



A Very Miller-Cooper Life

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Description: Charlie and Reagan Miller-Cooper have survived fake relationships, family reunions, holidays, and even their own wedding. Now it's time for their biggest test yet – triplets.

Join this couple as they raise their kids from cranky newborns to semi-functional college graduates.

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Chapter 1

Charlie

“Fuck my life.”

I broke into a fit of giggles as I watched my wife lay on the floor and stare blankly at the ceiling. The scene was humorous, but definitely not as funny as I was making it out to be. Lack of sleep would do that to you. I bounced the one baby that was still awake on my knee. Reagan had just spent the past hour getting the other two down, hence her current mood.

When I didn't answer her, Reagan continued her curse filled rant. “Seriously, fuck this. We're not having any more fucking kids.”

I covered Carter's ears as if our three-month-old was somehow going to absorb Reagan's words and shout the wordfucksuddenly. If that actually happened, I wouldn't be mad because it would be ridiculously impressive. I laughed out loud at my own thoughts, then finally responded to Reagan. “I've never heard you swear this much. Also, don't we need one more? What about Disney?”

“Fuck Disney. Someone can sit alone. Hell, I'll do it. I don't care.”

I laughed once again. I was pretty sure the lack of sleep these past few months was getting to both of us. “Deal. Three sounds good to me.”

Reagan waved a finger in my direction. “How's that going?”

I watched as Carter slowly blinked her eyes, the eyes staying closed longer with each blink. “I think she’s finally falling asleep,” I whispered just loud enough for Reagan to hear. The last thing I needed was for my voice to snap her awake.

“Thank the fucking Lord.” Reagan let out an exaggerated yawn and rubbed her eyes. “With the way Carter was thrashing around in her crib, I didn’t think she would ever fall asleep.”

I blinked my eyes a few times as I stared down at the baby in my arms, wondering if I was losing my mind. When those soft hazel eyes looked up at me, I knew I wasn’t. Our daughters, Carter and Olivia, might be identical, but as their mom, I could still tell them apart. Apparently, the same couldn’t be said for their other mom. “You do realize it was Olivia that you just spent the past two hours getting to sleep, right?” I asked with a laugh.

Reagan shot up into a seated position and furrowed her eyebrows at me. “Bullshit. I know my own daughters.”

“Clearly you don’t,” I said with a giggle while pointing down at the baby who was now sound asleep in my arms. “Because this is most definitely Carter.”

“How can you tell?” Reagan stood up and walked over to me, looking down at our daughter in wonder.

I smiled up at her and whispered, “It’s all in the eyes.”

Reagan softly scoffed. “They literally have the exact same eyes.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. They had the exact same everything. Before getting pregnant I had no idea it was possible to have an identical pair of children and a third who is fraternal, but apparently it is. The odds are about one in a million, but of

course, if something like that could happen, it would totally happen to me and Reagan. “They have the same coloreyes. Carter’s are softer, while Olivia’s have a fire behind them.”

“Of course they do. We should have known when we named a child after Nana that they had no chance of being chill.”

“You should have realized as soon as she was thrashing around in the crib that it was Olivia and not Carter.”

Our daughters might look exactly alike, but their personalities were already completely opposite. Carter was content as long as she was snuggled up in someone’s arms (which made it hard to ever lay her down in the crib), and Olivia was never content. She would go wild until she had no energy left and no choice but to pass out. I already had no question that she was going to be our troublemaker.

Reagan nodded slowly as if she was considering what I just said. “That’s true. It did seem out of character, but I’m so fucking exhausted, the fact that I might not have the child I thought I did never crossed my mind. Olivia is laying in Carter’s crib by the way. There’s no way I’m moving her now.”

I waved my hand. “I’m too tired to deal with this one waking up as soon as I lay her down, so I think I’ll just let her sleep in my arms for a while anyway.”

Reagan yawned once again as she sat down next to me on the couch. “Seriously though. I’m so exhausted. How the fuck am I going to make myself look human for Jamie’s wedding in three weeks?”

I looked at my wife who clearly had the exhaustion written all over her face with the deep bags under her eyes and the wrinkles on her forehead that seemed to have become a permanent fixture, but she was still the most gorgeous woman in the world

to me. Hell, she was even more gorgeous now. She was exhausted from raising our children. This was our little family, and although the last three months had been completely insane, I couldn't help but smile about that fact.

I patted Reagan's arm. "You're going to look absolutely breathtaking, my dear. I have no doubt about that."

A smirk spread across Reagan's face as she carefully leaned closer to me so our lips were just inches apart. "So, what you're saying is you still think I'm hot, huh?"

I licked my lips as I stared at hers, heat rising in my belly at the thought of things we hadn't done in much too long. "I think you're very hot."

Reagan leaned a little bit closer, but instead of kissing me, her eyes moved to the baby I had almost forgotten was sleeping in my arms. "Think we can get her into Olivia's crib so we can have some special mommy time?"

There's nothing I want more. "I'm certainly willing to try."

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“Perfect.” Reagan hopped from the couch as if it was on fire, while I stood much more slowly to be careful not to wake Carter.

We made it to the bedroom that was currently shared by the triplets without any issues, and I smiled when I put Carter down and she didn’t make one peep. Reagan and I both tiptoed out of the room and she carefully shut the door behind us.

Not even a second after the door was latched, a wail erupted from the room.

Reagan cringed. “You don’t even have to tell me this time. I know that’s Olivia.”

A slightly deeper cry started as well, followed by a soft whimper. “And that would be Ronan and Carter,” I added. Shit. “Raincheck?”

Reagan groaned and hit her head against the door, then turned to smile over at me. “Who knows. Maybe we can find someone to pawn them off on for a few hours at the wedding.”

“We can only hope.”

“So, how are you feeling about all of this?” Reagan asked as she reached across the center console of the car to take my hand.

She didn’t have to say more, because I knew exactly what she was asking. Even though she wasn’t shouting about it from the rooftops (or even mentioning it to her

friends), my mom was going to Jamie's wedding. I was glad for my brother's sake that she had somewhat learned from her past mistakes and wasn't going to skip his wedding like she skipped mine, but it was still hard. Our wedding day had been perfect, and I honestly don't know if it would have been with my mom there, but that didn't stop it from hurting.

I looked into the back to make sure all three kids were actually asleep since there was no point in having a serious conversation if it was destined to be interrupted at any moment. I smiled when I saw all three of them fast asleep as if they were perfect little angels. I wish.

I let out a long sigh when I remembered Reagan's question. It was such a loaded question, I didn't even know where to start. "Honestly, I'm just trying to focus on the fact that my brother gets to marry the love of his life, because in the end, that's what really matters."

Reagan looked between me and the road a few times before gently squeezing my hand. "I completely understand if you don't want to talk about it, but I also hope you know that you don't have to bullshit me. We're obviously both over the moon for Jamie and Ethan, but that doesn't mean the day comes without any hard feelings for you."

"Yes, it hurts that my mom didn't come to our wedding, and in some ways, even though I know it's not the case it makes me feel like I wasn't good enough. But the thing is—I loved absolutely everything about our wedding. Sure, Jamie's suit kept coming unbuttoned and our allergy-ridden DJ sneezed through the whole reception because she chose our wedding day to try to impress the florist, but it was still perfect. Honestly, I'm not sure if I'm envious of Jamie for having our mom at the wedding or extremely concerned for him. She ruined the beginning of our relationship and our engagement. I'd hate to see what kind of scene she would have made at our wedding."

“That’s true.” Reagan chuckled softly. “Although, I wouldn’t say she ruined the beginning of our relationship or our engagement. Those are still two of my favorite memories.”

I laughed along with Reagan. This was why I loved this woman so much. She could find the good in literally everything and everyone. “Even though my whole family found out I had my hands down your pants and my mom basically unknowingly proposed for you?”

Reagan laughed even harder now. “Exactly. I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s very us, and I love us.”

I brought Reagan’s hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “I love us, too. I honestly think I’m more nervous to spend a prolonged amount of time with my mom than I am salty over the fact that she’s going to Jamie’s wedding when she skipped mine.”

“That’s true. We have done a pretty good job of avoiding her these past few years, haven’t we?”

“I guess.”

Although, I wouldn’t exactly call it avoidance. After my mom skipped my wedding then showed up the next day to tell me she made a mistake, I decided the ball was in her court. She needed to be the one to put in the effort, not me. And while she had gotten better, she was still far from perfect, which meant our relationship was rocky at best. She came to visit for the weekend two weeks after the triplets were born, and she did a good job of acknowledging them as her grandchildren and a decent job of acknowledging both me and Reagan as their moms. She didn’t use the word mom when referring to Reagan, but she also didn’t deny the fact that she was, indeed, the mother of my children. Baby steps, I reminded myself. Although, most

days it felt like our actual babies were growing much more quickly than she was.

“Has Jamie said anything else to you about how things are going with my dad?” I asked, desperate to change the subject to anything that wasn’t me and my mom.

“He hasn’t said much, which I’m guessing means it isn’t going too well.”

“That sucks.” My wedding helped to strengthen my relationship with my dad and it really seemed like he had turned over a new leaf. Apparently, his gay daughter marrying a woman was much easier for my dad to swallow than his gay son marrying a man.

Ever since Jamie and Ethan had announced their official wedding date, my dad had shut down around him. He acted like my brother was no longer the guy that liked to toss around a football with him and watch sports, even though nothing had actually changed. Jamie tried to act cool about it whenever he talked to me, but I could tell it was really hurting him that their relationship had changed so much.

“He’ll be okay, don’t worry.” Reagan squeezed my hand once again. “He gets to marry the guy that he thought he let get away in high school. The dude is on cloud nine. I’ve honestly never seen him happier than when he’s with Ethan. Even when he was being a huge player in college and acting like he loved it, he wasn’t nearly as happy as he is now that he’s settling down.”

“I’m glad Jamie had you.” I stared out the window and thought about all of the time I missed with my brother, because both of us were too stubborn to admit our struggles to each other. It was one of my biggest regrets. Thank god for Reagan helping us to rekindle that relationship. “You know, when I wasn’t there for him.”

“Jamie regrets that time too, you know,” Reagan said, her voice soft and understanding.

“I know he does. I just wish we both hadn’t been so dumb back then.”

“You two went through a lot of shit growing up, most of which you didn’t fully comprehend until the past few years, so it makes sense that you were a bit messed up.”

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“I think I’m still a bit messed up,” I said honestly. Reagan knew me inside and out, so there was no need to lie about it.

“Aren’t we all?” Reagan asked with a laugh. She pointed her thumb toward the back of the car. “How much do you think we’re going to mess these three up?”

I cringed at the thought. So many of my friends had one thing or another from their childhood that still had an effect on them as an adult, but no one who has kids expects to give them lifelong trauma that can only be worked out with years of therapy. At least, I hope not. “Hopefully just enough to give them character.”

Reagan smiled over at me before moving her eyes back to the road. “I’m sure we’ll do a great job. One step at a time. Let’s start by trying to survive this wedding weekend with them and your mother.”

On the morning of the wedding, I was barely awake when there was a soft knock at our hotel room door. I breathed a sigh of relief when I opened the door to find Reagan’s mom and dad standing there.

“We’re here to take care of your little angels so you two can get ready with the rest of the group,” Reagan’s mom said as she brought me into a tight hug.

I was so thankful Jamie had invited Reagan’s parents to the wedding. I wasn’t sure whether he had done it because he knew they would help us or because they were the parents of his best friend, but either way, I was very appreciative to have them there.

Reagan and I gave each of the kids a tight squeeze and grabbed our clothes for the wedding before sprinting out of the room.

Reagan looked at me and wiggled her eyebrows as we walked down the hallway toward the elevators. “Wanna sneak off and have sex somewhere?”

My body heated up at the thought. It had been way too long since Reagan and I had sex and just imagining her touch had me turned on. Except, unfortunately, that wasn’t what today was about, and I clearly needed to be the mature one. “You know there’s nothing I want more, but my brother would kill us if we did that, especially you, Miss Best Woman.”

Reagan smirked at me in a way that made me want to say screw it and push her into the nearest dark corner. “That’s Mrs. Best Woman. Don’t forget that I’m married to a super hot groom’s woman.”

Since Jamie and Ethan decided to only have three grooms-people each, Reagan and I were two-thirds of Jamie’s party, so we couldn’t skimp out on our responsibilities, especially since I doubted my parents would be much help. They came just in time for the rehearsal last night and disappeared as soon as they finished their last bite at the dinner that followed.

“You’re thinking about your parents, aren’t you?” Reagan asked, her voice more serious now.

I sighed. “How can you tell?”

Reagan ran her finger between my eyebrows. “You always get the cutest little worry line right here whenever you’re thinking about them. I hate that they stress you out, but I have to admit, I also find that little line adorable.”

“Lucky for you, it doesn’t look like they’ll stop stressing me out anytime soon, so that line is probably there to stay.”

Reagan leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the lips that had my body buzzing. “I think everything about you is adorable, so I’d rather you be happy.”

I didn’t have any time to reply, because the elevator door opened at that moment, and much to my surprise, my brother was pacing in front of it.

“Oh, thank God,” he said as we got off. “I was just coming up to find you two. I love Benson, but he is very heterosexual and no help at all. His solution for everything is that we should take shots.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, because I told my brother that would be the case when he said he was going to ask his oldest friend, a guy he played football with since middle school, to be in his wedding party. Benson was nice, but he was probably going to be a bachelor forever because he didn’t have a romantic bone in his body.

As if reading my mind, Jamie pointed a finger at me. “I don’t want to hear it. Just help me out please. I’m kind of freaking out.”

