphic, but I thought I'd let you know in case you don't want him watching that sort of thing. Plus, it's long. Two and a half hours."

Nicki has always been great sitting still in class, but there are some days he's more anxious than others. Wiggling, fidgeting, paying more attention

to whatever is happening outside rather than in the classroom.

“It’s about war,” Fletcher chooses to respond with. “Nothing he hasn’t heard about in his lifetime. But hopefully nothing he has to experience in it either. I imagine that’s vital to this play, right? The hope that surfaces after the battle is over.”

Fletcher has no clue that those words trigger something inside me that makes me wish we weren’t sitting in my classroom.

That’s why I put down my chicken wrap, reach over until my fingers dance along his arm, and say, “I’m ready.”

Two words.

So many different meanings.

But Fletcher knows exactly which I mean when his eyes flare with heat.



Dominic falls asleep using Admiral as a pillow on the living room floor halfway through the second act. Fletcher watches his son with a content smile on his face, his body eased on the couch with an arm thrown around my shoulders and my body pressed against his.

He hasn’t said anything about the play.

Nothing bad.

Nothing good.

But I can tell that he doesn’t mind it. He hasn’t looked at his phone once or done anything that makes it seem like he’s bored. He even asks a few questions about the accuracy of the storyline, which I happily indulge both boys on since I did plenty of research on the creation of the plot in comparison to what really happened.

When I was done rambling, he’d made only one comment about it. “Creative liberties, then.” There was no judgment in his tone. He even sounded impressed.

After the credits start rolling, I move away from Fletcher and look at the time. Nibbling my lip, I debate on what to do. Say goodnight? Wait for him to suggest otherwise? We haven’t talked about sleepovers. Considering this is the first time I’ve spent with both Millers in their domain, I’m feeling uneasy.

“Let me put him to bed,” he prompts, standing and stretching after sitting still for so long while I used him as a human cushion. When he lifts his arms, a sliver of his stomach appears, along with the thin trail of hair leading somewhere, I’d like to see again. His eyes catch my gaze, and a smug smirk tugs up the corners of his lips until I quickly look away.

“Stay put, yeah?” he adds, once his son is perched in his arms, cradled against his chest. Then, with one hand holding his son to him, he reaches down where I sit on the edge of the couch and brushes his knuckles lightly against my cheek. “Want to see you when I come back down.”

I give him a small nod and watch his big frame disappear up the stairs. It’s only then I get up and stretch my own legs, flattening my clothes out and taming the frizzy hair that’s gone wild since I put it down when I got here. I look at the various pictures hanging up on the walls and resting on the shelves. Pictures of Dominic and Fletcher together, some with Nicki and Admiral when they were both much younger, and images of a younger Fletcher in a uniform.

My fingertips graze the picture frame, drawn to the seriousness behind the glass. He’s standing tall, posture straight, face neutral, and looking away from the camera. I don’t know who took the candid shot, but whoever it was caught him lost in thought if his stance is any indication.

Taking the frame from the shelf, I brush off the dust from the side with the pad of my thumb. Most of the others are clean, but not this one. If I had to guess, I’d say it was intentionally missed.

I don’t know how long I was staring at it before I hear, “It’s amazing how time changes people, huh.”

Startling, I nearly drop the frame. “Geez. I didn’t even hear you come downstairs.” I put the frame back where it was. “Sorry, I was just looking. I haven’t spent much time in here to get a good look at these.”

When I’m at his house, we spend most of our time in the kitchen or dining room, depending on what’s going on. Sometimes, we’ll sit and talk in the living room, but not long enough for me to study the trinkets and images on the shelves since my eyes rarely trail from him.

“You don’t need to apologize.” He comes up beside me and stares at the picture I was examining. “I was thirty when that was taken. It feels like a lifetime ago, though.”

Amusement kicks up my lips. “That was only twelve years ago, Fletcher. That’s hardly a lifetime.” The look on his face is pained, like his memories

hitting him while he looks at his younger self says otherwise. “But, I suppose, when people have gone through what you have, it probably feels like more than a lifetime.”

His eyes shift down to me. “Did he ever talk about it?”

I know who he’s talking about, but not what he’s referring to. “Did he talk about what?”

“Being overseas?”

Blinking, I trail my hand down his arm until our fingers link, then bring him back over to the couch so we can sit. “No, Hunter never said anything about it. It wasn’t like he saw any action, or he probably would have bragged.”

A heavy look shadows over his features as he sinks into the cushion and puts our hands on his thigh. “Soldiers who see the real action never brag,” he tells me grimly. His throat clears. “Did you know I served five tours overseas? Three in Iraq and two in Afghanistan. The things we saw were nothing I’d ever want to repeat to anybody, to save them from the burdens we were faced with after getting out.”

If he served that many tours... “You must have experienced hell.”

His breath is slow, steady. “Sometimes I think hell would have been easier than what happened over there.”

My heart breaks for him as his fingers squeeze mine to remind him where he is. Not there. Here. With me.

Distant eyes moving to me, he gives me a small, empty smile. “You don’t have to look at me like that, honey. Some men and women went through far worse than I did. Some of them didn’t make it back like I was lucky enough to.”

As true as that may be, it doesn’t make me ease the grip I have on his hand. “I can’t imagine what you must have gone through, but for what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re here.”

He leans over and presses a kiss against the corner of my mouth, then softly brushes his lips against mine. Finally, he draws back and leans his forehead against mine, his heavy exhale caressing my nose and mouth before pressing another kiss against my cheek.

“When did you retire?”

With one more peck against my lips, he sits back and gazes down at our hands. “I’d started the process after Traci told me she was pregnant. I was debating on doing it for a while. I was...tired. Damn tired at that point,

Stevie. My body, my mind, they weren't suited for the lifestyle anymore, for the things expected of me by my colleagues and country. And when I heard I'd be a father, it seemed like the perfect time to step down. Let myself breathe again. Be the best man I could be, the healthiest, for my son or daughter."

As he speaks, my cheek rests against his shoulder, watching as his thumb brushes the back of my hand in slow strokes.

"I'm glad I left," he continues quietly, something warm brushing against the crown of my skull. His lips, I realize, as he talks. "If I didn't, who knows where I'd be now. I'm not sure I could give my all to Dominic or even a fraction of what I owed Traci. She never asked me for anything, not even when she told me about the pregnancy test being positive. Trace never expected me to do a damn thing about it, and that crushed a part of me. Made me want to try ten times harder to prove to her I'd take care of both of them."

It's good he can't see my face because I'm definitely not making a good one. He must guess as much because those lips trail to my temple, where they press another kiss. "Like you, I don't hold any torches for my ex. You have nothing to worry about."

I know that, and I'm sure if I looked I'd see the same cocky smile on his face knowing I'm just as jealous over the same topic. "You don't need to tell me that," I assure him.

"Mm. But sometimes it's nice to be told there's nobody else that could compare," is his reply, and I hear the smile in his voice.

I look up, chin resting where my cheek was on his shoulder. "You're right. And in case I didn't get my point across already, I wanted to let you know that there is absolutely nothing you need to worry about with me and Hunter."

Another noise vibrates from his throat. "I'm seeing that."

"Can I ask you something?" I ask him. His silence tells me to continue. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

He remains quiet for a long stretch of time. The only sounds that fill the room are our steady breathing and the refrigerator running on the other side of the wall. When he does answer, it makes the organ in my chest squeeze. "I want to tell you yes and make a big statement about the first time I ever met you, but I'd be lying. You were on another man's arm. His wife. And no matter the natural beauty you have, then and now, the way you've

always carried yourself, always smiled at everybody no matter who they were, and brought light into those people's lives, I was never going to look at you beyond that. Not when you were with him. Not when I had no right to."

My heart pounds so hard I can feel it *thumping* in my ears.

He finishes me off with two sentences. "If love at first sight existed, there is no doubt I would have fallen deeply in it with you. No matter how wrong."

I stare at him.

Unblinking.

Breath caught in my throat, I force out a choked version of his name. I barely even understand it, but he reacts all the same, like he can, nonetheless.

I want to say the words.

I love you.

I want to tell him how much he means to me. Because his response means more to me than anything I could have conjured in my imagination.

But he doesn't let me get the chance to when he says, "I know, baby. Me too. You don't have to say it now. Not yet. Not until you're ready."

Done.

So done with this man and his words and the way he looks at me like I'm the only woman on this planet. It seems impossible, but the second those eyes land on me, the possibilities are endless.

"I told you I was ready the other day..."

Yesterday, to be exact.

But the man sitting beside me simply kisses my cheek, then my jaw, one side of my mouth, then the other, before saying, "I want nothing more than to take you upstairs, strip you bare, and hear you moan my name and clench my cock, baby girl. But I don't want you to be quiet, to hold back, because of Nicki. If you'll wait a little longer, then this weekend..."

Fire burns through my blood at his words, so much so that I almost groan over him making me wait.

He chuckles at my obvious distaste over the thought. "If you're quiet enough," he bargains, eyes burning with the same need mine must hold, "I'll make you feel good, ease the pressure until then."

And with his mouth, hands, and fingers, he does just that to me on the couch, muffling what noises I can't hold back with his hand and then his

lips.

My body is happily sated.

My inner thighs blissfully sore from the rough bristles of his beard.

When we do go upstairs to bed, we sleep.

Only sleep.

It's the best night's sleep I've gotten in a long, long time.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Bex walks over to where I'm standing in front of the mirror and gives me a motherly smile that I've seen her give her two kids. I haven't had time to speak much to either of them, but her daughter is the spitting image of Bex with the same welcoming, warm personality as her mother, and her son has the same dedication and family loyalty as she does. Seeing the three of them together, exchanging stories over coffee and whatever food her daughter brings home with her from school, always makes me smile, especially when her daughter brings me brownies since her mother apparently talks so much about me to them.

"You look beautiful," she tells me, putting her hands on my shoulders and squeezing.

I flatten my palms down the front of the black belted wrap dress and lean my head against the side of hers when she leans in and rests her chin on my shoulder. "You don't think it's too much? It's pretty fancy."

"Does it make you feel pretty?" she asks.

I nod.

"Do you feel confident in it?"

Another nod from me.

"Do you think Fletcher will be wiping drool off his chin the second he sees you in it?"

This time, I grin. Fletcher has seen me in dresses before, but none of them look like the high-low hem one I'm wearing now. The dresses, skirts, and other clothes he's complimented me in are all for work. Nothing showy or too expensive. Most of the time, he sees me in jeans and a slightly fitted T-shirt or blouse, and occasionally, whatever pajamas I'm too lazy to change out of on the weekends.

And, in hindsight, he's seen me in far less too. Multiple times. Whether half-dressed with his head between my legs or fully nude with his fingers trailing between my thighs as my hand works his cock. We've had plenty of stolen moments where Fletcher has gotten me bare in some form or another with a wicked grin on his face while doing it.

My neighbor laughs. "Then I don't think it's too much. I think it's perfect. Us women need to knock a man off his feet once in a while, and I

have no doubt this number will do just that.”

She pats my shoulder before holding up her fingers, disappearing from the dressing area of the store where we’re shopping before coming back with a pair of strappy black heels. When she passes them to me, I see they’re the right size and quickly shoot her an appreciative smile.

“It’s been forever since I treated myself to new clothes,” I admit, sitting to slide the dressy shoes on. The heels aren’t too high or too thin, both good things since my clumsiness knows no bounds. “It feels strange.”

She must sense the slight guilt to my tone over going on a shopping spree for something as vain as a dress and shoes for the date Fletcher and I are going on tonight because she says, “You deserve it, Stevie. Self-care is important. We all have to treat ourselves to something that makes us feel good once in a while.”

Though true, I can’t help but sigh. “I know you’re right, but all I can think about is what I could be spending the money on instead.”

My house is mostly all set up with furniture. It could use more décor to cover the bare walls, but as time goes on, little things like pictures taken or drawings that Dominic or other students have given me are hung throughout the house. My kitchen has turned into a beautiful oasis of various houseplants, livening up the space. And since Fletcher has taken over my lawn care, including shoveling and salting whenever the snow and ice comes, and promising he’ll mow the grass when spring graces us for more than a day at a time, I’m saving money on the service I’d been hiring since I moved over six months ago.

I shouldn’t beat myself up over buying new outfits considering most of my work wardrobe came from secondhand shops and clearance racks. I didn’t exactly spend a fortune on the things I wear at school, so the few times I buy brand new items won’t break the bank.

“Enough about me.” I stand and examine the outfit fully, tilting my foot and smiling at the final result. “How are you and Sexy Santa doing?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “His name is Todd,” she tells me, giving me a tiny laugh before giving me a once over. “And he’s fine, I’m sure. We decided it wasn’t going to work out.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I frown, wishing I’d asked sooner. Last I heard, which has probably been a month or more, they’d been seeing each other at least once a week. Sometimes twice. “I know you liked him.”

She pats the hand I put on hers. "It's okay, Stevie. It was me who called things off. He's a nice man, but it was becoming...too much."

My brows pinch. "What do you mean? If you don't want to talk about it, I understand. Heaven knows you've listened to all my woes. But I'm here if you want to talk."

Bex picks a piece of lint or something off my dress. "Truthfully, I think I was unfairly comparing him to my late husband. I found myself thinking about whether I liked certain things or not about Todd simply because he was so different than Billy."

Expression easing, I squeeze her hand tighter. "That's natural, though, Bex. If you decided that there were too many cons with Todd, it was all for the best. The right guy will come around when he's meant to, and then I'm sure you won't be comparing him to anyone because nobody will match him."

She blinks, her lips stretching into a slow, wide smile. "My, my, sweetie. You've grown quite a bit since I've met you."

It's my turn to blush at her compliment as we step apart and look at my reflection in the mirror again. My hands go to my dress, my eyes roaming from head to toe in appraisal. "It's in part because of you, you know." My eyes go to her in the mirror. "You were always honest with me, telling me what I needed to hear instead of holding back. In a way, my mom does that too, but she's a bit...harsher with her points."

Her smile is sad. "She must love you very much then. I know I show Mary tough love more than I probably should. She's a stubborn girl. Reminds me of someone else I know." She pokes my side and winks at me. "But I hardly did anything. This journey, where you are now, it's because of you. You've let yourself love again."

Love. The L-word I never thought I'd use again in the context of another man. Family, sure, Friends, yes. My job, even. But when it came to admitting that there was a man out there that fit into my life like a missing puzzle piece, I never would have believed it.

Until the friends I made here.

Until seeing Fletcher again.

Until Hunter showed back up.

It's ironic how our hearts can be hurt by the things we saw coming. And I had.

I'd put together all the moments leading up to the papers being served to me and knew what the outcome would be. Hunter had shown me he'd fallen out of love long before he'd gotten the nerve to say it.

I just didn't want to believe it.

To see it.

But now that I do... "I have," I agree with Bex, my smile warm and genuine. "Let myself love again, that is. Fletcher makes me love myself in a way I think I might have forgotten how to do in the past. He never makes me feel unworthy or self-conscious by being who I am or showing what I want."

My face heats thinking about him coming over to my house during his walk with Admiral. He'd only meant to stop to give me a kiss and see how my day was before going back home to check on Dominic, who he'd left alone to finish up his homework before they had dinner. But before he left, the kiss had deepened, and the desire grew as our tongues twisted and hands roamed. Before I knew it, I was on my knees in front of the door, unbuckling his belt, unzipping his pants, and taking him in my mouth until he was panting my name and thrusting between my lips. Admiral had gone off to play with the toys I kept at the house whenever they visited. After I'd made his owner come in my mouth, I almost had to remind Fletcher about his waiting son when he gave me that heated look that went straight to my core.

There have been other times. Him planting me on the edge of my kitchen counter and lifting up my skirt to reacquaint his mouth with the center of my body.

Me grinding on him on the couch until I made us both come while Dominic slept upstairs after Fletcher had put him to bed.

Even the make-out sessions we had like two teenagers who couldn't get enough had brought me to the brink of insanity.

Each little moment we'd stolen with one another had built and built and built until the dam nearly flooded.

All leading up to tonight.

Nicki is with Traci and Jacob. He'd brought Admiral with him after his father's suggestion, which means Fletcher and I will have an entire house to ourselves.

No kid.

No dog.

No interruptions.

Bex snickers, breaking me away from the dirty memories I was having of a very hard piece of Fletcher. And not just his muscles. “I don’t need to read minds to know what’s on yours, my dear.”

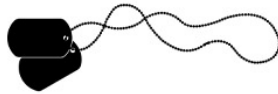
My cheeks only blaze hotter, making her laugh louder. “Sorry.”

She pats my butt as I turn to head back to the dressing room and change into my regular clothes again. “Don’t be. We’ve both been married women. I know a thing or two about what you’re thinking.”

I can’t help but laugh along with her, not letting the embarrassment get to me. We’re both adults—both know what it’s like to not want to keep our hands off the men we love.

Through the curtain, Bex adds, “Can’t say I’m not a little jealous of you. What I would pay to see what that man looks like naked.”

My laugh turns into a snort. “I’ll try snapping a picture.”



It takes me over an hour to get my hair just right, loosely curled and sprayed to stay in its shape, and apply just enough makeup to highlight the green in my eyes, emphasize my cheekbones, and the outline of my fuller lips. When it’s all done, I can’t help but smile at my reflection before slipping on my dress, sliding on my heels, and giving myself one more look in the mirror when the knock sounds from downstairs.

Because of our late-night meetings, Fletcher has a key to the front door to get in easier when he’s free. So, I’m not surprised when I hear the lock click and the door open as I walk from my room, down the narrow hallway, and stop at the top of the stairwell.

Taking a deep breath, I count to three, flatten my dress, and finally walk down when I hear him call out my name.