Now that he mentioned it, his face was extremely pale, which was in stark contrast to his neck that had red blotches all over it

Reagan put a hand on Jamie’s shoulder and squeezed it. “First of all, just breathe. This is your wedding day. You’re walking down the aisle, not walking the plank.”

“I know. I’m just...” Jamie closed his eyes and blew out a breath. “I just want everything to be perfect.”

Reagan laughed as she pulled her hand away. “Then you might be talking to the

wrong girls. Nothing we do ever goes perfectly, but we are here to help in any way we can.”

Reagan’s words seemed to calm some of Jamie’s nerves and we were able to keep him fairly calm throughout the day as he got ready for the wedding, did his first look with Ethan, and took pictures. My parents were absent for almost everything except for the pictures, but after seeing Ethan in his tuxedo, I could tell nothing was going to ruin Jamie’s mood.

By the time the wedding started, his smile was bigger than I had ever seen it before. The same was true for Ethan, except he also had tears running down his cheeks.

I couldn’t blame him. As soon as they started reading their vows to each other, my tears started to fall as well. I smiled through my tears as my brother used a shaky hand to grab a piece of paper from Reagan.

He took a deep breath and blew it out before he started to read. “Ethan, for years, I thought you were the one that got away. I don’t know what crazy fate brought us back together or why you accepted me with open arms, but I’m so thankful you gave me another chance to do things right this time. You were too good for me in high school and you’re still too good for me now. I’m also thankful that you don’t seem to realize that.” Everyone laughed as my brother chuckled and wiped his eyes. “Not only are you the greatest person I’ve ever met, but you also make me a better person. You give me a confidence I never thought I would have. The fact that someone like you loves me helps me to love myself. I mean, I must have done something right if I get to spend my whole life loving you. Thank you for choosing me. Thank you for accepting me. Thank you for believing in me. Most of all, thank you for loving me. I can’t wait to start the rest of our lives together today. I love you.”

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Ethan took off his glasses and dabbed at his eyes with a tissue, but it was no use. His tears were flowing even more now. “Wow. I probably should have gone first. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to read my own words when I’m crying like a fool.” He wiped his glasses and put them back on then stared down at the paper in his hands. “All right. Here we go. Jamie, you always say that I was the one who got away, but the truth is, I never went anywhere. Even when I didn’t know it, my heart was always waiting for you. You’re not just the love of my life. You’re also my soulmate. My life became a million times more beautiful from the moment you walked back into it. I can’t wait to start the next part of our journey together. I can’t wait to watch you become a father to our future children. Life with you gets better every single day, so I can’t even begin to imagine how amazing the years to come are going to be. I could go on forever, but we promised your nana we would keep this ceremony short.”

“Hell yeah!” Nana screamed from where she was sitting in the front row, causing everyone to burst into laughter, including Ethan and Jamie.

“Exactly,” Ethan said as he smiled and shook his head. He put the note back into his pocket and took both of Jamie’s hands in his. “I love you, Jamie. I loved you before I could define what those feelings in my heart were. I love you now, and I’ll love you forever. I promise.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the house (aside from maybe my mother and father, who looked annoyingly stoic) as Jamie and Ethan walked back down the aisle together. Before we walked down the aisle as well, Reagan scooped two of our children into her arms and I grabbed the other one, then we walked down as a family.

After a few more pictures, it was time for the cocktail hour and reception. I had a few

drinks for liquid courage before I decided to finally go talk to my dad, who was standing off to the side and watching everyone else enjoy themselves, which was a little better than my mom who hadn't left her seat at their table.

I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder, causing him to jump. "It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it?"

My father nodded, his jaw set in place as if he was holding in the words he actually wanted to say. Words that I'm sure he shouldn't say. "It was."

I pointed over at my brother who was laughing with his new husband. "Jamie looks so happy. Ethan really is perfect for him. I have no doubt that they'll have a great life together." I stared at my dad for a long time until I finally broke him and his demeanor softened.

He sighed and slouched his shoulders slightly. "I'm trying Charlie, okay? I really am. I want to be happy for your brother. I am happy. I'm just..." He trailed off instead of finishing his sentence.

"I really thought we turned a corner at my wedding, Dad." I let out a frustrated sigh, mostly because I really was frustrated we were still stuck in this spot when I thought we had moved on, but also to prove my point that I was sick of his shit lately.

"It's different with Jamie. He's my son, my boy. It's different."

I shook my head. "It shouldn't be."

My dad's shoulders dropped even more. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to." I nodded across the room.

“I know.”

“I know apologies are hard for you and Mom, but maybe at least start by telling him you’re happy for him.”

“I am happy for him,” my dad said, his voice firm in a way that actually made me believe him.

I elbowed him in the side as playfully as I could even though I really wanted to knock some sense into him. “Then show it.”

“You’re right.” He looked at me and smiled and it was the most sincere smile I had seen from him in a while. “You’re very smart.”

“I know.” I tossed my hair over my shoulder. “Now, I need to get back to my wife before the triplets kill her.”

I smiled over at Reagan who was bouncing Carter and Ronan on her lap while Olivia, who was being held by Reagan’s mom, screamed and tried to reach for her.

I reached my arms toward Olivia when I got to the table. “Here. Let me take her from you. I know she’s a handful.”

“Oh, she’s just fine,” Mrs. Cooper said as she smiled down at Olivia rather than handing her to me. “I’m all partied out. Why don’t you let me and my husband take them for the night?”

I shook my head. “We can’t make you do that. Plus the cribs are already set up in our room. It’s no big deal. I appreciate the offer though.”

“Well, guess what? There are cribs set up in our room as well. I called the front desk

to have three brought up this morning before I came to your room to get them. It looks like you have no choice but to give them to me.”

“Are you sure? Because I don’t want—”

“For God’s sake, Charlie. Just let them take the kids,” Reagan said with a laugh, not hesitating before handing the two she was holding over to her dad.

After giving the babies a bunch of hugs and kisses, Reagan and I finally let ourselves relax, which obviously meant having as many drinks as we could as quickly as possible.

“I’m going to miss you when you go back to work,” Reagan said, her words slurring as she danced close to me. “When is that happening? Did you hear anything back from the last daycare we emailed?”

I cringed at her questions. This was the last thing I wanted to be thinking about right now, especially since I had nothing but bad news for her. “Honestly, I need to get back as soon as possible. I’ve been lucky that I’ve been able to find associate doctors to fill in almost all of the days I’ve been out, but paying them is causing a big hit to the money we’re taking in.”

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“And daycare isn’t cheap, especially with three.”

“Yeah, about that...” I let my voice trail off.

Reagan furrowed her eyebrows at me. “What’s up?”

“That daycare did email me back and they also have a waitlist. They said it will be at least a year if we want to get all three in.”

“Shit.” Reagan laughed even though Charlie was sure she didn’t actually find this funny. “I guess we should’ve listened when people told us to get on a waitlist before they were born, huh?”

“Yeah. It seemed crazy at the time, but I guess they knew what they were talking about. I honestly don’t know what we’re going to do. I need to go back to work, but I can’t really do that without having childcare in place.” I shook my head and pulled Reagan tight up against me. “We shouldn’t be talking about this right now though. Let’s just enjoy this kid-free moment.”

“I can do it.”

I pulled away from Reagan slightly so I could look at her. “Do what?”

“I’ll stay with the triplets while you work. I need to get work done too obviously, but since I work remotely, I can get my stuff done while they nap and once you’re home. My boss won’t care what time I’m doing my work as long as I get it done.”

“You want to stay with the triplets...alone?”

“Want to? Hell no. Will I do it for the good of our family? Of course.”

I raised an eyebrow at Reagan. “I feel like you’re only suggesting this right now because you’re drunk.”

Reagan shrugged. “Probably. But do we really have any other option?”

I sighed because I knew she was right. “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Of course. I’m Reagan Cooper. I can handle anything.”

Chapter 2

Reagan

“I can’t handle this,” I said to myself as I looked around our small apartment that was a complete and utter mess.

This was only the first week of being at home with the kids by myself and I already felt like I was losing my mind. It felt like as soon as I got one kid to calm down, one or both of the others would freak out. At least Carter was content as long as she was close to me. I had learned just one day in, that things would go a lot more smoothly if I just kept her in a baby wrap all day, so I had my hands free to handle the other two.

As if she somehow knew I was on the verge of a mental breakdown, my mom called at that very moment. I fumbled with my phone as I tried to grab it off the coffee table then used my nose to accept the call and turn on the speaker. “Hey, Mom,” I said, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible.

“Hey, sweetie, how’s it going?” The tone of her voice told me she knew exactly how it was going.

“It’s...” I looked around our apartment which was a mess of toys, swings and bouncers, piles of dirty and clean laundry I was attempting to do, but hadn’t gotten far on, and my open laptop, which most likely wouldn’t get attention until Charlie was home. “It’s going. Great. It’s... um... really great.”

“Since when do you lie to me?”

I didn’t know whether to groan or smile. Of course she knew. She always knew. “I’m really trying to hold it together. I need to. I really don’t have a choice.”

“Why don’t you let me come up and help for a week? I’d stay longer since retirement has me bored, but I don’t trust your father alone in the house for longer than that.”

“That would be amazing. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course I don’t. You’re my little girl. I want to help you. Also, I’d use any excuse to get snuggles from my grandbabies.”

The week leading up to my mom’s arrival seemed to drag on forever while the week she was at our house ended in the blink of an eye. I couldn’t believe as we sat on the couch together, each rocking a baby while the other was asleep in his crib, that I only had a few hours left with her. I had to blink back tears at the thought of doing this alone again. “Are you sure you have to go?” I asked with a laugh, hoping I could play it off as a joke even though it definitely wasn’t funny.

My mom sighed as she stared down at Olivia. “I wish I could stay. I love spending time with all of you.” My mom looked around the room before bringing her focus back to me. “You know I hate to be one of those meddling moms, but have you

thought about hiring a babysitter?”

“For triplets?” I scoffed as if I hadn’t had the same idea the week prior. “The babysitters want double what I make, and those are the cheap ones. I’d be better off quitting my job.”

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“I wish I lived closer so I could babysit for you.” My mom held Olivia tight up against her chest and smiled. “I take my payment in snuggles.”

“I wish you did too, Mom.”

I always loved living in New York, but since the triplets were born, I realized how hard it was to not have any family around. This really would be so much easier if we lived closer to my mom and dad. I couldn’t shake this thought from my head over the next month. I tried to forget about it and be happy where we were, but the pull to move only became stronger. With my job, I could live anywhere. The problem was Charlie. She had her own practice here—a practice she had always dreamed about owning. There’s no way I could ask her to give that up.

It turned out, I didn’t have to. One night as we lay in bed together, Charlie stared at me while she absentmindedly ran a finger along my arm, that light touch still sending chills throughout my body. “I’ve been thinking. I know this is going to sound completely crazy, so you can obviously say no. But how would you feel about moving? As in, out of New York.”

“Moving?” I asked as if the word was foreign and the thought didn’t cross my mind approximately five million times a day.

“Yeah.” Charlie sat up in bed and chewed on her nail. “I realize it won’t happen anytime soon. We would need to sell the business and find a house and figure out a million other things I’m sure, but I’ve been thinking about this a lot since your mom left and was wondering how you felt about moving back to your hometown? Or at least somewhere nearby.”

“Wait. Are you serious?” I had to make sure Charlie hadn’t somehow read my mind and was only offering this because she knew I wanted it. “But you love your practice. You worked so hard to set it up.”

Charlie shrugged. “I did it once, which means I can do it again. Plus, I could use a break from running a business. I’ll work at a corporate optometry office when we first move. That way, I can take a break from being in charge and also make a shit ton of money, since those places pay their doctors crazy amounts.”

“You’ve thought about this...”

Charlie nodded. “Every single day since your mom left.”

“Can I be honest?” I laughed and pointed a finger at my own chest. “So have I.”

Charlie’s eyes went wide at my confession. “You have?”

“Yes. I didn’t say anything because it felt selfish to even suggest it. There was no way I was going to ask you to leave everything behind just because I wanted extra hands to help around the house.”

Charlie took my hands in hers and squeezed. “I wouldn’t be leaving everything behind. You and our children are my everything. A job is just a job. I want to do what’s best for our family.”

“And you’re sure this is what’s best?”

“Do you disagree?”

“No. Not at all. This is what I want. I just wanted to make sure it’s actually what you want.”

“Itis, so please stop overthinking it.”

“I guess we’re moving, huh?” I asked with a giggle, unable to hold in my giddiness.

“We’re moving,” Charlie repeated as she wiggled around beside me, clearly just as excited.

It took almost a year for us to sort everything out and finally move, but it was more than worth it. At least, I assumed it would be. With help from my parents and Charlie’s nana, we were able to afford the down payment on a two-story, four-bedroom house that was only a five-minute drive from my parents’ house. My mom was helping to watch the kids five days a week, but since I decided to quit my job when we moved, we were going to be there together in the beginning. Since my job was remote, I didn’t have to leave, but I figured this was the chance for a completely fresh start. I liked the company I worked for, but knew I didn’t want to stay there forever.

The only problem was that now I didn’t know what I wanted to do next. Since Charlie got an amazing offer from a corporate optometry chain, we had some time to figure it out, but after a few weeks with no prospects, I could tell Charlie’s patience was beginning to wear a little thin. It didn’t help that her new job paid so well because they expected her to do more than was humanly possible.

After another month, I found a company I could do advertising for remotely, but quickly realized I wasn’t passionate about it. I stuck with it for a few weeks, but even with my mom’s help, trying to work a job I didn’t like while also having three kids who were now mobile was exhausting. To make matters worse, the longer Charlie worked this new job, the worse her mood seemed to get.

The honeymoon phase of our new house quickly wore off, and I started to wish we had stayed in New York. Sure, it was harder to take care of the kids while we were there, and it was nice getting so much more time with my parents, but it felt like Charlie was slipping away from me.

“Dinner is ready,” I told Charlie after she came home late from a long day at work.

Charlie threw herself onto the couch and squeezed her eyes shut. “And how is the job hunt going?”

I cringed, because I could already feel a lecture coming. “Still just doing a few per diem things while I figure out what I want to do next.”

“The ‘figuring it out’ part seems to be taking you quite awhile.”

My cringe turned into a grimace. It was starting to feel like Charlie didn’t appreciate everything I was doing for our family. I had tried to keep my cool since I knew work was stressful for her, but I was at the end of my rope. “Yeah, well, it’s a little hard when I’m home with three kids every day.”

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Charlie scoffed. “Yeah, three kids and your mother. That must be so hard on you.”

“Seriously?” I walked over to the couch with Carter on my hip and put a hand on the other one once I stopped. “Do you think it’s easy being home every day? Even with my mom, it’s still a lot of fucking work. Not to mention, most days, I have a few hours with them by myself. I keep them not only alive but also occupied and clean the house and cook dinner. And what do I get in return? Not even a thank you. You honestly don’t know how lucky you are. I wish I could leave the house every day.”

“You say that like I’m leaving the house to do something fun.” Charlie squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, and it looked like she might start to cry. “No. I’m leaving to do a job that makes me fucking miserable. I spend hours a day getting shit on by my patients just to have my boss tell me I’m not doing enough. I feel like I’m missing our kids growing up. I’m not with them at all throughout the day and then by the time I get home, I’m so tired, I feel like I’m just trying to survive until we get them to sleep. I don’t even get to enjoy them. Some nights... if I’m being honest, most nights... I can’t wait for them to go to bed. Do you know how shitty that feels? It makes me feel like a terrible mom. Who knows. Maybe I am. You sure seem to think that.”

As soon as I saw the first tear fall, I sat down on the couch next to Charlie and took her hand in mine, all of my anger suddenly forgotten. “You’re not a terrible mom, and I’m really sorry if I ever made you feel that way. I’m just really tired. I thought this move was going to be a fresh start, but instead, I just feel like I’m drowning.” I squeezed Charlie’s hand and ducked my head to force her eyes to meet mine. “Let’s go on a date this weekend. You don’t work on Saturday, right? I’ll have my parents watch the kids overnight. We can get a hotel, either in town or even in the city.”

“What is this? Prom? You’re buying us a hotel for the night so you can finally have sex with me?” The way Charlie laughed told me her tension was starting to ease as well.

I smiled at Charlie and wiggled my eyebrows. “That’s exactly what I’m doing. Well, except I’m not buying the hotel. I’m using our credit card points. Gotta put all that money spent on formula and diapers to good use.”

A small smile finally parted Charlie’s lips. “Okay,” she said softly.

“Okay? Really?” Her answer took me by surprise since I had been sure she was going to turn me down.

“Yes. Let’s do it. As long as it’s okay with your parents, of course.”

“It will be, don’t worry.” I will beg, grovel, and plead if I need to.

Luckily, my parents were happy to watch the triplets so no begging was necessary. Less than a week later, we were heading across town to our hotel. We decided that would be easier than going into the city, and since the point was relaxing, why do anything that could potentially cause stress?

“Any preference where we eat dinner?” I asked Charlie as I drove.

“Does the hotel have room service? Because eating in bed and watching a movie without any interruptions sounds marvelous right now.”

“They do. I checked before I booked it, because I had a feeling you might want to do that.”

Charlie lifted my hand that she was holding and kissed my knuckles. “You know me so well.”

“See. I’m not that terrible, am I?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Charlie furrow her eyebrows as her smile dropped. “I never said you were terrible. You don’t actually think I feel that way, do you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe sometimes.” I shrugged. What was supposed to have been a joke had definitely fallen flat and brought us into a territory I didn’t want to be in tonight. “Let’s not talk about that right now though, okay? Tonight is supposed to be all about fun and relaxation.”

“Okay, but just for the record I don’t think you’re terrible. Not at all. And I’m really sorry if I made you feel that way, because it’s not the case at all. I think you’re the most wonderful person in the entire world. Seriously. You mean everything to me. I have no doubt this night is going to be perfect.”

“Please don’t say that word.” I clutched the steering wheel tighter.

“What word?”

“Perfect.” I loosened my grip and laughed. “You know nothing ever goes perfectly for us. Just saying it out loud is a sure way to jinx it. Next thing you know we’ll get a call that the hotel is on fire or something.”

“Oh god, don’t even say that.”

“Am I wrong though?”

“No, you’re completely right. With our luck, that would definitely happen. I apologize for using the P word.”

It became harder and harder for me not to use the P Word as the night went on, because it certainly felt that way. As soon as we arrived at the hotel, we ordered room service and snuggled while we watched a cheesy Hallmark movie (Charlie’s choice, of course) and waited for the food to arrive. After we ate, we snuggled back together and finished the movie.

“So, what now?” I asked after placing a kiss on Charlie’s forehead.

Charlie pulled away from me and gave me a sly grin. “I saw that the shower has one of those rain shower heads. Want to try it out?”

My body buzzed as I pulled Charlie’s back up against mine. “Feeling dirty?”

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Charlie bit her bottom lip and ran her eyes over my body. “I’m feeling very dirty.”

My heart thudded in my chest, and the sensation spread all the way down to my core. I couldn’t remember the last time Charlie and I had sex. I could probably count the amount of times we had since the babies were born on one hand, which was absolutely insane. “I guess we better go get you clean then, huh?”

Charlie stood from the bed, turned away from me, and put on a show that had my mouth watering as she slowly removed every layer of clothes she was wearing. When she turned back around, she lifted one eyebrow at me, causing my stomach to flip flop even more. “I wouldn’t call what I’m about to do to you clean, my dear.”

I jumped out of the bed and didn’t waste any time tearing my clothes off. I wanted to put on a show like Charlie had done for me, but it was no use. Her words had me way too excited. All I could think about was finally having her hands on me after way too long.

Charlie apparently had other ideas though. As soon as we were in the shower with the water pouring down on us, she dropped to her knees in front of me. I expected at least a little bit of foreplay, so my legs almost gave out when her tongue darted out and licked a path up my center. I put my hand on Charlie’s head to bring her mouth even closer, but also to help to balance myself since the feeling of her tongue circling my clit made it hard to stand.

As if that wasn’t enough to drive me insane, she soon added her fingers into the mix. I threw my head back and let the water wash over my face as electricity pulsed throughout my body. I moved my hips to push my center against Charlie’s mouth,

which was sucking hard on my clit while two of her fingers pushed deep inside of me. Her hands and mouth pulled away from me for a split second, but before I could groan from the loss of contact, they had switched spots. Her fingers massaged my clit while she fucked me with her tongue. When her tongue went deep inside of me, I saw stars as an orgasm shot through my body.

“Shit,” I said as I struggled to catch my breath. “I really didn’t mean to come that fast, but holy shit, I also wasn’t expecting that. Where the hell did that come from?” I asked with a strained laugh.

Charlie stood and licked her lips. “I feel like I’ve been building up to this moment for so long. God, I can’t even remember the last time I tasted you. I couldn’t resist diving right in.”

“Well, feel free to dive right in whenever you please,” I said with another laugh.

“Is that a dare?” Charlie brought her fingers back to my wet center and lifted an eyebrow at me, while she smirked like she knew she had complete control over me.

She almost did and I almost let her keep going and take me once again, but as much as I wanted that, what I wanted even more was to touch her. I moved her hand from my center and pushed her hands to rest against her sides, then shook my head. “It’s my turn.”

I started by giving attention to her breasts and relished in the way she threw her head back from just one touch. I took one nipple into my mouth while I squeezed the other between my thumb and forefinger, causing Charlie to let out a low moan that made me even more turned on. After a few minutes, I moved one of my hands between her legs and ran my fingers through her folds. When Charlie purred in my ear, I shoved one finger, quickly followed by another, deep inside of her.

“More,” she begged between large gasps for air, so I added a third finger.

Her center moved against my hand as I used my fingers to fuck her. “Yes. Right there. Yes. Fuck, Reagan. Keep going. Don’t stop.”

“I love when you talk dirty to me.” I smirked at Charlie, but continued to move my fingers in and out of her until a warm liquid hit my hand and she screamed out my name.

Charlie giggled as she rested her head on my shoulder. “Oh my god, that was so good. How did we wait so long to do that? What’s keeping us from doing that every single night?”

I tapped my chin as if I actually had to think about the answer. “Hm. I don’t know. Definitely couldn’t have anything to do with those three crazy little humans that live in our house.”

Charlie picked her head up off my shoulder and smiled a smile that was much bigger than anything I’d seen from her in a long time. “I love those three crazy humans. Sometimes I still have to pinch myself to remind myself this isn’t a dream.”

“So, it still feels like a dream to you?” I asked, a little worried my question might ruin the moment, but I needed to know. Charlie seemed so miserable lately.

When Charlie shook her head, my heart squeezed in pain. That’s what I was afraid of.

But then her smile became even bigger and she grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “It’s better than a dream.”

“Are you sure? I feel like you’ve been so unhappy lately.”

“I know.” Charlie’s smile dropped as she looked toward the floor. “It’s not you, I promise. It’s work. It has me really stressed. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I put my hand under Charlie’s chin to force her to look back up at me then I placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “As long as we’re okay, that’s all that matters to me.”

“We’re great.”

My night away with Charlie was exactly what I needed, and the following week, I felt completely rejuvenated. I still didn’t know what job I wanted to look for next, but I could tell I was getting closer to figuring it out. I even took out my iPad and started playing around with some designs. During high school and college, I used to spend a lot of my free time sketching and making graphics. At one point, I had thought about majoring in graphic design, but decided on business with a minor in marketing since I felt like it would open more opportunities for me. As I worked on a fake mockup for the company Charlie worked for, I questioned if I had made the right decision. This felt like the type of job I should be doing, not just social media and email campaigns, which was exactly what my last job had become.

That Friday, I couldn’t sit still as I waited for Charlie to get home from work, because I was so excited to show her what I had been working on. My mom and dad had taken the three kids to dinner (bless them), so we had the house to ourselves. At least for a little while.

“You’re home!” I shouted as I practically sprinted through the hallway as soon as Charlie came in the door.

Charlie threw her work bag on the ground and let out a long sigh. “Yep. And I’m

exhausted.” She squinted as she stared down the hall. “Where are the kids?”

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“My parents took them to dinner, so we have the place to ourselves.”

“I really hope that doesn’t mean you’re expecting to have sex, because I’m way too wiped out for that.”

“I kind of figured that would be the case.” Even though less than a week ago you were saying how you wanted to do it every day. I tried to shake these thoughts from my head. Charlie and I had gotten ourselves back to such a good place last weekend, and even though I could slowly feel it fading away as the days passed and real life took over again, I didn’t want to start another fight. Especially not over something as trivial as sex.

I took Charlie’s hand and led her up the stairs. “How ’bout we just cuddle instead?”

A small smile parted Charlie’s lips. “Snuggling sounds great. Just let me get changed first.”

“Perfect. I also want to show you something.”

“Can’t wait.”

I lay down in our bed and took out my iPad, bringing up the design I had worked so hard on. As soon as Charlie crawled into bed, she wrapped her body tightly around mine. “So, what did you want to show me?”

“This.” I could feel a proud smile spread across my face as I turned my iPad so she could see it.

“That’s cool, babe.” Charlie laughed as if she wasn’t staring at something I spent all week working on. “Why’d you make that?”

I shrugged, suddenly feeling extremely deflated. “Just messing around I guess.”

“Awesome.” The tone of Charlie’s voice and the hint of a huff she let out after saying it led me to believe she thought my hard work was anythingbutawesome.

“Just say it.”

“Say what?” Charlie asked, sounding sincerely confused.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking.”

“It’s nothing. At least, nothing important. Let’s just take a nap and relax while we can.”

I sat up, because I wasn’t willing to just blow this off. I thought Charlie would at least be somewhat impressed with what I made, but if anything, it seemed to have just annoyed her. “No. I’m not going to act like everything is okay when it’s clearly not.”

“And I don’t want to say anything that I’ll regret because I’m exhausted.”

The bite to Charlie’s words made my skin itch. I couldn’t just lay here andwonderwhat she was thinking when all she had to do was say it.

“It’s fine. Just tell me.”

“Fine. I guess I just wish you would spend your time actually looking for a job, rather than just messing around and doodling.”

“Doodling?” The itch turned to a burn as my body heated up with anger over the fact that Charlie could dismiss my hard work like that. “I actually worked really fucking hard on thisso called doodle,Charlie. Really hard.”

“I’m sure you did. It looks great. All I’m saying is that I wish you put that much work into finding a job.”

“Maybe I’m trying to find my passion instead of just finding a job.”

“Well, yourpassiondoesn’t buy our kids’ diapers and formula. Yourpassiondoesn’t put food on the table. You know what does? The fact that I’m working my ass off for us.”

Her words were like gas on a flame and I was about to blow up. I took a deep breath, but it was no use. Her words hurt, and I was livid. “Jesus Christ, Charlie, where is this coming from? You literally sound like your mom right now.” I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth. It might feel like the truth at the moment, but given the rocky relationship Charlie had with her mom, it was a low blow. “Charlie, I—”

Charlie threw her hands in the air and jumped from the bed. “This is why I didn’t want to talk about it. I’m going for a walk.”

Before I could even consider trying to stop her, she walked out of the room. Just a few seconds later, I heard the door open and slam shut.Shit.