I’m on the last step when he stops and stares at me with unblinking eyes, the color darkening, lips parting slightly, and a sound I’ve never quite heard made before rising from his throat.

The moment I step onto the wooden floor in front of him, his head begins shaking back and forth in disbelief. Those eyes take me in slowly, raking over my entire body from the careful way I did my hair, to the makeup applied to my face, to the fabric wrapped around my body, hugging

all of the right curves, and down to my shoes that make my legs look longer.

“Fletcher?” I ask, trying and failing to hide a smile.

His head finally stops shaking as he steps up to me, one of his hands wrapping around the small of my waist before trailing to my lower back and pulling me into him.

“Forgive me,” he whispers, kissing me lightly before those lips move from my jaw to my throat and nipping over my pulse.

“For what?”

“For having to miss our date.”

I blink, instant disappointment filling my stomach as I place a hand on his chest to push him away gently. “Is everything okay? Is it Dominic? Is everything—”

“Baby.” He all but growls the word as his eyes flash with lust. “There’s no way we’ll be leaving this house after I’ve seen you like this.”

My eyes widen.

He kisses me again, his lips crashing into mine, nipping, sucking, his tongue bending and twisting with mine in a raw hunger before he pulls back and says, “But don’t worry. I’m about to make it up to you. We’ll just make a reservation another night. Because the second I take this dress off you, you won’t be putting anything else on until tomorrow.”

And before I know it, his hands are gripping the back of my thighs, hauling me up until my legs are wrapped around his hips. With my dress hiked up exposing my lace thong, he moves us upstairs to my bedroom.

All I can manage to say between the hungry way he devours my mouth is, “I forgive you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Fletcher delivers his promise like he always does, stripping me in record time until I'm in nothing but skin and makeup. I'm not even angry that I spent so much time on my appearance because the way the man hovering over me is touching me slowly between my legs makes it impossible to think about much of anything.

Squirming for more as his thick fingers make passes along my wet seam, I pant and arch when his trimmed beard scrapes against my bare breast, taking the rosy nipple between his lips and sucking. My hand curls around the back of his neck, fingertips tightening and massaging the flesh there as he switches between the hard, pebbled nubs and enters me with one of his fingers. Moving in and out slowly to build me up, he inserts a second finger and hooks them until he hits the perfect spot that has my back lifting off the bed with each thrust.

His lower body rolls against the mattress to get friction against the steel tenting his briefs as he works me over. "You're dripping down my fingers, baby," he groans, moving his mouth from my nipples to my lips as the wet sounds pick up the quicker his hand flicks and moves between our bodies.

Sucking his tongue between my lips, I sneak a hand between us, taking my time to take in his impressive chest with my fingertips, and then dip my palm into the elastic of his briefs and wrap it around the base of his hard cock until I feel the bristles of coarse hair there as I give him a gentle squeeze. He lets out a primal noise that breaks our kiss as I begin stroking him from base to tip and back down again, making him falter with his own movements.

"Please, Fletcher," I plead against his lips, moving my hips to match the rhythm he creates with his fingers.

He gives me another kiss, a peck on the jaw, the cheek, before nipping my earlobe and sucking it between his lips. "Are you sure?"

"I promise."

My knuckles brush his hot skin as I work his shaft, tightening my hold and squeezing below the tip before trailing back down until I can feel him leaking.

When his fingers leave me, I want to cry, but he repositions himself to yank down his briefs until that very impressive, very hard, hot organ is free at last and looking even more massive than I remember from the many other times I've seen it over the past month.

Every time we had to wait, to reschedule, has led to this, making us even needier than the first time.

"*Fletcher*," I say when he's settled back between my legs, one of his palms guiding my leg up and around his waist as his cock nudges my entrance.

This time when he whispers my name in his heated, low tone, I don't freak out.

This time, when he pushes in, first one inch, then another, I don't lock up.

He works slowly as his lips pay attention to every inch of my face. First pressing against my cheek, then the other. My nose. One corner of my lips. The opposite side. One eyelid, then the second.

My fingers trail down his back, stroking up and down his spine as my leg hooks tighter around his waist. Then, finally, I lift up and feel him seat himself fully inside of me, causing both of us to groan when our pelvises meet. He pauses for a moment or two to kiss me, taking my top lip into his mouth, then the bottom, before parting my lips and teasing my tongue with his own. The kiss is slow, exploring every part of my mouth, my tongue, swiping my teeth, tracing my lips, all while he twitches inside of me.

"Please," I whisper, my lips trailing down the underside of his jaw, then to his throat and biting down on the damp skin there.

That's when he moves.

He withdraws until only his tip is still inside me before pushing back in, filling me in one hard thrust.

Then he does it again.

And again.

Faster, harder, each time until our skin slaps together in a delicious harmony.

Our breaths, tongues, and teeth clatter together as he makes love to me with everything he has. The noises that mix between us make my body feel worshipped—the sounds in the air, the scent thick with sex and passion as he grabs my other thigh and lifts it until both legs are wrapped around him.

The angle hits me deeper as he rises on his knees, feeling like nothing I've experienced in the past.

I feel cherished.

Loved.

"God, baby," he breathes, his hands gripping my hips as he slams into me. "You have no idea—" His voice cuts off as I lift my hips to meet his movements making him cuss and bend down to capture my lips again.

Teeth biting down on his lip, I wrap my arms around his neck and say, "Fuck me."

Two words.

Words I'd never spoken before.

Words I've always *wanted to* but felt too ashamed to because of the partner who'd made me feel that way from the start.

This is how it's supposed to be.

Love.

Making love.

Fucking.

It's all the same when it's with the right person. Not dirty, but right. Perfectly right.

The words unleash the soldier inside Fletcher that's been dormant since his retirement. If it's possible, a version of him that I could never have in even in my wildest, dirtiest fantasies picture takes complete control of my body.

Of my breasts.

My hips.

My pussy that tightens and clenches around him as he goes harder, jackknifing as his arm ropes around my lower back and picks me up until I'm straddling his lap with my legs on either side of his body.

"Oh God," I moan as he lifts me up and drops me down onto him, using my body to fuck himself until we're both panting. Each movement brings a sting of delicious pain between my legs, and I have no doubt I'll need medicine tomorrow if I want to walk. "*God, Fletcher.* I can't—" I shake my head and tighten my arms around him, burying my face into the crook of his sweaty neck as I try matching the rhythm he's creating.

It's too much.

Too fast.

Too hard.

Too everything.

But I love the uncontrollable nature he's showing me, giving me, because he can't help himself. Can't stop himself.

The only thing that gets me to look him in the eyes is when he says, "I love you, Stevie," as both his arms hold me to him, pressing our naked, sweaty chests together so nothing can get between us.

My eyes are wide as I stare at the piercing eyes he's watching me with, my breath catching in my throat.

He kisses me, holding my lips against his, breathing me in, tasting me, still moving his hips upward and filling me methodically slow. "I'm not saying that because it's the heat of the moment. I mean it, honey. I love you so much it hurts my chest, fills my head every goddam day. It drives me crazy. *You drive me crazy.*"

He holds my stare, making this moment that much stronger. I nearly come undone from his firm statement alone, but then he says, "I love you so much that I hope to fucking God your birth control fails tonight."

I lose it, clenching him as I come harder than I've ever come in my entire life. Blackness takes over, and white spots dot my eyes as I tip my head back and feel him twitch inside me and then enter me one more time before burying himself deep and pulsing until I can feel the hot warmth fill me as he groans loudly into my neck.

Sweaty, sated and feeling on the verge of passing out, I let him lay us down, still connected as intimately as we can be. He brushes his fingers through my damp, ruined hair, kisses me once, twice, a third time, before pulling me into him and hugging me against his chiseled body.

"I love you too," I whisper, voice hoarse.

"You're everything I've ever needed," is how he replies before pulling out, grabbing a wet washcloth, and carefully cleaning me before pressing a kiss on my overly sensitive clit, and then crawling back in bed.

That's how we fall asleep.

Until he wakes me up for round two by whispering in my ear, "Need to fuck you from behind, baby girl."

And I let him.

Twice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Except for one, all of my kids disperse from class when lunch and recess rolls around with an aide guiding them to the cafeteria. I smile at Dominic as he stops in front of my desk and twists his fingers together, his gaze flickering between a stack of papers to me to the floor.

“Is everything okay?” I ask him.

He hasn’t been fully paying attention all day but did answer at least one question when prompted, which told me he’d heard enough to absorb some of the information I was feeding the room. But more times than not, I’d seen him looking at the marble pinched between his fingers instead of the papers or books in front of him he should have been focusing on.

“Nicki?”

“I think my dad is going to leave,” he says, eyes trained on the floor like the first time he’d walked into the classroom.

I kneel in front of him. “Why do you think that?” Worry is carved into my tone as he lifts his gaze to me for a brief moment, those circular eyes lined with the same thick lashes Fletcher. The contact lasts longer than normal, raising red flags.

“I overheard him talking to Cooper on the phone last night about seeing him.”

Blinking over the unfamiliar name, I give the little boy a confused look. His sad features make me want to hug him, but we haven’t crossed that line, and I’m not about to in school. “You’ve lost me, Nicki. Who is Cooper?”

“The man who took him away before!” he exclaims in exasperation, his sadness turning into anger quickly. “Mom told me that Cooper always wants to steal Dad back and that, one day, Dad will probably go because he always does what he thinks is right. And I heard him tell Cooper last night that he’ll meet him.”

Take him away? It doesn’t take me long to put the pieces together, and when I do, I can’t help but shake my head. In disbelief. In doubt. “Dominic, I don’t think your dad is going anywhere. From what I know—” From the conversation I’d had with him not that long ago. “—he has no intentions of reenlisting or going anywhere. He *wants* to be here with you. Home with you to see you grow up.”

“He’s said that before,” he grumbles.

“When?” It’s not my business to pry, but it’s obvious Nicki is getting more distressed by the second, and curiosity gets the better of me.

“When I was little.”

“I think it’s best if you talked to your father about this. I’m sure it’s a big misunderstanding. Your dad talks about how much he loves being home, getting to see you every day. I highly doubt what you heard is what’s really going on. Maybe Cooper—” I still don’t know who this Cooper guy is. Not somebody Hunter knew, at least not well or whenever I was around. “—is just going to see your dad and catch up. They’re probably friends.”

I think back to the man Fletcher was at the bar to see the day he’d walked me out. I hadn’t gotten a chance to wonder who he was meeting. I stand by my belief. Fletcher talks about the military like a thing of his past. Not something he’d ever consider being part of again. He wants to be a father to Nicki and be present in his son’s life. Not that he owes me any type of explanation, but I think he’d tell me if he were at least considering the possibility of joining again.

Pushing that aside to deal with when I’m on my own, I look back to Dominic. “I’m sure your dad will tell you whatever you want to know if you ask him when you get home.”

He picks up his shoulders and drops them heavily like he doesn’t quite believe me. I get it. Fletcher told me during our many talks about his past military life that it’d taken a while before his retirement was official. It wasn’t until Dominic was four before he was officially out, even if he was never far from home during that time. He saw Nicki and Traci often. Almost every day, from what I could gather. But if I were in the little boy’s shoes who looks dejected in front of me, I’d probably be scared to lose him again too.

“If you want,” I offer, “we can talk to him about it together.” I’m not sure it’s a smart suggestion, but one that seems to lighten his mood.

His eyes widen as they snap to mine and stay there, full of hope that slightly kills me. “Do you mean it?”

“Of course.”

He nods. “We should do it together because he wouldn’t just be leaving me and my mom this time. We’re used to it. He’d be leaving you too, and you’d be sad.”

My throat tightens at the memories of what it feels like to hug and kiss your loved ones goodbye before they leave. You don't know when they'll come back or if they even will, and it's a horrible feeling. "Yeah," I murmur. "I would be very sad."



After walking Nicki to the cafeteria so he can eat, I return with my packed lunch that I grabbed from the teacher's lounge fridge and stop short when I see a new body in my room.

A tall, lean one, dressed in expensive jeans and a button-down shirt that, for once, isn't tucked into the belted waistline of his denim. As if he knows I'm standing at the doorway, he turns away from the window and smiles. "Hey."

I blink, almost tempted to rub my eyes to see if I'm seeing this right. "Hunter?"

He lifts his hands, palms up and facing me with a sheepish look on his face. "I come in peace."

Slowly, I walk over to my desk and set down the container of food in front of my pushed-out chair, and choose not to say anything until he tells me why he's standing in the middle of my classroom.

"The secretary told me where to find you," he says, gesturing toward the door. "Seems like a nice lady. Reminds me of Mrs. Borner. Remember her? She had those hideous glasses and always wore too much—"

I hold up my hand, grab a bottle of Motrin from my top desk drawer, and pop a couple pills in my mouth while my ex watches me. The last thing I plan on telling him is that my body is sore from what his former commanding officer has been doing to it.

"Hunter, please tell me why you're trying to get me to go down memory lane with you." I don't want to be rude, but the last thing I expected was to walk into my room and find my ex-husband in my space *again* after thinking we'd said our pieces and then our goodbyes. Talking about the woman who had to be at least 100, who drowned herself in perfume every day before coming into our old high school, isn't high on my list of things to converse with him—or anyone—about. "Didn't we say everything we needed to before?"

His shoulders lower slightly at my pinched tone. "I already told you that I come in peace. I'm actually about to leave and head back to base. They're reassigning me, so I wanted to talk to you. Say goodbye."

I pause, looking at him warily. "Goodbye," I say slowly, drawing the word out as I grip the back of the chair.

His lips twitch downward like he's fighting a frown before they go back to neutral. A sigh leaves him. "I deserve that."

You do, I agree, but I don't linger on it.

I told him I forgave him, and I meant it. Even though I don't know what to do with his need to see me before he goes, I still stand by it.

When he realizes I'm not going to say anything else, he rubs his jaw with his palm before nodding. "Look, I shouldn't have gone to your house. My mom chewed me out when she found out I did. She told me to leave you alone."

I'm sure she did, I grumble to myself. That woman was always nice to me when I first started seeing Hunter, but it was obvious as our wedding neared that her feelings had changed. I don't know if it was because I was taking her son away from her, or something else. She made me feel like I wasn't enough for him more times than I can count, and Hunter never did anything to dispute that when I'd confided in him. I stopped caring about her opinion of me when I signed the paperwork that separated me from him and his entire family.

Hunter was a mama's boy, and she loved him all the more for it. It meant controlling him.

Like mother, like son, I guess.

"It was just something I needed to do. To let you know that what I did was shitty. The way I served the papers. The way it all happened..." His head shakes slightly as he looks down at the floor, where scuff marks from kids' shoes dirty the tile and little pieces of scrap paper from notebooks litter the ground around desks. "Truth is, when I heard you were with somebody, I was jealous. I know I shouldn't have been, so you don't need to tell me. It was hard hearing you were with anybody when I was so used to having you all to myself."

Discomfort settles into my stomach. I should shut the door, so nobody walks by and overhears this, but I don't know if I want to be in a closed room with the man shifting on his feet and moving those eyes up to meet mine. If I did, there'd probably be more speculation as to why I was alone

with a random man who nobody had seen before. Not even Sonia, even though she'd asked more than once for pictures. It wasn't until nearly breaking down into tears when she finally stopped pestering me to see what he looked like.

"I was a shithead, which I'm sure you can't argue with. I've handled things badly for a long time, and it wasn't until showing up at your house and seeing you that I realized how bad I messed up. I won't lie, Stevie, I miss you. I still love you, but I can see I have no choice but to get over it. If you're happy, truly happy, then I will. I won't show up again."

This time, I do reply. "I am happy."

His lips rub together, then his jaw moves back and forth as he nods. "I'm sorry. I know I said that before, but I really do mean it. I didn't treat you the way I should have, and when you didn't even want to talk to me, I knew you weren't the same person I'd known. You weren't the same Stevie I married."

I shake my head in agreement. "I grew up, Hunter. We both did. Nobody is the same person they were when they were nineteen. And I'm not going to argue with anything you've said because I can't. I wouldn't go as far as calling you a shithead, but..."

He chuckles at that. "Definitely wouldn't blame you if you did. Look, it was obvious when I was at the bar, and you didn't even look my way that I had no chance."

I blink. "Bar?"

Those lips curl up but not in any amusement. Instead, there's almost... sadness in the way they're carved onto his face. "See, that's what I'm talking about." His hand goes up to his hair, raking through the short, buzzed pieces. "You used to always know when I was in a room. It's like you sensed me. We were both like that. Remember? It used to freak people out. They said we had some sort of radar for each other."

People *had* said that, but I'm still confused. "What bar are you even talking about?"

"I went to meet with Fletcher one night. He asked to meet up at the bar, said he didn't want me at his house. I was having some car problems, so I was late. Pissed him off, not that I'm surprised. If I pulled that on base, he would have had me run ten miles and then give him two hundred pushups right after with no breaks."

All I can do is gape at him.

“Anyway, when I showed up, I saw you two together. Had heard from plenty of people that you two seemed close. Didn’t really like witnessing it firsthand. But it was when he walked you out that I knew. Even before I showed up asking you what was going on, I knew. I was standing right there, and you never even looked up at me.”

I...don’t know how to process that. Hunter was the friend Fletcher was meeting? It doesn’t make any sense to me. “Why were you even seeing him to begin with?”

The look he gives me says, *do you really have to ask?* “Come on, Stevie. You know why I was there. Why we were both there.”

Me. They were meeting because of me.

I draw in a deep breath, letting it fill my chest and flood my lungs. “If you knew that night, then why did you bother showing up at my house? You two must have talked.”