Chapter 3

Charlie

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I jumped at the sound of the door slamming behind me. I didn't mean to close it so hard, but I was pissed. The thing was, I didn't know who I was more pissed at—Reagan or myself. I shouldn't have called the graphic she showed me a doodle. The truth was, it was absolutely amazing. I always knew Reagan was talented, but not that talented. In all of the time we've been together, she had never shared this side of her. A supportive wife would have told her all of that. Not me, though. I had to turn it into a fight about money and how hard I'm working. It's almost impossible not to at this point though. I'm barely a functioning human these days, because of this stupid job. I don't want to resent Reagan, but there's a part of me that can't help it.

Then there was that comment she made. I could tell she regretted it as soon as it left her lips, but it was too late to take it back. She said it, and if that's how she truly felt, I didn't know how we could come back from that. My mom and I were working on our relationship, and the birth of the triplets certainly seemed to help, but so many of my deep-seated issues started with her. If I was like her...I shook my head. Reagan is wrong. I'm nothing like my mother.

A part of me wanted to turn around and walk right back inside so Reagan and I could work this out, but I had a bad feeling that if I did that, it would only be a temporary fix. Things had been so up and down between us since the move and I didn't want to make up and have it be a temporary high, just like last weekend. I wanted to figure out how to actually work this out—not just this fight, but all of the issues we've been having.

How was I supposed to figure that out though? It's not like there were magic words that would suddenly fix everything. I felt like I was grasping for straws.

I needed to talk to someone, but who? My family was out. My parents would obviously automatically take my side—even though they’ve come a long way, I could tell they still held resentment toward Reagan as if she was the only reason why I’m gay. Jamie and Nana were the opposite. I was sure they wouldn’t hesitate to take Reagan’s side, and I didn’t need someone to make me feel worse than I already did.

That’s when it hit me. I took out my phone and tapped on the contact whom I had no doubt could help me in this situation.

“Charlie! To what do I owe the pleasure?” Kennedy asked when she answered her phone.

Kennedy and her wife Skylar had been two of our best friends since we met them at the beach a few years ago. Since they had technically been separated and on the verge of a divorce when we met them (but now are still very happily married), they understood the toll that a relationship can take on you. They knew what it felt like to constantly fight to the point that you weren’t sure what else to do. I didn’t think my issues with Reagan were at that level, but I also didn’t want them to get there.

“Reagan and I have been fighting a lot.”

“You’re not thinking about...”

Kennedy’s voice trailed off, but it didn’t matter, because I knew what she was thinking. On my wedding day, she told me if it ever got to the point that Reagan and I were fighting a lot, I needed to call and talk to her, rather than doing something rash like threatening a divorce (a mistake she had made in the past).

“No, no. It’s not that bad, but I wanted to talk to you before it became that bad.”

“That’s very smart of you. I wish I had done the same. It definitely would have saved

months of heartache.” We were both silent for a moment before Kennedy spoke again. “So, what’s up? What’s been going on?”

“I think I’m starting to resent my wife, and that’s the last thing I want.”

“Okay. And why do you feel that way?” The soft knowing tone of Kennedy’s voice caused my body to relax for the first time in what felt like months.

“You know how I switched to that corporate optometry job when we moved?”

“Of course. You joked how that company was known to steal your soul and rip out your heart, but also paid their doctors a lot of money, so it was worth it.”

I cringed as I thought about how I once actually believed any amount of money was worth the complete crumbling of my mental health. “Well, it turns out it’s not a joke. It also turns out that it’s not worth the money.”

“Are you going to get a new job?” Kennedy asked, as if it were actually that simple.

“That’s the problem. I can’t, because I’m the one who is making all the money right now. I wake up every day with a lead plate in the pit of my stomach, because I’m dreading work so much. Even on days I don’t work, I still feel sick just thinking about going back. Meanwhile, Reagan is at home, not an ounce of stress surrounding her as she pursues every passion imaginable to try to figure out what she wants to do next.”

“Just playing devil’s advocate here, but are you sure Reagan isn’t stressed?”

“How could she be?” I asked with a scoff. “She gets to spend hours every day enjoying our children while her mom helps her with everything, and even with her mom’s help, she still can’t take the time to find a job.”

“Okay.” Kennedy was quiet as if she was considering everything I had just said. “I can definitely see how that would be frustrating from your end and I am in no way taking sides, but since I figure you called me to help you see the other side in this situation, I’m going to do that. When it’s you and Reagan at home, working together to take care of the triplets, is it easy?”

I scoffed again. How could she even ask that? “Not at all. No matter what I do, whether I’m at work or at home, I feel like I’m in a constant state of drowning. I’m not even living anymore. I’m just trying to survive.”

“So, even with two adults, you’d say it’s pretty tough to take care of three young kids, right?”

“Of course. It’s—” I snapped my mouth shut when I realized what Kennedy was getting at. “Okay. Touché.”

Kennedy laughed lightly, but there wasn’t a hint of judgment in it. “Have you asked Reagan how she’s feeling? Like not just a simple ‘hey, how are you?’ but how she’s actually doing. You obviously know your wife better than me, but I can’t see Reagan being completely laid back about letting you do all the work.”

“I’m not doing all the work,” I said quickly, finding myself becoming overly defensive over the woman I had essentially been saying that exact thing about ever since we moved.

“I know.” There was a hint of cockiness to Kennedy’s voice, but it wasn’t of the ‘I told you so’ variety. It was confidence in knowing she was getting her point across.

“Okay. You’re right. Maybe I haven’t been completely fair to Reagan. But I feel like I try so hard to hold in what I’m actually going through so I don’t make her feel bad, but it always ends up backfiring because I get to the end of my rope and snap at her.”

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“I’m going to tell you something my best friend told me years ago that has stuck with me all this time. She said that you can do everything in the world to get your point across, but nothing works as well as just flat out telling the person how you’re feeling.”

“But I have told Reagan how I’m feeling—probably too much. My mood swings and my lashing out on her are a big part of the reason we’re having so many issues.” Even though I had known deep down that this was the case, this was the first time I was admitting it to myself rather than automatically putting all of the blame on Reagan.

“But have you told her how you were feeling after you actually took a breath and gathered your thoughts?”

I sighed as I looked toward the ground where I was running my foot along the dirt.
“No. I guess I haven’t.”

“Start there. Tell Reagan how you’re really feeling. Let her know exactly what this job is doing to your mental health. Until you do that and listen to what she’s feeling in return, you won’t actually get anywhere.”

“You’re right. Thank you, Kennedy.”

“No need to thank me. Just figure this out with your wife so you can put your focus on more important things, like when we’re all getting together again.”

For the first time in a week, I laughed and actually meant it. “Sounds good. Thank you. And thanks for understanding. Thanks for not automatically taking my side or

making me feel like I'm a terrible person."

"There's no side to take in this. You and Reagan are two wonderful women who are trying to figure out how to navigate this new world. You're both doing everything you can. I don't doubt that one bit. I also don't doubt that this is just a minor blip in your long love story."

I spent the next few minutes talking to Kennedy about what was new in her life then hung up so I could make things right with Reagan.

When I got home, I didn't find her downstairs in the kitchen or family room, so I walked up the steps to find our bedroom door shut. I softly knocked and laid my head against the cool wood. "Reagan? Is it okay if I come in?"

"Yep."

There was a crack to her voice as if she had been crying, and as soon as I opened the door and saw her red eyes and pink cheeks, I knew that was the case. I ran over to the bed and immediately wrapped her up in my arms, placing a kiss on her forehead as I held her. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. Please don't cry. Please. I'll do anything."

"How can't I?" Reagan asked through a new set of tears. "I hate myself for what I said to you. It was heartless. It was one of the worst things I could have said, and I'm not sure why I did."

"You're right. It hurt hearing that you saw me that way, but it wasn't without prompting on my end. I've been so hard on you since the move. In the midst of all my complaints and lectures, I haven't actually taken the time to ask how you're doing. But I am now. How are you really doing, Reagan?"

Reagan sat up slightly and took my hand in hers. She looked down at me, and I could

see the love shining from her eyes. It was the same look she had given me when we made love last weekend—a look I had taken for granted recently, but refused to ever again. “Before I answer that—I need you to know that I didn’t mean what I said about you sounding like your mom. I shouldn’t compare you to her. Not after everything she’s put you through. The way you were hounding me like nothing I did was good enough felt like something she would do to you, but I know it doesn’t actually compare. I’m sorry for making it seem like it did.”

I squeezed Reagan’s hand. “You don’t have to apologize. I get it. I’ve been pushing you so much lately. It makes sense that you would snap and say things you don’t mean after all of that. I don’t blame you. Seriously, though. How are you?”

Reagan took a deep breath and blew it out. “That’s a loaded question.”

I motioned with my hand for her to continue. “Try me.”

Reagan wiggled around on the bed, then sat up straighter. “I love the life we’ve made together. Don’t get me wrong, I really do. I adore our kids, and I’m really happy we moved back here. But, I don’t know. I guess I thought when we moved here, everything would just click into place, and instead, it seems to have done the opposite. I’m completely lost over what I want to do, and I feel like I keep letting you down over and over again.”

“You’re not letting me down. I promise.”

“Are you sure? It definitely seems that way. No matter what I do, it’s like nothing is good enough. And I know it’s because I haven’t done the one thing you’ve been hounding me to do. I get it. I really do. I just... I don’t know. I guess I’m just really lost right now.”

I understood that feeling all too well. “That definitely makes two of us. I’m sorry I’ve

been so hard on you.”

Reagan shrugged. “It makes sense. We need the money. I haven’t been doing what I should be for our family.”

“That’s the thing though. You really have been. You’re home with the kids every single day. Even with your mom here, I know that’s not an easy task at all. You have dinner waiting for me most nights when I walk in the door, and even after being with the kids all day, you still take on the bulk of the responsibility for them so I can relax. I didn’t notice any of that because I’ve been so caught up in my own misery. I know I’ve told you this multiple times, but I don’t think I’ve expressed it the way I should have. I hate my job. Every day when I wake up, I feel physically ill, because I dread going in so much. They load my schedule up with so many patients that I can barely breathe throughout the day. Half the time, I miss my lunch because I’m running so far behind, since the idiots who make my schedule don’t have any idea how long it actually takes to do an eye exam. I don’t feel like I’m making a difference the way I did when I owned the practice. Hell, a lot of the time, it feels like I’m doing the opposite. When I get home, I’m so exhausted, I can’t even enjoy our beautiful children. I know it’s all temporary, but right now, it doesn’t feel that way. I’m scared I’m going to be stuck in this never-ending cycle forever, and that will be my life—going through every single day just trying to survive. Not actually living.” I laughed and shook my head at my verbal diarrhea. “I know it sounds ridiculous. I’m sorry.”

Reagan stared at me for what felt like forever, her eyes burning straight through mine and into my soul, and for the first time in so long, it felt like she was actually seeing me. “It doesn’t sound ridiculous at all. I should be the one who’s apologizing. You’re working so hard to make sure our family has everything they need. Meanwhile, I’ve been so caught up in my own head about what to do next that I didn’t see just how much you were struggling. I knew you hated your job, but I don’t think I realized how much it was affecting you, and I’m sincerely sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. I haven’t exactly been an open book.”

Reagan shook her head. “It’s not okay, and you shouldn’t be working a job that’s taking such a huge toll on your mental health. I don’t care if it’s only temporary. Life is way too short to spend any of your time here completely miserable. I think you should give your notice.”

Even though I knew she would be supportive, that was the last thing I expected Reagan to say. “I can’t do that. What about money? What about healthcare insurance?”

Reagan shrugged. “We’ll figure all of that out when the time comes. I’m the girl who kissed my fake boyfriend’s twin sister when she still thought I was dating her brother. I like to jump, then think about the consequences later.” Reagan pushed her shoulder against mine playfully and gave me her trademark smile that made me fall in love with her the first time and continue to fall in love day after day. “In case you were wondering, it’s worked out pretty well for me in the past.”

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“Are you sure? Because I heard the girl you fell for has been a pretty sucky wife lately.”

“I’m positive. I love you more than anything in the entire world, Charlie, and I absolutely adore the life we’ve made together even if it has been a little messy lately. So, you’ll give your two week—”

“Sixty-day,” I interrupted. “According to my contract I have to give them a sixty-day notice, or I’ll owe them money for the days I don’t work during that time.”

“Fucking assholes.”

I chuckled at Reagan’s bluntness. “You’re telling me. I think I’ll actually do three months though. It gives us slightly more time to figure things out.”

“Are you sure? Three months is a long time to torture yourself.”

I nodded. Lately, every day felt like a year, but knowing it wasn’t going to last forever made it not seem so bad anymore. “I think having an end date will make things easier for me.”

It turned out, I was right. As soon as I gave my notice, I felt a million pounds lighter. Getting up for work didn’t feel like complete torture. I was so much happier that I almost convinced myself maybe this job wasn’t as bad as I had made it out to be in my mind. Almost. The job fucking sucked, and the way I ran out and didn’t even look

back on my last day, only proved how true that was.

“Congratulations!” Reagan shouted when I walked into the house after work that day. “You’re officially no longer employed by the devil.”

I followed her voice and the sounds of “Yay, Mommy!” through the house and into the kitchen, where I found balloons decorating the room and a chocolate cake with peanut butter icing (my favorite) sitting on the counter. “Congrats,” was written sloppily along the top of the cake.

One at a time, each of our kids ran over to me and wrapped their arms around my legs in a hug. I felt my eyes burning as tears threatened to fall, and at the moment, I wasn’t sure if they were happy tears or sad tears. When had these three gotten so big? I felt like I missed them growing up over the past year, but I also knew that wasn’t going to happen anymore, and relief flooded through me.

“Did you have a good last day?” Reagan asked as she wrapped me in a hug.

I laughed at the question, feeling lighter than I had in a very long time. “It was awful, which in a way, was wonderful. A very good reminder of why I left that place.”

“I’m so happy to hear that. I have some good news of my own.”

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

“Remember how I was messing around and drew a scene from the one book I was reading?”

How could I forget? I had to remind myself to breathe when Reagan reluctantly showed me what she had been working on, because it was so beautiful. “Of course I remember. And if that’s you messing around, I’d love to see what you can do when

you actually try.” I poked her in the side to show her I was only kidding. I never again wanted to make her doubt how proud she makes me.

“Well, I put it up on my Instagram last week and tagged the author, and she shared it in her story. After seeing it, a few people reached out asking if I do commissions, so I’ve been thinking about doing it. But you’ll never guess who messaged me today.”

“Who?”

“Laurel Lake!” The way Reagan’s face lit up as she said the name told me I should know who that was. It sounded so familiar, but since I didn’t really read, I wasn’t sure why.

“That’s amazing! Now, remind me again who Laurel Lake is.”

“Really, babe?” Reagan rolled her eyes at me. “We literally met her at Ethan’s charity event a few years ago. The Christmas one.”

“Oh! You mean Kinsley, right? The one who is married to Grace—the girl who went to my school. I would have known if you said her real name.”

“Okay, okay. Whatever. Anyway, she asked me if I wanted to design the cover of her next book.”

“No way! Are you kidding me?” I asked as I pulled Reagan into another hug. “That’s amazing. You told her you’d do it, right?”

“I told her I would let her know. I wanted to talk to you first. Since it’s the first one I’m doing, I don’t want to charge a ton, so it’s not like we’re going to make a bunch of money from it, but I think this could open the door to more opportunities like this for me. I think this might have been what I was waiting for, even though I didn’t

realize it before.”

“You need to message her back immediately. This is a huge opportunity, Reagan. Don’t let it pass you by!”

Reagan’s eyes lit up even more, and it was so cute, it made me want to kiss her from head to toe. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! Get your phone out and tell her you’re doing it.”

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Reagan pulled her phone out of her pocket and quickly typed out a message. When she slipped it back into her pocket, there was a huge shit-eating grin on her face. “What a day. This calls for an even bigger celebration.”

“I hope you’re not going to suggest going out to eat,” I said, gritting my teeth just thinking about it. “You know what a disaster it was last time.”

“Nope. Not what I was thinking.” Reagan took both of my hands in hers and her smile became even wider to the point that I was scared what was about to come out of her mouth. “Let’s go to Disney World. Not tonight obviously, but in a few months. This summer. Once it’s warm out again.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Of course I am. It’s perfect. We always said that Disney would be our first trip as a family. The kids will be two by the time we go. What better timing than that?”

After everything we’d been through over the past year, I didn’t want to be the one to burst her bubble, but one of us had to be realistic. “Honey, neither of us have a job right now.”

Reagan shrugged. “I know, but I’ll do a ton of commissions, and whenever you’re ready, you can start doing fill-in work until you figure out what’s next for you. You said doing stuff like that pays ridiculously well, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then we’ll be fine,” Reagan said before I could finish my thought.

I shook my head. “Okay, but money aside, you want us to go to Disney World with three two-year-olds? Have you met our children? They aren’t exactly getting any calmer.

“We’ll ask my parents to go. You know, if that’s okay with you.”

I was always happy with more sets of hands, and I loved Reagan’s parents. “Of course that’s okay.”

“So, that’s a yes? We’re doing this?”

I nodded, unable to stop the excitement that began to course through my body. I couldn’t help it. The energy emanating from Reagan’s body was contagious. “Let’s do it.”

“Guess what kids?” Reagan asked as she looked down at our three children who were being uncharacteristically quiet and well-behaved. “Mommy said yes! We’re going to Disney World.”

All three kids shouted and jumped up and down as if they could actually comprehend exactly what was happening. It was such a happy moment, I almost missed the obvious. “Wait a second. You knew you were going to suggest Disney and you told the kids?”

Reagan shrugged, the grin on her face suddenly a sly one. “What can I say? Leverage. I had to make sure you said yes.”

“I can’t believe you.” I playfully pushed her away from me. “What are we waiting for? We have a trip to plan.”

I skipped around as I cleaned the house while the kids napped and Reagan and her mom prepared dinner. It was crazy how much could change in a week. I was so relieved to be free from that job that I wasn't even stressed about money at the moment. Sure, it helped that once Reagan posted she was opening up commissions (and a few authors who were apparently big names in the sapphic fiction community, including Laurel Lake, reposted it), she received a surprisingly large amount of requests. Plus, I was already getting calls about places I could fill in. I hadn't said yes to any of them yet because I needed a moment to breathe, but it made me feel better to know I had options.

I was in such a good mood that I didn't even think twice about picking up my phone when I saw my mother was calling. "Hey, Mom! What's up?" I asked as I put the phone on speaker and walked into the kitchen to see how dinner was coming along.

"I'm shocked you picked up. Sometimes, I swear you're screening your calls."

I am. "Nope. Just super busy."

"How are my babies doing?"

"They're great. Not so much babies anymore, though. They're getting huge."

My mother sighed as though the thought of my children growing stressed her out.

"That's why I'm calling. I miss them and want to see them. You never come to visit."

That's because visiting Maryland isn't relaxing for anyone. "Roads work both ways, Mom. It's much easier for you and Dad to hop in a car than for me and Reagan to pack everything we need to travel with three kids, then actually travel with them."

“Speaking of traveling, your nana told me you’re going to Disney World this summer.”

“I didn’t tell her.” My nana’s voice was faint through the phone, but I could tell she was yelling. “She heard me talking to your brother about it.”

“James says you invited him to go with you.” The tone to my mother’s voice told me I wasn’t going to like whatever she had to say next. “That’s nice of you to include your brother, but he doesn’t have children. He won’t be able to help you take care of them the way someone with experience would.”

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Is she trying to get me to invite her? Hell no. Not happening. “Don’t worry. We asked Reagan’s parents to come along, so they’ll be able to help.”

My mom sighed once again. “What did I do to deserve this?”

Seriously? I rolled my eyes at Reagan and her mom who both gave me a knowing smile, then turned off the speaker and left the room so they didn’t have to listen to the fight that was most likely about to break out. “What are you talking about, Mom?”

“You never invite us to do anything. It’s always your in-laws.”

I rubbed my forehead as I contemplated how to answer. The last thing I wanted was to fight with my mom, especially when things had been fairly good between us since the kids were born. At least, as good as they could be with my mom.

“I’m really trying, Charlotte,” my mom said before I could think of how to put my thoughts into words.

“I know. I just... I don’t know. That’s a lot of people, Mom.”

“Just think about it, okay? More hands means more help with the kids.”

More help did sound great, but I still wasn’t convinced I wanted that help to come from my parents, especially not my mom. “Okay. I’ll think about it. The triplets are napping though, so I have to go. I don’t want to wake them up.”

“Of course. Love you, sweetie.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I hung up the phone and walked into the kitchen where I dramatically threw myself into one of the chairs. “Guess who wants to go to Disney with us?”

“If you say your mom, I’m going to pour this pot of boiling water over my head.”

“Reagan,” her mom said before she swatted her in the arm. Her tone was scolding, but the small smile on her face told a different story. “Be nice.”

“I am nice.” Reagan walked up behind me and began to massage my shoulders, causing my tension to instantly melt away. “In fact, I’m so nice, I think we should say yes. Let them come.”

I swung my head around to look at Reagan. She had to be kidding. Just a few seconds ago, she was threatening to burn herself at the thought of my mom coming. There’s no way she actually wanted her to come. “Please tell me that’s a joke.”

Reagan simply smiled and shrugged. “Why not? More people means more help. God knows we could use it.”

“I can think of about a million reasons why we shouldn’t have my parents come, the main one being that my mom has found a way to ruin every big moment in our lives.”

“You sayruin.I say she gave us memories to look back on and laugh at.”

“It is nice that she wants to be involved,” Mama Cooper added. “Plus, we’ll be there to act as a buffer. You know I’d never let her ruin your first family vacation.”

“See?” Reagan leaned down to place a quick kiss on my lips. “What could possibly go wrong?”

“So many things.” So, so many.

Chapter 4

Reagan

“I’m going to miss you so much. Yes, I am. Mama loves you. Yes, I do. I love you so much.”

“Oh, calm down,” Nana said as she grabbed Patch out of my arms. “He’ll be just fine here with me.”

“And you’re sure you’ll be okay?” Charlie asked as she wrapped an arm around her nana.

Much to our chagrin, Charlie’s parents had decided to stay at our house the night before vacation and fly out of Philadelphia with us. The only positive was that Nana offered to ride with them to our house and watch Patch while we were gone. Thank god. With his anxiety, I didn’t even want to imagine what he would do if we left him with someone he didn’t know. Luckily, Patch loved Nana, but then again, who didn’t?

Nana waved her hand at Charlie. “I’ll be just fine. I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself. Now, tell me, where do you keep the good stuff?”

“The good stuff? Like alcohol?”

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Nana rolled her eyes at me as if she thought I was purposely avoiding her question. “I’m not stupid. I know you girls have weed.”

I chuckled while Charlie coughed beside me. “Oh! That good stuff. We don’t have that much, so I packed most of what we have, but there are a few gummies in the nightstand by our bed.”

“Which you will not be taking.” Charlie glared at me. “Why would you pack that? What if they search our luggage and find it?”

Nana waved a finger at Charlie, but kept her eyes on me. “I remember when this one used to be fun. Old ball and chain now, huh?”

My body shook slightly as I tried my best to hold in my laughter. I winked at Nana then focused my attention on Charlie. “No one is going to find it. Plus, we’re going on vacation with your mother. Did you really think I was going to make it through the whole week completely sober?”

“Touché. Come to think of it, maybe we should take some now.”

“I’m not at the point of wanting to claw your mom’s eyes out yet, so I think I’ll hold off for now.”

“You’re not?” Charlie asked with a laugh. “That makes one of us.”

“Hey,” I wrapped my arms around Charlie and pulled her close to me. “Don’t let her get to you. This is going to be an amazing trip. We’ve been dreaming about this ever

since our first date. Nothing or no one is going to ruin it for us.”

“You’re right.” Charlie rested her head against my chest. “I still can’t believe this is real. We’re going to Disney with the family we made together. It seemed like such a pipe dream just a few years ago. Now it’s actually happening. Sometimes, I still have to pinch myself.”

Happy tears burned at the corners of my eyes. I opened my mouth to tell Charlie that I couldn’t agree more, but I was cut off by the sound of Nana scoffing.

“You’re lucky I love you two, because all this lovey dovey shit is going to make me throw up my breakfast.”

“Sorry, Nana.” I let go of Charlie and put my arm around Nana instead. “I just can’t help it that I love your great granddaughter so much.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’m really happy for both of you.” Even though her tone was sarcastic, I knew she meant it. Nana had been our biggest supporter since day one.

I pulled her even tighter up against me. “Don’t worry. No matter what, you’ll always be my favorite Miller.”

“I better be. It’s not like there’s much competition.”

“Nana!” Charlie’s mouth fell open, but it quickly turned up into a smile. “That’s not very nice. We’re not all bad, you know.”

“That’s true. I’m sorry. You’re right. Jamie has grown into a wonderful man.”

Both Charlie and I burst into laughter. Even though I was really excited for this trip, there was a part of me that longed to stay back with Nana. Her fragile frame

reminded me that she wasn't getting any younger, and I wanted to soak up all the time we had left with her.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us on the trip?" We had asked her multiple times and her answer was always a resounding no, but I figured I might as well give it one more try.

"And leave Patch here by himself to destroy your whole house? I don't think so. Plus, if I miss a week of my soaps, I'll never catch up. Do you know how many people will die, cheat, or turn gay in that time? I might as well stop watching if I miss a week."

"You're right. I could never ask you to miss out on all of that excitement. We're just going to miss you."

"Pft." Nana furrowed her eyebrows and waved a hand at me. "Enough with the sappy shit."

I laughed as I pulled her into my arms for one more hug. "Sorry, Nana. Take care of Patch. Don't let him boss you around."

Nana pulled away from me and lifted both eyebrows as she stared at me, face stone cold serious. "I'm always the boss. You should know that by now. I'll have this pup whipped into shape by the time you get home. No more biting or chewing once I'm done with him."

I appreciated her enthusiasm, but I knew there was no chance of that happening. Patch's anxiety had anxiety. There was no way that was going to be cured in a week.

"Girls! All three children are in the car. We're just waiting on you." When Mrs. Miller came into the room, she was out of breath and her hair was completely disheveled as if she had just run a marathon. "If we don't leave now, we could miss

our flight.”

Charlie looked down at the watch on her wrist then rolled her eyes at her mom. “Our flight doesn’t leave for four hours and the airport is around an hour away. We’ll be fine.”

Mrs. Miller shook her head and threw her hands in the air. “Fine. If we get stuck in traffic and then there is a line for security, you can explain to your children why they aren’t going to Disney World.”

I squeezed my lips together to hold in my laughter at how ridiculous that statement was, but Nana apparently didn’t have the same reservations. She looked at Mrs. Miller directly and literally laughed in her face. “That is the most asinine thing I’ve ever heard, which is saying a lot when I’ve been living with you for the last ten years.”

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Instead of addressing Nana, Mrs. Miller looked at us. “Just get outside, please.” She stomped away, huffing with every step she took.

Nana continued to laugh, barely pushing her words out between chuckles. “You girls have fun with that. I know I’ll be enjoying my vacation right here away from her.”