He nods in confirmation. “We talked until the bar closed up. Had a lot to say, shit that doesn’t need to be repeated because it’s said and over with, but I was too stubborn to admit defeat. Not to him. You knew...that I looked up to him. Had a lot of respect for the person he shaped me into. Obviously, it wasn’t somebody good enough knowing what I did. Even after he helped look at my car in the parking lot to make sure it was good, I still went to see you. Out of pettiness, maybe. I guess because I didn’t want to lose to anyone, especially not to someone like him, knowing what kind of man he was. Admirable. Better. Better than me, and better than most guys I know. That’s the truth, even if it sucks to say.”

My eyes widen.

I shouldn’t be surprised that Fletcher would help him even though it’s obvious he isn’t Hunter’s biggest fan. He’s that kind of guy. One who would do anything for anyone no matter the circumstances.

Even knowing what Hunter was to me.

When Hunter’s expression changes into something darker, I can’t help but feel nerves rise up and clench my heart. “I’m glad you’re happy, Stevie. You deserve to be with someone who isn’t a total fuck up like me. What I did to you was horrible, and—”

“Hunter,” I cut him off, sighing. “You fell out of love with me. It sucks, it hurt, but it happened. It happens to a lot of people. It’s what we needed in the end. You don’t have to keep apologizing.”

“You know that’s not what I’m apologizing for.”

I blink, not sure what he means.

“I should have never done it. I know I told you I didn’t, but it was only a couple times with the same woman. It was a mistake that I kept making because I thought it’d make me happier. Like I said, I’m a shithead.”

The nerves clenching my heart tighten so much that I think it stops beating for a second or two as my lips part. When I say his name again, it’s so slow that it almost sounds like I’m trying to remember who he is. “I don’t understand what you’re saying...”

He squeezes his eyes shut before pinching the bridge of his nose. “You don’t need to protect him. I know he’s told you. I would have told you too if I were in his shoes. I swear it was only one woman. I know that doesn’t make up for it happening, make it better, but—”

“*Hunter.*” My voice breaks, snapping his attention to me before his cheeks pale as he takes in my face.

My face that must look crestfallen.

Confused.

Hurt.

Hurt times ten. A million.

Because the man I spent so many years with is telling me that he did cheat all these years later. He’d cheated more than once. With a woman he thought would make him *happier* than me. Happier than his own wife.

He *cheated*, and then he *lied*.

And the man I was with now, the one I’d asked directly if he’d known what Hunter may have done, had also lied about it.

“Fletcher knows?” I ask, voice tiny.

Hunter’s white face somehow gets paler at my question. “He...he really didn’t tell you?”

Oh my God.

Oh my God.

Can your heart be broken twice by the same man even if you stopped loving him a long time ago? If I had to answer that now, I’d say yes. Because on the floor of the classroom were the shards of my shattered heart all over the tiles.

Right there, where anyone can see.

Hunter cheated on me.

And Fletcher knew.

“Hunter.” My robotic voice is unrecognizable even to me as I look him straight in the eyes and calmly say, “Get out. Leave this room and leave me alone. For good this time.”

“I thought you—”

“Go.” I don’t let myself get so angry that my voice cracks. I don’t get so upset that my eyes glaze with fresh tears, knowing the man I’d let go of has broken my heart more than once.

I trusted him.

Believed his words.

He took that for granted.

He manipulated me. *Again.*

And the man I was in love with now? The man who I’d compared endlessly to my ex-husband, the one who I decided after countless months was nothing like the man currently leaving the room, was actually no different.

They’re both liars.

And they’d never hurt me again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I don't know how, but I manage to pull through the rest of the day without terrifying the kids with the tears building in the back of my red eyes. I managed to make them believe allergies were the culprit, but even then, I got called to Ms. Clifton's office after packing my things and buttoning my coat.

That's when I knew someone who'd seen me either cared enough to be worried or didn't care at all and wanted to make a scene. I didn't have enemies here, not even Miles who said hello from time and time and told me all about his fiancée with the hopeless love I'd once been in a long time ago, so I'd like to think the reason I've been summoned is because I'm cared for.

Except, the emptiness I feel, the way I hold back my tears when I knock and am told to enter, doesn't make the impromptu meeting easy. The second I close the door and turn to my boss, she knows as much.

"What's going on, Stevie?"

There's a point in everybody's lives when it all becomes too much. You pretend you're okay, slap on a fake smile, and give everyone a default "good" when they ask how you are because it's easier than explaining all the reasons why you're not. But when that becomes too heavy, and there's nowhere else to store the bad things piling up, the wall it's stored in breaks.

Unfortunately, mine breaks in front of my boss. The woman who hired me. The woman who, after realizing I was in no condition to speak, passed me a tissue, led me to a chair, sat me down, and let me cry it out. Snot and angry tears soaked up each Kleenex she passed me as she sat at the edge of her desk and rubbed my back in silence. It isn't until ten minutes pass, maybe more or maybe less, that she says, "Why don't you take a day or two off? I know you have the time, and we have the substitutes. Whatever this is, whatever is causing this, should be dealt with."

It's a professional way of saying get your life sorted out before coming back. I'm lucky that's all she says. Some bosses wouldn't be so kind in their suggestions.

So, I nod, manage to collect myself enough to offer a weak agreement before she murmurs, "I'll see you on Monday."

I have four days to pick up the pieces left behind by not one man but two before returning to the life I built after being crushed the first time.



I don't think before I knock on the door. I'm stepping back when it opens, revealing the man behind it, whose face pinches the second he sees my puffy face.

"Stevie, what's—"

Knowing Nicki is home, I say, "I need you to come outside so we can talk." I don't add a please or let him have any other option but to step outside, close the door behind him and stop in front of me.

When he reaches for my face, I take another step back, cross my arms over my chest, and shake my head. "Don't touch me. Not right now. Not..." *Not ever again*, is what I want to say, but I can't let the words out. "You lied to me, Fletcher."

His body instantly straightens. "What are you talking about? What's wrong, honey? Did something happen at—"

"Yes, something happened. What happened is that you *lied to me*." When my voice breaks, I squeeze my fists and bury them under my arms. "Hunter came to see me to say goodbye and decided to tell me about the woman he'd been seeing while we were married. The one you apparently knew about. I didn't let him explain before kicking him out of my classroom because I knew I wouldn't be able to handle the details. I didn't need them."

His lips part to cut in, but I hold up my hand to stop him. "I asked you. I *asked* if anything had happened. I needed to know. You told me you didn't. You looked me in the eyes and lied to my face."

"Stevie—" His voice is ragged, face pained as I let even more tears escape the sore ducts.

"No. I don't want to hear it. How can I believe anything you say to me? What else have you been lying to me about?" It all comes out then. Every insecurity. Anything I can throw at him. "Your son came to see me today. He told me that he was afraid you were leaving because *Cooper* wanted to see you. I told him you wouldn't do that to him, to us, because that's what you told me. You said you were done with that life. But maybe you were bullshitting me about that too."

His hand goes to his face, scrubbing the side as he cusses. “Christ, Stevie. That’s not fair, and you know it. I’d never—”

“Be very careful with your words,” I warn coolly. “You wouldn’t want to say something you don’t mean.”

His jaw ticks. “Would you let me talk? Or are you only here to throw out accusations without giving me the chance to explain?”

“What the hell is there to explain?” I hiss at him, not wanting my voice to raise too loudly, so Dominic doesn’t hear us fighting. My eyes go to the house before shooting back to him. “How can you pass this off like what you did is okay? I told you that if I knew he cheated, it would have been easier. And you *hugged me* and told me you had nothing to say about it. You could have told me the truth then and there, and we could have avoided this.”

“Don’t you see?” His voice is dangerously low as he takes a step closer to me. I’m too angry to move, so I let him get in my space without so much as flinching. “That’s the fucking point, Stevie. I told you that I didn’t involve myself in my men’s lives. If they fucked up, that was on them. Did I know? Yeah, I knew. I knew that a lot of men were unfaithful to the people they had waiting for them at home. But it was never my responsibility to tell their significant others.”

“Well, you’re not *fucking* their significant others unless you’ve been lying about that too, so don’t you think this situation called for some common courtesy instead of keeping this hidden?”

My words make his facial features harden as he straightens to full height—his shoulders squaring and teeth grinding. “If I told you that Hunter had cheated on you, I would have delivered the final reason for you to hate him, to cut him loose, on a goddamn silver platter.”

Nostrils flaring and eye twitching, I let him keep talking because I don’t trust anything else that’s bound to come out of my mouth.

He reaches forward and tips my chin up, so I’m locking eyes with him. “If I told you what you wanted to hear that day, you would have hated his fucking guts and decided to move on because of that anger. You would have decided to move on for all the wrong reasons. Because you let your emotions take over. Because you wanted to get back at him. You didn’t need me to tell you anything, Stevie. You needed to decide on your own what it was you wanted. I sure as hell wasn’t going to do it for you. Not like that.”