“Have fun,” Charlie said before giving her nana one more hug. “Call us if you need anything, please.”

Nana stopped laughing and glared at Charlie. “Stop your worrying. I’m fine. It’s you two I’m worried about.” She waved her hand in the direction of the door. “Having to deal with that thing all week.”

“Don’t worry about us either,” I said with a laugh. “We’re going to have a great time.” At least, I hope so.

The house we rented was huge and only a few minutes from the parks. Still, after enduring a whole plane ride with Charlie’s mom, it didn’t seem big enough.

I walked up the stairs and down the hall to the bedroom that was the farthest away from all the others and frowned when I found that Jamie and Ethan’s bags were already sitting on the bed. Damn them for getting here before us.

“Jamie, could you please come here?” I yelled through the house, trying my best to do my sweet voice.

“What’s up?” Jamie asked when he found me in the hallway outside of his claimed bedroom.

“We have a problem.” I pointed toward the open doorway. “I want this room.”

Jamie smirked. “Sounds like a personal problem. It’s already taken. You know what they say—the early bird—”

“What they say is that I had to deal with your mother the whole way down here, so I deserve the room that is farthest away from hers.”

Jamie crossed his arms in front of his chest, but the smirk remained on his face. “Is that so? Have you forgotten that I live fifteen minutes away from her? I’d say I deal with her much more than you do.”

Two can play this game. I crossed my arms in front of my chest as well and took a step closer to him. “Have you forgotten that you ~~cho~~se to live there?”

“This is true.” Jamie nodded as if he was actually considering my point. “You know what else is true, though? The fact that you have three children so you should probably be in a room that is close to theirs and this room isn’t close to any of the others.”

“Dude. That’s even ~~more~~ reason for me and Charlie to get this room. We deal with those crazy little people every day. This is vacation. Someone else can deal with them.”

Jamie tapped his chin. “You make a good point, but there’s gotta be something in it for me. What will you give me for the room?”

“The guarantee that I’ll be far enough away that you won’t have to listen to me

having sex with your sister.”

Jamie wrinkled his face in disgust the way I was hoping he would. “First of all, ew. Second of all, it doesn’t matter if you’re all the way down here. You do remember Christmas a few years ago, don’t you?”

I smiled thinking back on that night. “How could I forget? One of the best orgasms of my life.”

“You’re missing my point. My point is that’s not good enough. I need something else.”

“Fine. I brought edibles along to help us deal with your mom. I even baked some special brownies. If you give us this room, you can have some.”

“I feel like you were already planning on sharing those with me.”

“I was, but now they come at a price.”

Jamie gritted his teeth. “You don’t fight fair.”

I couldn’t help but smile even wider at him. “I know.”

Jamie groaned and threw his arms in the air in defeat. “Fine. You can have this room as long as we don’t get stuck in the one closest to the triplets. I love my nieces and nephew, but I don’t want to get woken up by them super early. This is my vacation too.”

I held my hand out toward him. “Deal. I’ll put them right in the middle of your parents and my parents. That will make everyone happy.”

Jamie grabbed my hand and shook it. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

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“Why do I feel like we just missed something shady going down?” Charlie’s voice said from behind me.

I turned around to find both her and Ethan standing there. “Nothing to worry about here. Just scoring the best room in the house for my favorite woman.”

Charlie lifted an eyebrow and smirked at me as she snaked an arm around my waste. “I love the sound of that. Why don’t we go in and you can show me around?”

“I’d be happy to show you around, dear.”

“Ew.” I looked at Jamie whose face had turned to one of disgust once again. “Still standing here. Also, don’t you two have children to take care of?”

Charlie shook her head. “Nope. Their grandparents are busy fighting over them, so we’re free.”

Jamie moved over to Ethan and put an arm around him just like Charlie had done to me. “Well, we’re going to put our suits on and get in the pool. Whenever you two get done doing whatever it is you’re doing, you should come join us.”

“Oh, I think you know exactly what we’re doing,” I said with a wink.

“Shut up!” Charlie and Jamie shouted at the exact same time, causing me and Ethan to break into a fit of laughter.

“Wow. You two really are twins.”

After Jamie and Ethan grabbed their bags out of the room, I brought ours in and locked the door behind us. Because that's a mistake you only make once.

I nudged Charlie back onto the bed and crawled on top of her. "How quiet can you be?"

"I can be very quiet," Charlie whispered, her voice sultry and soft and already making me wet.

"Are you sure about that?" I asked as I wasted no time unbuttoning her shorts and moving my hand inside.

Charlie bit her bottom lip and nodded. "Mmhmm. So sure."

I ran my fingers through her folds and was happy to find how wet she already was. "You're ready for me, huh?" I leaned down and kissed Charlie long and hard as I continued to touch her.

After a few seconds, she gently pushed me away and looked at me with eyes so laser focused that it made me forget how to breathe. "Reagan, I'm ready for you every minute of every day. I hope you don't ever doubt that. I love you so much."

Her words were so sweet, I had to squeeze my eyes shut to keep myself from crying. "I love you too, Charlie. I wish I could make love to you all day."

Charlie stared at me for a few seconds before moving her eyes around the room and letting out a long sigh. "I wish you could too, but, unfortunately, if this takes more than a few minutes, everyone is going to know what's going on up here, and I don't think I can handle that again."

"You make a good point." I sat up, still straddling Charlie's lap, and tore off my T-

shirt and bra. “We better make this quick.” I ran my eyes over her body and licked my lips. “Now would be a good time for you to get naked.”

Charlie giggled and put her hands on my hips. “Unfortunately, that is going to require you getting off of me.”

“Fine.” I rolled off of Charlie and pulled off my shorts and underwear, while she removed her clothes as well.

Charlie scooted up the bed and once she was situated with her head on the pillows, I brought my body back on top of hers. We kissed for a few minutes while our hands explored each others’ bodies, and when I was sure we were both more than ready, I maneuvered my body so my center met hers. We both moaned quietly at the contact and I brought my mouth back to hers to keep us from making too much noise.

I had to kiss her harder as I found myself coming closer and closer to the edge, because all I wanted to do was scream out her name and let her know how good she made me feel. When her hips pushed up against mine bringing our bodies even closer together, I couldn’t take it anymore. I removed my mouth from hers and bit her shoulder as the orgasm shot through my body. The way Charlie’s body writhed below mine told me that she had climaxed as well.

“I love you so much,” I said once again as I stared down at my beautiful wife, her skin glistening with sweat from what we had just done and making her look more beautiful than ever.

“I love you too, Reagan. You’re my best friend in the whole world.” Charlie laughed as she rubbed her shoulder. “I just hope you didn’t leave a mark when you bit me. That one will be fun to explain to our parents.”

I moved her hand and studied the small red spot on her shoulder.Oops.“If anyone

notices, we can tell them it was Patch. Problem solved.”

“You’ve thought of everything. Haven’t you, sweetheart?”

“Stick with me. We’ll be just fine.”

Charlie and I giggled together like giddy teenagers, before she pulled me down to give me another kiss. “I plan on it.”

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We decided to start out our vacation with Magic Kingdom, since we couldn't wait to see our kids' faces when they saw Cinderella's Castle for the first time. Their reactions certainly didn't disappoint us.

As soon as the castle came into view, Carter, who was holding my hand, stopped dead in her tracks and stared up at it in awe. She squeezed my hand tightly as her mouth fell open.

The other two weren't as calm with their responses of course. Ronan shouted, "Castle! Castle!" as he jumped up and down, practically tearing Charlie's arm off in the process.

Olivia dropped my mom's hand and took off in a sprint in the direction of the castle. Luckily, Jamie had quick reflexes and ran after her, scooping her up into his arms before we could lose her in the crowd. She giggled uncontrollably as he tickled her and held her upside down as his form of reprimanding her.

After taking turns getting pictures in front of the castle (Jamie and Ethan taking the most since it was the spot they had gotten engaged), we started to make our way around the park.

Three hours (and only two rides) later, the kids began to complain that they were hungry, tired, and their feet hurt.

"I told you we should have brought the strollers," Charlie whispered to me through

gritted teeth.

“So they could complain about that too? No thanks.” I smiled at the rest of our family. “I think we’re going to head back to the house for the afternoon, then come back when these three are feeling refreshed, but you should all stay and have fun.”

Mrs. Miller waved a hand at us. “Nonsense. I’ll come with you.”

I gave Charlie a look before trying my best to fake a smile for her mom. “You really don’t have to do that.” Seriously. Please don’t.

“I don’t mind one bit. I could also use the break.”

My mom must have noticed the panic in my eyes because she gave me a knowing smile. “You know what? I could use a break too. Why don’t us girls head back to the house and the boys can stay here? The more hands the better, right?” Aka she knows I don’t want to be stuck with just my mother-in-law. Thank you, Mom.

“That sounds like a great idea. Thank you so much, Mama Cooper,” Charlie said before I had the chance to respond. As what appeared to be a last minute thought, she smiled at her mom as well. “And Mom. Thank you.”

Charlie, my mom, and I each picked up a child and headed toward the exit. We had almost made it when Olivia spotted a gift shop. “Ears! Ears!” she shouted as she pointed toward the store and tried to wiggle out of Charlie’s arms.

Charlie fought to keep Olivia in her arms as she picked up her pace. “Not now, sweetie.”

Mrs. Miller put a hand on Charlie’s arm, bringing her to an abrupt stop. Instead of addressing Charlie, she looked at Olivia. “Do you want Mickey ears, sweetie?”

Olivia bounced up and down even more as she nodded her head up and down. “Ears!”

“Then let’s go get you some ears!”

If looks could kill, Mrs. Miller probably would have been hit by a rogue set of Mickey ears at that exact moment with the way Charlie was glaring at her. “Mom, the kids are exhausted. They can get the ears later. We need to get them back to the house so they can nap.”

“They can nap anytime. We’re in Disney. They need Mickey ears.”

Charlie looked at me for back up, but I was too tired to fight, so I simply shrugged. Charlie glared at me the same way she had at her mom just a few seconds ago. “Fine. They can get ears, but since you suggested it, you’re buying them, Mom.”

“Fine with me.” Mrs. Miller smiled widely as she reached out her arms toward Charlie to take Olivia from her. “You know how much I love to spoil my favorite little grandbabies.”

When Mrs. Miller walked away, I bumped my hip against Charlie’s. “I’m sorry. We have a whole week here, so I’m trying to choose my battles wisely with your mother.”

Charlie sighed and her body softened. “No, I’m sorry. I’m just tired, and she has this way of always getting under my skin.”

“I can’t imagine why,” I joked.

“Be nice,” my mom whispered in my ear from behind me.

“I’m always nice.” I turned toward my mom then looked between Ronan and Carter.

“Do you two want to pick out some Mickey ears?”

Ronan shouted yes at the same time Carter said please much more quietly. Luckily, it didn't take long for them each to pick out which set of ears they wanted.

As Mrs. Cooper walked to the check out with all three sets of ears, she stopped in front of the Disney Pride display which was adorned with an assortment of rainbow Disney merchandise. I held my breath as I waited for her to make a rude comment or at least huff and walk away.

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“Well, isn’t this cute?” she said as she looked over the display. “Disney Pride. I love it. Why do you think they chose rainbows?”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times because I wasn’t sure if that was a trick question. Does she even know what this display is for?

She picked up a pair of rainbow Disney ears and put them on, smiling at herself in the mirror as she spun to look at them from all angles. “I love these. I’m going to get them.”

“For... yourself?” Charlie asked. “Mom, you do know this is the Pride collection, right? Don’t get me wrong. I’m really happy you want to get them. I’m just surprised.”

“Why would you be surprised, honey? I’m excited to show my Disney pride.”

Charlie wrinkled her nose and furrowed her eyebrows. “Disney pride? As in pride in Disney?”

“Of course.” Her mother waved her hand in front of the display. “That’s what all of this is for, right? Pride in Disney. Must be some sort of anniversary celebration.”

Charlie opened her mouth to respond, but I nudged her in the side to stop her. “That’s exactly what they are for. You should totally buy them.” I had to work to hold back my laughter as I lied through my teeth.

I didn’t feel bad at all when Charlie’s mom added them to the pile of other ears she

was buying. If you don't support your gay children enough to know that rainbows and pride are all about us gays, then you deserve to be lied to.

When I focused my attention on Charlie, I was sad to see that she didn't seem to find it as funny as I did. Of course. I could have slapped myself. She was disappointed. For a moment, she probably let herself believe that her mom actually wanted to support her.

"I'm sorry she didn't want the ears for the reason she should want them."

Charlie shrugged, a forced smile parting her lips. "It's okay. I should have known she didn't realize what they were for. She's getting better, but she's far from being a PFLAG mom."

"She might not actually be one, but she sure does look the part." I pointed over to where Charlie's mom was now proudly wearing her rainbow Mickey ears.

Just as I hoped, a real smile replaced Charlie's fake one. "Have I mentioned how much I love you?"

"Just a few times, but I like to hear it."

When we went back to Magic Kingdom that night with three well-rested kids, Charlie's mom was still wearing the ears.

Both Jamie and Ethan's eyes went comically wide when they saw her. "Is Mom wearing gay Mickey ears?" Jamie whispered to Charlie at a volume loud enough for me to hear as well.

I put my finger up to my mouth. “Shh. She doesn’t know what they’re for.”

“James, what do you think of my ears?” Mrs. Miller asked in a sing-song voice.

Jamie put both thumbs in the air. “Very nice, Mom. They are very fitting for you. I love them. You should probably wear them all the time.”

“I think I might. I’ve gotten so many compliments.”

For the rest of the week, Charlie’s mom wore those ears proudly (with absolutely no clue what she was proud of). I was pretty sure Mr. Miller was smart enough to figure out what the ears represented, but even he didn’t say anything.

I was starting to believe the ears might be magical since we made it through a whole vacation with my in-laws without any major issues. I was having so much fun. Charlie, Jamie, Ethan, and I had only dipped into the brownies once and it was after our parents and the kids went to sleep one night.

As we got ready for our last night, which we were spending just as we started the week—at Magic Kingdom—I took a deep breath and mentally patted myself on the back for such a successful vacation. Big mistake. I should have known there was no way this trip could go by without a hitch. Honestly, I should have been waiting for something to go wrong, because inevitably, something always did.

I went downstairs to find Charlie struggling to get Olivia’s shoes on her. “Seriously?” she groaned when Olivia pulled her foot away just as she was trying to fasten the Velcro buckle.

I heard what sounded like a rip and then the shoe flew across the room. I rubbed Charlie’s arm as I walked past her. “I’ll fight Olivia and you can start working on the other two.”

When I picked up the shoe, I realized what the ripping sound was. The buckle had ripped off the shoe enough that it would be impossible to get them to stay on her anymore. I held the shoe in the air. “We had a casualty. I’ll have to get another pair.”

“I’ll do it,” Mrs. Miller said, hopping from the couch as if it was on fire.

“Are you sure you don’t mind? They’re on the floor of the closet in our bedroom.”

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“Of course I don’t mind.” Mrs. Miller held her hand out toward Olivia. “Do you want to come with me?”

Of course, Olivia agreed, and she pretty much dragged her grandma up the stairs. I looked at my watch after what felt like forever and noticed that it had been over five minutes since they went up.

“How long does it take to grab a pair of shoes?” I asked as the seconds ticked by on my watch.

“Not this long. We shouldn’t have trusted my mother to go up there.”

“I mean, what’s she going to do? It’s not like she’s going to go through our stuff.” I laughed, but when I saw the look on Charlie’s face, the laughter immediately faded. “Shit.”

“Shit is right.” Charlie looked toward the stairs and cleared her throat, her voice going up in both volume and tone the next time she spoke. “Mom? Everything okay up there?”

“Coming, Charlotte.” Her mom’s voice didn’t sound guilty, as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn’t. Instead, she sounded almost annoyed.

When she came down the stairs, she shook her head. “I have a bone to pick with you two.” She waved a finger at both me and Charlie, but the smallest smirk parted her lips. “Why would you hide brownies in your closet so no one else in the family could have them? Especially your kids. That’s just mean.”

“You didn’t give Olivia one, did you?” Charlie asked, the panic in her voice matching the intense thudding of my heart. We would never risk our children getting into our special treats, hence why they were hidden in the closet, high enough for them never to be able to reach, and under a pile of clothes. You would have to search to find them, which Charlie’s mom clearly did.

“Of course not, sweetie,” Mrs. Miller said with a laugh. “I would never do that without your permission.”

Thank god. My heart rate slowed down, and I felt like I could breathe again.

“Of course, I did take one for myself, and let me tell you. It was amazing.”

Holy shit.

Chapter 5

Charlie

Without saying a word, I grabbed Reagan’s hand and pulled her up the stairs. I didn’t stop until we were in our bedroom with the door shut safely behind us.

I dropped her hand and ran my own through my hair as I paced back and forth across our room. My mom had just eaten a pot brownie. My mom... super conservative... permanent stick up her ass... in less than an hour she would most likely be as high as a kite. And now I had to explain to her why she was high. I had to tell her that her daughter, who she was too conservative to even fully accept for being gay, had brought weed along on their family vacation. Sure, I understood that weed wasn’t some hard drug, but I was pretty positive my mother wouldn’t understand that.

I didn’t even know if Reagan’s parents would understand that. Oh god. What if they

hate me? What if we lost the one set of parents that actually supported us? I knew I was spiraling and my thoughts were going out of control, but I couldn't stop them.

I stopped pacing and turned to face Reagan. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

"So, I've been considering that. And I think we need to tell everyone what happened right now. Well, everyone except your mom."

"You want to tell everyone here except the person who is actually getting high?"

"I also don't want to tell our children."

I didn't try to hide my eye roll from Reagan. This was no time to be joking around. "Obviously. I just don't understand why we would tell everyone but my mom."

"I figure there's no sense in hiding it from anyone else since I'm sure it will become pretty obvious once it hits. My parents are pretty liberal about things, so I highly doubt they'll care that much. I'm sure your dad is a different story, but whatever. He needs to know."

My patience was wearing thin because Reagan wasn't addressing the most important point. I waved my hand at her as I wiggled around in anticipation. "Okay. Fine. But what about my mom?"

"If we tell your mom now, she is going to get all up in her head about it and as soon as that high hits, I guarantee she will be super paranoid. Remember that time you took more than you meant to and you spent the whole time you were high convinced you were going to die?"

"Of course." Lord, that was a terrible three hours. Thank god Reagan had finally convinced me to go to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, I was, to no one's

surprise, still alive.

“I feel like the same thing will happen to your mom. Honestly, it could happen either way, but I think if we wait until it hits, we’ll have a better chance of a giddy high than an impending doom high.”

“Okay, that makes sense.” Surprisingly, it really did. Plus, at least that gave me more time until I had to feel my mother’s wrath.

We spent the next few minutes taking family members aside to explain what had happened. Jamie and Ethan had obviously already figured it out. Reagan’s parents scolded us about being more careful, and expressed concern for my mom, but I was also fairly certain they were trying to hold back smiles. My dad of course freaked out to the point that he almost gave away what was happening, but, luckily, we were able to calm him down enough to keep him quiet.

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My mom's high hit as soon as we walked into Magic Kingdom. I could tell by the face she made that closely resembled Raven Simone when she had a vision in episodes of the old Disney show, That's So Raven.

"Whoa, I feel funny," she said as she grabbed my arm, most likely since I was the person standing closest to her. "I'm kind of dizzy, but," she brought her hand up to her mouth and giggled. An honest to god giggle. Definitely a sound I never expected to hear from my mom. "It also feels kind of nice. It's like I'm fl—" Her words cut off as her eyes squinted at something in the distance. "Are the lights different tonight? They look so pretty."

My dad glared at me as Reagan and I pulled my mom off to the side to finally tell her the truth. "So, here's the thing." I cleared my throat as I thought about what to say. "It turns out those brownies had a certain ingredient in them. Hence, why we weren't sharing them with anyone else."

"Ingredient? What kind of ingredient?" My mother giggled once again. "Paprika? What a funny word. Puh-pree-kuh."

"No, Mom, it wasn't paprika."

"Well, then what was it?" my mom asked, her face crinkled in total confusion, as if paprika was the only option of what could have been in those brownies.

"It was, um..." I trailed off as my breathing picked up. How was I going to tell my mom that I had accidentally gotten her high?

“Pot,” Reagan finished for me. When my mom just stared at her dumbfounded, Reagan cleared her throat like I had done just a moment before. “You know. Um. Weed. Marijuana. It was baked into the brownies.”

My mom stared at both of us, unblinking, for a very long time. With every second that passed, my heart beat faster and more sweat accumulated all over my body. Then, much to my surprise, my mom started to laugh. This wasn’t the same as the giggles from before. This was a full belly laugh, as if being told she was high was the funniest thing in the world.

“Wow. I’m surprised I didn’t recognize this feeling. I guess after all of these years, who could blame me?”

“Wait, Mom. You’ve...” I tried to wrap my head around what was happening. There was no way she was saying what I thought she was. “Are you saying...? Have you had pot before?”

My mom laughed even harder now. She bent over and put her hands on her knees as if she couldn’t handle how funny this was. “I lived through the seventies, Charlotte. Of course I’ve had marijuana.”

I looked at Reagan in disbelief, and she broke into laughter as well. When I leaned in closer to her to ask what we should do now, she thrust a fistful of gummies at me. When she opened it, she was holding one of our gummy edibles. She nodded toward it. “Take it. I guarantee this is the only time you’ll be able to say you got high with your mom.”

“Is that something I want to be able to say?” I asked with a laugh.

Reagan shrugged. “It’ll make for a great story some day.”

“What about the kids?”

“They’ll have six fully functioning adults to take care of them. That’s still two per child. We’ll be fine.”

She wiggled the gummy in front of me. “After everything you’ve put up with throughout your life, you deserve this one night.”

“You know what? You’re right.” I popped the gummy into my mouth without giving it another thought. Tomorrow was most likely going to suck and I had no question both of my parents were going to lecture me as if I was back in high school. I might as well enjoy myself now.

Of course my high hit forty-five minutes later when we were right in the middle of the haunted mansion. “Did my high just hit or is that piano playing itself?” I asked as I blinked my eyes to try to focus on it. My eyes quickly shifted when I saw candles floating in the air. Oh yeah. I’m definitely high. “Holy shit.”

Before Reagan could respond my mom yelled to us from the car ahead of ours. “How cool is this?”

“The coolest!” I yelled back.

Reagan laughed beside me as my mouth dropped in awe of the ghosts. When the ride ended, my mom waited for me to walk up to her and gave me a high five that was so big, it made my hand tingle.

My mom kept a hold of my hand after the high five and pulled me behind her. “It’s a small world next!” she yelled while pointing in the direction of the ride (or what I assumed must be the direction).

We somehow found our way to the ride, even with my mom leading the pack. When I was assured that the three grandparents that weren't high were taking care of my kids, I jumped in the small world boat right after my mom.

My mom and I were both silent as the familiar music started. After a few minutes, my mom leaned closer to me. "Do you think they have souls?"

"The animatronics?" I asked as I watched their stilted movements. I could see my mom nodding out of the corner of my eye. "Probably." The more I thought about it, the more it freaked me out. "What if they steal our souls?"

"They could," my mom answered nonchalantly as if it was the most normal conversation in the world.

Clearly, neither of us were overly concerned about it, because by the end of the ride, we were singing along with the song and trying to mimic the characters' stilted dance moves.

When the ride came to a stop, Reagan held her hand out to me and helped me off the boat. "How are you doing?"

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“I feel like my soul has been sucked from my body.”

Reagan laughed as she continued to hold my hand tightly. “I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“Honestly, me either.”

“It’s fireworks time,” my mom practically shouted into my ear as my dad guided her in the same way Reagan was guiding me.

I pointed my thumb between Reagan and my dad. “We’ve got some good ones here, don’t we?”

“We sure do,” my mom said with a wink.

I smiled in satisfaction until it hit me what she had just said, then my jaw fell to the ground. “Wait. Do you really mean it?”

“Of course I do.” My mom pulled away from my dad to put her arm around Reagan. “Reagan is my girl.”

Reagan put her arm around my mom as well. “Yeah, Charlie. We’re girls.”

I watched as my mom and wife walked together with their arms still draped over each other’s shoulders. Reagan leaned in and whispered something to my mom that she threw her head back in laughter in response to. It was like watching what my life could be like if my mom actually acted like a normal human, and I loved it. There

was a pull in my chest as I longed for this to be my reality. Who knows? Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and it will be. I immediately laughed at myself. Even high, I wasn't naive enough to believe that would be the case.

Reagan looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. "Everything okay back there?"

"Everything is great."

"Get up here." My mom waved her hand at me. "I want to watch the fireworks with my two daughters."

I did as I was told, a smile forming that was so big, it made my face hurt, as I skipped to catch up to Reagan and my mom. While I would never encourage anyone to purposely drug their mom, I couldn't help but be thankful for this night. It was, by far, one of the best nights of my life.

"Charlotte, please come out here."

At first I had no idea why my mom was lightly tapping on my door and insisting on seeing me before the sun even came up. I was certain I would have heard if my kids were awake, which meant it was even too early for them. What the hell?

All at once, it hit me. The memories from the night before flooded my mind and played out in front of me as if I was watching a movie. It honestly would have been a pretty funny movie if I didn't have the impending conversation with my mom.

"Coming," I said as calmly as possible, even though, in reality, my heart was beating out of my chest.

I am a thirty-four-year-old woman with a doctorate, a wife, and three children. Why am I still terrified of my mother?

When I opened the bedroom door, my mom was standing outside of it tapping her foot on the ground. Gone was the carefree woman from the night before. Back was the uptight mom I was all too familiar with.

“About last night...” I started. Might as well get this over with.

“Yes. That’s why I’m here. To tell you that we will not be speaking of last night.” She paused for a moment then cleared her throat. “Ever.”

I could feel my body relax. This really was the best case scenario. I was expecting much worse from her. “That works for me.”

“Good.” My mother nodded toward the doorway, her body rigid and mouth in a straight line. “You may go back to sleep now.”

As I began to walk back into the bedroom, I could feel my relief mixing with something else—disappointment. Even though I knew it was for the best that we didn’t talk about it since I was sure it wouldn’t be a positive conversation, there was part of me that didn’t want to forget last night. I wanted to grab onto that side of my mother and never let her go. I wanted to know if she really meant everything she said last night. Maybe underneath all of her deep-seated homophobia, she was actually a human who wanted a real relationship with me and my wife, not just the surface-level bullshit from the past few years.

I guess I would never find out. Still, I couldn’t stop myself from turning around to look at my mom once more. Even though I knew all of our problems couldn’t be solved by one night of debauchery together, the woman standing in front of me still appeared different somehow. I didn’t know if I would ever see my mom the same

again, and in this case, that was a good thing.

“I know you’ll probably get mad at me for saying this, but for what it’s worth, I had a really great time with you last night.”

My mom’s face remained serious as she pointed a finger at me. Great. Here comes the lecture.

“I will deny ever saying this, but,” her face softened and a smile parted her lips, “I had a really good time, too.” She winked at me then turned around without another word, leaving me to wonder if the past fourteen hours had been one prolonged dream.