Once the words are out, his hand drops, and he steps back. His head turns, his eyes going anywhere but me as he takes in a deep breath and shakes his head. I hear another cuss leave him before his hands clench into fists before loosening again at his sides.

When he looks back down at me, his eyes are distant, his voice hard, as he says, “You had to figure out whether you loved me because you didn’t have anyone else to love or because you actually meant it. I wasn’t going to influence that with what I knew. If Hunter was a real fucking man, he wouldn’t have lied to you in the first place. He should have told you a long time ago. So, don’t put that on me. Don’t force that baggage, the bullshit he put you through or said to you, on me. I don’t deserve it.”

The front door flies open, dragging both of our attention to the little boy who’s standing there with his hands over his ears. “No! No, no, *no*. You can’t fight! You have to stop or else it’ll be too late!”

Dominic’s voice breaks my heart as I step forward and force myself to stop. Who am I to comfort him? Based on the warning look I get from his father, I have no right to try calming him down.

Nicki looks at me with panic in his eyes, then at Fletcher. “You can’t fight, Dad! You’re supposed to be happy. We’re supposed to be a family. *You can’t change that!*”

His voice gets louder, loud enough that any of the neighbors home could probably hear him.

Fletcher walks over to his son, who’s stomping his feet. “Nicki, I need you to go back inside. We’re just talking, not fighting. Okay?”

Nicki’s face is turning red as his head moves back and forth. “I’m not stupid. You’re fighting. Bad things happen when people fight. They go away. I don’t want you to go away.” His eyes go to me as he delivers the last line, making my chest cave in with heavy emotion.

Oh, Nicki.

His eyes squeeze closed as he shakes his head wildly, moving away from his father’s touch. “No, no, no, *no*. No fighting! You said no fighting!”

Who said no fighting? “Nicki—”

“I think you should leave,” Fletcher tells me, looking over his shoulder with a blank expression coating his face. There’s no hostility, but no warmth either. “You’ve done enough.”

I’ve done...

I blink at him, frozen to the ground.

“I need to take care of my son,” he adds, standing and putting a hand on Dominic’s shoulder to turn him toward the foyer. “He’s my priority. He’s who I have to focus on. And you need to...” His head shakes, jaw ticks, before he sighs. “You need to focus on yourself. Think about what I said, Stevie. That’s all I have left to say to you right now.”

With that, he guides his frantic son inside the house and closes the door behind them without a single glance back. I can hear Nicki’s raised voice, but not whatever comfort Fletcher is sure to be giving him. He knows how to handle Dominic, so I have no reason to stay here and process what just happened.

Not knowing what else to do, I walk back home, feet dragging heavier than when I arrived.

For some reason, I can’t summon the tears that are desperate to fall as I sit on the couch with my knees drawn to my legs and stare at the blank TV.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Can I ask you something?” My fingers drop from the necklace and settle into my lap.

Mom turns to me from where she’s folding laundry. “Of course. What is it?”

I twist my fingers together, glance outside one more time, and listen to the chirping birds on the willow planted in the front lawn before turning back to my mother’s patient face. “How did you know ending things with dad was what was best? I know you never talk about it, but I want to know. Did you think about staying? Trying to help him more even though he refused it at first?”

The shirt in her hands is lowered back into the basket, clearly surprised by the question posed. We never talk about that. Ever. She’d told me before that she didn’t want to drag me into the relationship drama between her and my dad, and I could appreciate that, but now it was time. Long overdue, maybe. “I thought maybe the reason you were so quiet was because of that man. Fletcher, right?”

I don’t answer. Can’t.

She abandons the clothes yet to be folded and walks over to the love seat I’m sitting on, patting my knee before I draw it up and hug my knees to my chest. Sitting where my feet were, she lets out a long, heavy sigh before looking at me. “When you didn’t pick up some of your father’s and my calls, we wondered if you were okay. But you’ve always been the type to need your space, so we tried giving it to you. Worst few weeks of our lives, sweetheart. Knowing we couldn’t help you and whatever it was that was happening. It was like... Hunter all over again.”

I let out a choked laugh that makes Mom frown at me. “You could say that. But honestly, can you tell me what was going through your mind? What made you decide what you did?”

“You.”

Her instant answer makes me blink.

Her hand reaches out and cups mine, weaving our fingers together. “I saw how it was impacting you, and that’s how I made my choice. It didn’t matter how much your dad’s poor decisions were breaking my heart, but I

refused to let it break yours. He may not have been a mean drunk, but he was a drunk, nonetheless. I knew he was a good man, *is* a good man, but I couldn't keep him in our lives if it meant making you witness him unravel. That isn't the influence you needed in your life. You needed stability."

How could it be that easy? "I don't remember you ever being that upset over it when he moved out..."

"Oh, honey." Her smile is sad, and her eyes even sadder. "Every night after you went to bed, I'd sit in here and cry. Once, I thought you caught me when you snuck downstairs to get a snack. I never wanted you to see me like that and blame him for it. He was sick and he needed help. Only he could decide when to seek it. There was nothing me or you could have done beyond supporting him when he made that decision."

We're quiet for a while before I feel her fingers tighten around mine. "Stevie, what happened? You seemed so happy, so much happier than you had been in years. At first, I was worried. Like any mother would be. No parent wants to see their daughter hurt, especially not twice. But the way you beamed no matter what you did, the smile that went right to your eyes when it hadn't in so, so long, it seemed like..." Her words fade as she makes a face and brushes off her hesitation. "You may not want to hear this, but I'm going to say it anyway. It seemed like this Fletcher guy was giving you the kind of happiness, the pure love, that Hunter never could. I'd see you smile and laugh with Hunter when you talked about him too, but nothing like this man has done for you. He brought you back to life. He... he brought back my baby girl."

Emotion crams itself into my windpipe, making it hard to say anything to that.

Her eyes get glassy. "I know how that must sound, but it's true. Until the end, I had nothing against Hunter. I thought you were both too young to get married, but you made it work. You loved each other to some degree, but nothing like you clearly feel, or felt, with Fletcher. That must mean something. So, what happened? Did he do something? Hurt you? Because you know your father and me won't let—"

"No," I tell her, almost sad I cut her off before hearing what type of threat she was willing to make against my neighbor. She'd never even threatened to do anything bad to Hunter, and that says something. Dad, on the other hand... "I mean, yes, Fletcher hurt me. But the thing is, the more I

have time to think about why he did what he did or *didn't* do what he should have, I sort of understand.”

Mom looks lost.

“It’s hard to explain.” And frankly, I have no intention of telling her about Hunter’s infidelity. What’s done is done. I’ve accepted it over the past couple of weeks, went through the phases of grief, and realized there was nothing I could do. It left me thinking about why Fletcher kept quiet about it. Why he chose not to tell me. I don’t want to understand, to get it, but I do. “It doesn’t really matter what led up to this because there isn’t any way for me to change it. All I’ll say is that it involved Hunter and something Fletcher kept from me about him.”

Mom’s eyes narrow. “Why would Fletcher keep anything from you about your ex-husband?”

I hold my breath for a second before blowing it out. “Because Fletcher was Hunter’s commanding officer. I’ve met him before but never knew him well. So, moving in across the street from him was...a shock to say the least.”

When her jaw drops at the new information I’ve held back all this time, I decide to tell her everything. The hesitancy. The fear. The doubt. Every little thing that made me respect the man that, to this day, despite everything, I love.

I do.

I love Fletcher.

And that’s probably the most frustrating part of this because I feel like I shouldn’t. Like it’s wrong to.

“You still keep in contact with Dad, see him all the time. You cook for him and even sometimes go over and clean. Do you...” I meet her eyes, and it’s clear to me she knows what I’m going to ask before I say it. “Do you still love him? Even after all this time has passed?”

She folds my hand in between both of hers and smiles warmly at me. “No matter what your father has done, what he’s gone through, I remind myself that he did the work to get better. He put in the effort to prove to me he was worth loving. So, yes, Stevie. I love your father very, very much.”

Those words... I let out a tiny breath like I’ve been waiting for her to tell me that since the day they were officially divorced. “Are you guys back together?”

Her smile grows. “Yeah. We decided a while ago that it was time. Well past when it should have happened. Our love had to be put on pause until we got our bearings, but it never went away. In fact, I think it got stronger when we were separated because it put things into perspective.”

“What perspective was that?”

“That second chances don’t always work out for some people, but when they do, it’s even better than the first chance you were given because you learned from those mistakes.” My hand twitches in hers. “I won’t ask you to give me all the details, but from what you’ve told me, Fletcher loves you very much and didn’t want to force your hand at this relationship. He wanted you to be all in because you wanted to be. Because you love him too.”

I stare down at her hands and let a minute pass. Then another. A third. Mom gives me the time to think, process until I close my eyes and let my hair fall over my shoulders.

Loving Fletcher was never the question. It was wondering if loving him as much as I did in the amount of time I’ve known him was sane. It was worrying if the torn apart feeling of being away from him would go away like I desperately wanted to. Because if it did, if distance mended the hole in my chest left behind, then it wasn’t love at all.

I guess I knew better than that.

“If you think about it,” Mom adds quietly, “it’s very romantic what he did. He was willing to sacrifice you if you decided he wasn’t enough. He was trying to shield you from getting hurt again by the same man, and even if he ended up hurting you in the process by trying to protect you from it, he was willing. It sounds like the patience he has, the effort he’s given every single day to let you take your time, proves just how much this thing between you two is the real deal.”

My fingers wrap around the necklace again, absorbing each word carefully.

She says, “You never took it off.”

My grip tightens around the item she’s referring to. “No, I didn’t.”

Mom hums, extending her hand and examining the gold band on it. “I never took my wedding ring off either after all these years.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Vickie rubs my back and passes me her favorite lavender tea, telling me it'll settle my stomach before she sits down on the other side of the couch. "Maybe we shouldn't have finished off that second bottle of wine after all," she says, her face still a little green from the hangover we both woke up with this morning.

After speaking with Mom, then having dinner with both my parents and smiling without force for the first time in what feels like a month, knowing they're together again, Vickie and I spent the night in at my house watching trash TV and devouring a pizza and downing too much wine. I didn't have any intention of doing either since I had plenty of food to eat in my fridge, but when she showed up holding the two bottles with a look of pure hatred on her face that she's only gotten one or two other times in her life—both because of men—she'd told me our plans, said "fuck all dick wielding scum" and then turned on my television.

She'd guilted me into not letting her drink alone. At some point during the night, we'd drank straight from the bottle, passing it back and forth while I listened to her rant about some guy I didn't even know she was seeing. Whoever he is, he's no longer on her good side and at the very top of her shitlist. Maybe even above Hunter after I told her what had happened the day after I found out myself.

"When did wine affect us this much?" she groans, resting her forehead against the table. "I think this *officially* means we're getting old, Stevie. I hate to say it."

I can't help but grin. "At least you didn't spend all morning with your face in the toilet." I was feeling extra queasy this morning, and as soon as my stomach emptied into the toilet bowl, I was extra glad I cleaned it the day before—anxious cleaning, Vickie had called it when she smelled the cleaning products in the air and saw all the sparkling surfaces. I do my best work when my mind is swirling with what-ifs.

It kept me busy when I wanted to go over to the house I hadn't been at since I called out the man living there. I offered tight smiles whenever I saw the little boy and dog in the yard, but never more than that.

You've done enough.

It's been quiet over there too. No poker nights. No visitors. Barely any lights on except late at night. Fletcher has done just as good a job at avoiding me as I have him, and that's probably a good thing.

Until now.

It's been an entire month since our fight and a week since my mother helped me decide what needed to be done. But I realized even after making my choice how chicken I was about doing anything about it. I found reasons not to walk across the street and tell Fletcher how I felt every day when I got home from work, and now that Vickie is here, my weekend has been full of drinking, bad food, even worse TV. The last thing I want to do is show up looking like a mess and probably smelling ten times worse.

"That's true," my friend eventually agrees, her voice no better than before. "But I still think we're old."

I simply snicker and then sip my tea, standing up. "I'm going to try making some toast. Want some?"

Her groan tells me no, so I shrug and walk into the kitchen. While the bread is in the toaster, I walk into the half bath and cringe at my flushed cheeks and red eyes. My hair is a frizzy, tangled disaster that not even a messy bun can make look decent, and I've yet to change from the baggy clothes that I put on yesterday.

Turning on the faucet, I splash cold water on my face and take a few deep breaths at the nausea slamming into me. There's nothing left in me to get rid of, so I hope to God the toast helps because at this rate, I'm going to need another day off from work to recover. I've felt off all week, but couldn't pinpoint what was causing it besides stress, and the wine and greasy food didn't exactly help.

It isn't until I'm staring at myself in the mirror, examining my chapped lips, dark-circled eyes, and peaked face, when something clicks.

Something that makes me nearly stop breathing.

"Hey," I call out to Vickie, voice muffled by thick realization. "I'm going upstairs for a few minutes. Can you get my toast out and butter it for me?"

She makes a face. "Are you going to get sick again?"

Maybe.

I offer a weak smile. "I don't know."

"I'm sorry I forced you to drink with me. I know you haven't been feeling well with everything going on." She sighs heavily and stands when

the toaster pops. “I guess I thought we both could use a reason to drink away our manly woes.”

I haven’t gotten the chance to tell her that I have every intention of getting Fletcher back, but she didn’t let me say much when she was going on about whoever spited her. It wasn’t exactly the right time to say, *‘Oh, by the way, I’m still madly, stupidly in love with the man across the street and plan on apologizing and getting him back if he’ll have me.’*

Escaping to the bathroom in my bedroom, I dig through the drawers.

Twenty minutes later, there’s a knock on the door followed by my best friend’s voice behind the closed wood. “Your toast is cold, bitch. Did you get sick again? Because there cannot be anything left to vomit up at this point. And if it’s diarrhea or something gross like that, I don’t want to know, or I’ll start puking too. But can you at least tell me if you’re okay?”

I stare down at the positive pregnancy test in my hands and let out a shuttered breath, nodding as if she can see me. “Yeah,” I call out with a watery smile. “I’m good.”



After Vickie drags herself back to her place, I make myself shower and brush my teeth to look halfway presentable for what I know I need to do. It isn’t until I’m out, hair wrapped in a towel and body semi-dried, when I stand in front of the mirror and stare at my naked body.

Nothing has changed. It’s still soft and curvy in the same places it was before, nothing showing or changing like I’d hoped my eyes would see. I flatten my palm against the skin, caressing just above my belly button and staring into the mirror, trying to picture what it’ll look like, feel like.

What the baby will look like.

Will it have my light, Irish complexion or Fletcher’s darker, tanner one? Will it have my hazel-green eyes or his brown ones? Will its hair be dark or light? Will its features take more after me, him, or will it be a perfect mixture of the two of us like I consider myself with my parents?

Then I wonder what Fletcher will think.

Almost on cue, I hear a knock downstairs, and I barely have my bathrobe tied around my waist before it opens, and a husky voice calls out my name from below. “Stevie?”

I stare down at my stomach—my semi-flat stomach that will have a few more stretch marks added to its collection over the next nine months.

“Your daddy is home,” I whisper to the small being growing inside.

“Stevie?” Fletcher asks, the stairs creaking under the weight of his steps.

“I’m in here,” I call out, knowing this isn’t exactly what I hoped to look like but not having any chance to do anything about it now.

He walks into the bedroom the same time I step out of the bathroom, hugging the robe to my body as his eyes do a scan from the towel on my head to my bare feet. Toes curling into the carpet over his gaze, I offer a small, shy smile. “I was getting ready to come see you. You beat me to it, I guess.”

Fletcher stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I saw Vickie leave. Didn’t want to waste any more time by waiting. I tried giving you space, but I don’t want to give you any more.”

My breath catches. “No?”

He shakes his head.

I lick my lips. “I really was going to come see you. Vickie and I had a rough morning, so I needed to clean up first and—” I gasp, eyes widening. “Oh my God.”

Fletcher is instantly in front of me, hands scanning over me, eyes doing the same to make sure I’m okay. “What’s wrong?”

“I drank!”

He blinks slowly. “You drank?”

Tears quickly fill my eyes. “I drank, Fletcher. Vickie and I finished off two bottles together and that can’t be good.”

I used to watch birthing shows obsessively before the truth came out about where that would lead with Hunter. I know just about everything there is to know about pregnancy, including how bad excessive alcohol is during it.

And I didn’t know...

I’ve watched hours and hours of shows on pregnancy and birth, and I still had no clue I was going to join the motherhood club. None.

Before I know it, I’m crying into Fletcher’s T-shirt and he’s holding me to his body and rubbing my back despite having no clue why I’m melting down.

“What’s the matter, honey? If you’re not feeling well, I can get you some Advil and make you something to eat. Eggs. Something easy on the

stomach. Get you water. Whatever you need, just tell me. Yeah?”

That only makes me sob harder, his body locking over the ugly noises I’m making. It isn’t until I clasp a handful of the tee he’s wearing and blurt, “We’re having a baby, Fletcher, and I didn’t know until this morning, and I drank. A lot. I drank, and you’re going to be a daddy again, and I didn’t *know* and—”

He lowers us until we’re sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands on my face, his thumbs wiping at my wet cheeks as he tries getting me to look at him. Through my blurry vision, I see shock among an array of other things on his face.

His lips are parted.

His eyes are wide.

His breath is short.

“We’re having a baby?” he repeats in a whisper.

I manage to nod, sniffing back tears.

“I’m going to be a dad again?” he asks.

Another nod.

Those lips that I want nothing more than to be on mine at some point tonight stretch into the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on his face. “And you’re going to be a mom.” It’s not a question, but I still nod anyway.

His hands go to my stomach, his gentle touch coasting over the soft material of my robe like he’s in awe of the concept.

“I was going to come over and tell you that I’m sorry,” I tell him once I manage to calm down, using my robe sleeves to dry off my face. “I wanted to tell you how much I love you and that I don’t want us to fight anymore. Never again, Fletcher. Because I want a future with you. A big one. A long one. I had a whole speech planned in my head, but then I had this feeling, and I took the test and...” His hands are still on my stomach, but his eyes are on mine as he listens to me ramble. “I didn’t know I was pregnant. I’ve been so distracted and stressed that that’s why I thought I was late.”

It sounds lame saying it out loud, but it isn’t like my period has always been on time. There were times, especially during my divorce, when I’d been late plenty of times because of the pressure I was under.

Fletcher’s hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing my bottom lip before he leans in and kisses me. It’s quick, soft, and he rests his forehead against mine, looking down at where his other hand is still glued to my stomach.

“You have nothing to apologize for, Stevie. I get why you were upset with

me. I really thought I was doing the right thing, but I was wrong. Had a lot of time to think about it. If the roles were reversed, I'd probably want to know too. But we're okay now, right? We're good?"

I breathe him in, closing my eyes and placing a hand over the one he has on my torso. "We're better than good, Fletcher. I love you."

"I love you too, baby."

He sucks in a quiet breath, the term of endearment clearly bringing more realizations front and center. "Dominic is going to be a big brother." The smile in his tone makes mine grow as he looks up and captures my lips with his. "Christ, Stevie. There was a lot I wanted to come over and say, but this knocked me speechless. The only thing I need you to hear is that I will be here for you no matter what because I love you. I will love you and this baby for as long as you'll let me, and I know Dominic will too."

I let out a shaky breath and kiss him lightly, resting our lips together. "That's all I need to hear anyway."

His hands trail to the opening of my robe, trailing a finger under the material and touching the bare skin underneath. "I have time before Nicki starts to wonder where I am. Couldn't wait to see you. But if you're not feeling well..."

I stop him by untying my bathrobe and letting it fall open. "Remember what you said the first time? You told me you loved me so much that you hoped my birth control failed."

He kisses me once, twice, another time before chuckling and laying us back until he's using one arm to hold himself above my body. "I think it worked, baby girl."

I bite my bottom lip as he trails kisses down my body until he nudges my legs open and gives me a whole new kind of kiss. "I guess you're right," I moan as his tongue flattens against my clit before he starts working it with his lips, sucking it into his mouth and working a finger into the wet entrance.

Before long, he's undressed too, pushing back inside of me and reminding me how we got to this moment to begin with.

It's quick but gentle.

Fast but passionate.

And when he's on the brink of coming, he readjusts us, so each thrust hits the right spot deep inside of me until I'm falling apart around him right before he buries himself hilt deep and follows suit.

We lay next to each other, my body draped partially on top of his, catching our breaths, when he laughs to himself. “He was such a fucking idiot,” he murmurs.

He doesn’t have to say who.

All I do is curl into his body and rest my head against his shoulder, thinking about how nice it’ll be to be able to do this for the rest of our lives.

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EPILOGUE

FLETCHER

“She kind of looks weird,” Dominic says, staring down at the small baby wrapped in a pink blanket. “Is she supposed to be that red?”

I chuckle at my son’s inquiry, looking up at the pinched expression he’s watching his sister with. “Yeah, buddy. You looked exactly like this when you were born.”

Nicki shakes his head, still staring at the little girl who’s snoozing in my cradled arms. “I didn’t look like that, Dad. It’s impossible because Stevie isn’t my mom. We have different genetics.”

I see he’s putting the knowledge he learned at school to the test. Now that he’s in sixth grade, he’s stopped calling my fiancée Ms. Foster. It took quite a bit of time to get him to start using her first name, but he’s gotten used to it by now. “You’re right, Nic. There are some differences. But you were both pretty tiny when you were born, and her coloring will even out like yours did.”

Bella Anise Miller is only a few hours and I already love everything about her. The speckles of dark hair on her head, the dark brown eyes that are nearly identical to mine. But her face is all her mom’s.

I smile down at her, completely enamored by the soft noises she makes as she sleeps. “What do you think?” I ask my firstborn.

When I move my gaze to study him, he’s lifting his shoulders. He’s sprouted a solid inch over the past few months. He’ll be taller than Stevie in no time. “She’s okay, I guess. I thought she’d be more exciting, but she’s just slept the whole time.”

As if he’s lost interest, he turns and walks over to where Stevie is laying in the hospital bed watching us. “Don’t worry, Nicki, she won’t be sleeping for long,” my soon-to-be wife tells him, an amused smile on her tired face.

The labor was intense, and if Bella hadn’t decided to grace us after one more push, Stevie was going to have to be wheeled away to get a C-section. Something she’s been hyperventilating about since she decided to Google every worst-case scenario known to man as her due date got closer. But just like I knew she would, she soldiered on until we heard the first cry coming from the little bundle in my arms.

Dominic asks, "Do you think she'll be normal or be like me?"

I frown. "Bud, we talked about this."

"Yeah, but what if I want to have a sibling who's like me?" His question is so innocent I have to blink and think about my response for a second.

It's Stevie who answers. "No matter what, Bella is going to share a lot in common with you. I'm sure she'll love dogs as much as you, enjoy all the history books you say you want to read her, and play whatever game you introduce her to."

He contemplates that as he stares at the little girl who's starting to wake up and squirm in my arms, her warm little body one I'm already willing to do whatever it takes to protect. "Fine, but she can't have my marble. It's mine."

I grin.

Stevie stifles a laugh.

Then, Bella starts to cry.

That's when Dominic murmurs, "Is she going to do that a lot? 'Cause I voted we get a dog when you told me we were getting her instead. They only whine for a little while before we train them."

My eyes pinch closed. "Nicki..."

"The pet store has more puppies like Admiral," is what he replies with.

When I meet Stevie's eyes, she's smiling at my son. She loves him despite his blunt statements, and I love her all the more for it.

I look around the room at my family.

Our family.

My son, my daughter, the woman who agreed to be my wife a few months ago.

And, suddenly, I'm damn glad she decided to move across the street. The blue Cape Cod is the perfect house to mold our growing family in as the years go by. Even her mother said so when I officially met her.

"*Be good to her,*" is all Mary asked of me when we invited our families over to announce the pregnancy after the first trimester. The promise to her mother was one I made without hesitation.

Meanwhile her father simply shook my hand, patted my back, and asked, "*Where'd you get that mower of yours, son?*"



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is usually where I'd put the acknowledgments, but I wanted to do something different for this story.

Make You Miss Me is a journey that I realized halfway into writing was personal to me. I always find ways to incorporate pieces of myself into each of my books. Best known to date would be Underneath the Sycamore Tree and Emery's struggle with invisible, chronic illness.

But Stevie's story became therapeutic to write. Sure, I've never been married. I can't even tell you guys that I've ever been in love. But I've had many manipulative dating experiences in the past where I'd succumb to whatever the man I was seeing wanted without thinking about myself or what I wanted in return. It was about the control they had on my life, on my dreams, aspirations, and goals. I was naïve enough to let them get their way until I sort of lost myself.

It wasn't until I spent about seven months with a guy who knew *exactly* what to say and when to say it that I realized we were going nowhere. I was stuck in the fantasy world of what-ifs that he was feeding just enough to keep me holding on. But he wasn't following through on any of his promises. He was truly a master manipulator. He'd say the prettiest things, make me feel so cared for, so good about myself and my career and my dreams, but when it came down to it, he simply said those things to get what he wanted.

He knew what I'd wanted from our time together—what I wanted for myself and my future. Yet, he strung me along with false hope of being that man for me until I about broke.

And, the thing is, I knew the second I ended it with him that I was better off. I felt *relieved* to have him out of my life almost instantaneously. I felt more like myself—better than the version he knew. I was ready to take on the world and prove to him that nobody can control my life but me.

In doing so, Stevie came to life. She's this vulnerable yet strong woman who's navigating divorced life. A woman who's trying to find herself, to trust people—men, especially—and to figure out how to love again. She's buying her first house on her own, just like me, and pushing past all the demons inside her mind that want to hold her back from being happy.

Stevie Foster is flawed. Human. She's everything I love in fictional characters because she's so real. She makes choices she's not proud of out of desperation, but she also moves forward knowing those choices can't drag her down.

And in the end, she gets Fletcher. She figures out that Hunter was never the love of her life because he could never truly love her the way she deserved to be.

So, I'm not going to thank my "ex" for giving me the inspiration to write this. He doesn't deserve it. However, I do appreciate how easily he let me go because this story wouldn't have happened otherwise.

The beautiful house I'm buying all on my own wouldn't have happened.

And I'd be stuck in a relationship that'd make me miserable instead of thriving.

Until next time,

B. Celeste

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with all things forbidden and taboo enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is The Truth about Heartbreak.

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