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When I crawled back into bed, Reagan was sitting up with her iPad resting on her knees. Her eyes were laser-focused and her eyebrows furrowed, but there was the slightest smile on her face.

I rested my head on her shoulder and looked down at the drawing of two women walking hand in hand through the woods. “That’s beautiful.”

Reagan’s smile grew as she moved her eyes to meet mine. “You really think so?”

“Of course.” How could she even question that? The sky was filled with hues of orange and yellow. One of the women was looking out in front of her while the other was looking over at her. I could actually see the love in the character’s eyes. I didn’t know that was possible, but Reagan had somehow done it. “Is this for another one of Kinsley’s books?”

“No. This is for a different author.” Reagan’s face lit up and her eyes practically bulged out of her head. “Speaking of Kinsley, though, apparently my copy of her book got delivered yesterday. I’m so excited to see it. My artwork on a real book. A real book by my favorite author. It’s like a dream come true.”

I loved seeing the passion in her eyes as she spoke. I didn’t realize how much that was missing until she got it back. “That’s so exciting, babe. We definitely need to celebrate when we get home.” I grabbed her hand and placed kisses across her knuckles. “I love seeing you so happy.”

“I feel like I finally found my passion. This is what I was looking for all this time. I truly can’t thank you enough for being patient with me as I figured it out, and

honestly, for continuing to be patient. I know the money I'm making isn't significant right now, but it's definitely picking up. I have no doubt I'll be able to make a living from this and provide for our family the way I need to."

"I just want you to be happy. I wasn't actually as patient as I should have been with you, and I'm happy my mood didn't discourage you from pursuing this. You deserve the world."

"So do you, Charlie." Reagan's face became more serious as her eyes looked deep into mine. "Which is why we need to start seriously talking about buying a new practice for you. I know we've been doing more than okay with your fill-in work, but I also know that's not what you're passionate about. We need to get you back into working with kids again. The times you filled in at that pediatric clinic over the past few months, I could see the difference when you came home. You pretty much floated through the house. I want that for you all the time."

Her words reminded me of something I hadn't discussed with her yet, because it didn't seem like a possibility, but now that she had brought it up, there was no use keeping it in. "Speaking of which, the doctor who owns that practice is retiring soon and looking for someone to buy it. He said if I want it, he'll stop looking and we'll figure out a price together." I shook my head and looked down at the comforter. "He wants to retire sooner than later though, so it's probably not meant to be. I don't think we're at a place where I should be doing this. It's too much."

"Bullshit."

My head shot up at the sound of Reagan's voice.

"If you wait for everything to be perfect, it's never going to happen. Jump now. Think later. Do I have to remind you once again how well that has worked out for us in the past? What if we had decided with all of the other shit going on that it wasn't the

right time for us to be together?”

“I believe you tried to decide that for us,” I reminded Reagan, laughing as I thought back on the memories of the two of us getting together.

“Andy told me I was being an idiot, thank god, so I’m going to do the same for you now. You’re going to buy that practice. We still have money in savings from selling the other one, plus we can take out a business loan. We’ll figure it out. Even if I have to sell my soul to Nana to get the money, we’re going to make this happen.”

“Wow. I’m just…” Honestly, I was speechless. “Wow.”

Reagan playfully nudged me in the side. “Is that a yes?”

“Yeah. Yes! Let’s do it.”

Before we could celebrate more, my phone rang. “Who would be calling us this early?” I asked as I fumbled around in the bed trying to follow the sound to find my phone. I held it up to Reagan when I saw the name. Mary Beth. “Do you think this is it?” I asked, my body instinctively bouncing up and down from the giddiness I was feeling.

“It has to be, right?”

Ever since Mary Beth told us that Jackie had planned a trip to London for the two of them, Reagan and I figured that meant she was finally proposing. I couldn’t think of any other reason she would call us so early, so I quickly picked up the phone.

“Hey! What’s up?” I tried to keep my voice level in case this was somehow bad news instead of the good news we were expecting.

“We’re engaged!” Mary Beth and Jackie yelled in unison.

Called it.

“That’s amazing!” I said at the same time Reagan said, “Congrats, you two.”

They apologized for calling us so early then told us about how Jackie woke Mary Beth up with a huge breakfast and proposed while they ate it out on the balcony of their hotel.

The story was so sweet, I thought I might actually start to cry. “Aw. I love it so much.”

“Yeah, we’re super happy for you two,” Reagan added.

“The wedding probably won’t be for a few years since our priority right now is taking over my family’s farm and building a new house on the property, but obviously when we set a date you two will be the first to know.”

Obviously. The word made me giggle. Mary Beth and I had come a long way since the time she confessed she was in love with me in front of my whole family right after I was caught with my hand down Reagan’s pants. Good times.

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We talked for a few more minutes before saying our goodbyes so they could call the rest of their friends and family.

“What an exciting day already,” Reagan said as soon as I hung up the phone.

“Yeah, really.” I laid my head against her shoulder and let out a long sigh. I was so content. This, right here, was my happy place. “Does life get any better than this?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

I smiled even wider now. I couldn’t wait to see what was to come.

Chapter 6

Reagan

2 years later

“Who would’ve thought all those years ago when you came to visit with yourboyfriendJamie that you would one day be going to his ex-girlfriend's wedding?”

I laughed as I struggled with my tie. “What I’m more surprised by is that I’m at the wedding ofyourfirst love.”

Charlie put her arms around me from behind and rested her chin on my shoulder as we both looked into the mirror. “Mary Beth wasnotmy first love. She was just the person who took my virginity.”

“Still a pretty big deal.” I lifted an eyebrow so Charlie could see it in the mirror.
“Should I be jealous?”

“Hm. Maybe.” Charlie tapped her finger against her chin. “I do enjoy a woman in a nice dress.”

“What about a woman in a suit?”

Charlie ran her hands up and down the front of my body, making me wish I wasn’t wearing said suit. “I enjoy that even more.” She reached up and squeezed my boobs and god, why does there have to be so much fabric between those hands and my skin? “But in this situation, I actually enjoy it much more when you’re not wearing any clothes.”

I groaned and turned around to face her. “You can’t say things like that or we’re going to miss the wedding.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time we were late for a celebration,” Charlie joked, her hands continuing to explore my body as my willpower dwindled.

I laughed at the memory. “I really thought your brother was going to kill us when he realized why we were late for the reception.”

“Eh. Whatever. Wasn’t the first time he wanted to kill us.”

“And I’m sure it won’t be the last either.”

“So, is that a yes?” Charlie asked as she moved her hand over the front of my pants.

Stay strong, Reagan. You can do it. I looked at my watch to see if there was any chance we could get the deed done quick enough to not miss the beginning of the

wedding. Shit. Not possible. I groaned once again. “I hate to be the mature one, but we really shouldn’t.”

Charlie stuck her bottom lip out at me. “Boo. I don’t like when you’re the mature one either.” She reached up and fixed my tie for me. “But I’ll forgive you since you look so good today.”

“Just today?” I joked.

Charlie rolled her eyes at me. “Fishing for compliments, I see. Obviously, you look amazing every day, but this suit is really doing it for me.” She licked her lips as she ran her eyes up and down my body.

“I can tell.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the hotel room to keep myself from doing what I desperately wanted to do.

The wedding ceremony and reception were taking place on the farm that Mary Beth and Jackie now owned together, and they had it decorated beautifully. The ceremony was quick, but sweet, and I could feel the love radiating from the two of them.

“What a wedding, huh?” Jamie asked as we walked beside him and Ethan over to the area where they were having the reception.

I nodded. “Super beautiful.”

“Mom’s going to be pissed that it was nice.”

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Charlie laughed. "Is she still salty over not being invited?"

"Oh god, yeah. That's all I've heard about recently. You're so lucky you don't live nearby. She's been even more insufferable than usual."

"I don't know. I think she might be getting better."

Jamie rolled his eyes at his sister. "You're only saying that because you guys had that high moment two years ago and have had some weird bond ever since."

"I think the word bond is a bit strong, but it definitely didn't hurt our relationship." Charlie shrugged. "She was annoying about the fact that we decided to get a hotel rather than staying at their house, but I'm just thankful they're watching all three kids until tomorrow morning."

"Why are you staying at a hotel?" Jamie asked as he looked between me and his sister. "I get not wanting to stay with Mom and Dad, but you're obviously always welcome to stay at our place."

I felt a smirk cross my face as I thought about all of the ways I could answer that, most of which would make Jamie physically ill. "Do you want the real answer or what we told your parents? Because the real answer is that your sister just keeps getting better looking with age, so we need some alone time. Trust me when I tell you that you don't want to hear the sounds I plan to pull from her tonight."

As expected, Jamie cringed at my words. "Ew. I'm so sorry I asked."

He turned toward Ethan, clearly looking for backup, but Ethan put his hands up as if he was surrendering. “I could have told you not to ask that. How long have you two been friends? Close to twenty years? I don’t understand how you haven’t learned by now.”

“In my defense, it didn’t bother me before she started saying these things about mysister.”

“Consider this a prolonged payback for waiting so long to tell me you had a sister.”

Jamie pointed between me and Charlie. “Can you blame me? It took you like a week to swoop in on her.”

“What can I say?” I smiled at Charlie and pulled her tight up against me. “I see what I like and I go for it. And in case it wasn’t obvious by now, I like her a lot.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jamie said sarcastically. “We all know. After all this time you’re still madly in love. Yada yada.”

I kicked my foot against Jamie’s. “You love it. Don’t act like you don’t.”

“Fine. You’re right. I do.” He pointed a finger at me as if he was a parent about to lecture their child. “But no more oversharing.”

“No promises,” I said with a wink before dipping Charlie and giving her a long kiss that was so disgustingly romantic it made me weak in the knees.

When we reached the reception area, there was a large sign that had the table assignments written on it. As we searched for our names, a middle-aged woman walked up beside us. One look at her told me she had to be related to Jackie, because they looked eerily similar.

“Hello,” she said sweetly as she smiled at us. “I’m Jackie’s Aunt Dawn. I don’t believe we met. How do you all know the brides?”

“That’s actually a very funny story,” I said, unable to resist.

Charlie threw a hand over my mouth as she focused her attention on Dawn. “It’s really not that funny.” She used her free hand to point between her, Jamie, and Ethan. “The three of us graduated with Mary Beth.”

Dawn clapped her hands together as if this was the best news she ever heard. “A friendship that has stood the test of time. So sweet.”

Oh lady, you don’t know the half of it. Instead of risking my life by saying something else, I simply smiled and nodded.

We made small talk with Dawn for a few minutes before heading in the direction of our table.

“You weren’t really going to tell her the truth of how we know Mary Beth, were you?” Charlie whispered as we walked.

“Just the bullet points—Jamie did the dating. You did the banging.” I said it loud enough that Jamie and Ethan would hear, too.

Jamie shook his head at me, but he chuckled after only a few seconds of trying to keep a straight face. “It’s amazing how you have three kids, and still have the maturity of a high school boy.”

“Speaking of kids...” I raised both of my eyebrows at Jamie so he knew I meant business. “When are you two going to have some?”

“I’m not sure.” Jamie shook his head again, but this time let out a dramatic sigh. “I’ve been trying to knock Ethan up for months, and it just doesn’t seem to be working for some reason.”

“Maybe you’re using the wrong door.”

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Charlie spit out the water she had just taken a sip of. “Ew.”

I couldn’t hide my pride at grossing out both of the Miller twins. “I know, right? Why are you drinking water when there’s a bar over there?”

Ethan handed Charlie a napkin off of our table to clean up the water she had gotten on her dress then turned toward me. “To answer your question, we only want one, and our plan is to adopt within the next few years. We just want to get a few things in order first.”

I nodded in understanding. Good for people who actually thought through their life plans. “That’s a much smarter idea than diving right into trying for kids and ending up with three before you’ve even been married for two years.”

“But they’re so cute,” Ethan said as he pushed out his bottom lip. Clearly his baby fever was much worse than Jamie’s.

“They really are.” I took out my phone and started showing them the millions of pictures I had taken since the last time we saw them.

We continued to do this until the DJ announced it was time for the couple to be introduced. When he said, “I present to you for the first time as wives, Mrs. and Mrs. Royerford,” we all leapt to our feet and hoots and hollers filled the barn.

We watched as Mary Beth and Jackie weaved their way through the tables out to the makeshift dance floor, where they immediately went into their first dance. I instinctively brought my arm around Charlie’s waist and held her tight up against me

as we watched them sway to the music.

“Do you remember our first dance?” I asked, leaning in to kiss her temple.

Charlie sighed and pushed her body even closer to mine. “Of course. How could I ever forget?”

The music continued, but I wasn’t watching the happy couple anymore. My eyes were stuck on the woman next to me; the one who had made all of my dreams come true. This was one of those moments I had to pinch myself to remind myself that this was actually real. Life gets crazy and sometimes it feels like I’m just going through the motions, but it’s times like these that bring me back to earth and remind me how lucky I am.

I gave Charlie another kiss. “Do you know how much I love you?”

“I think I do, but maybe later, you could show me.” She gently bumped her hip against mine.

I instinctively licked my lips at the thought. “There’s nothing I want to do more.”

“Nothing you want to do more than what?” Charlie asked in a teasing whisper, clearly aware of what my answer was going to be.

“You,” I whispered, making sure to keep my voice extra breathy.

Charlie shivered beside me and it sent a chill through my body as well. I loved that we both still had this effect on each other. I was so caught up in my own thoughts, I didn’t even realize that the first dance had ended and now Mary Beth and Jackie were dancing with their dads.

Halfway through the song, they switched partners, and it amazed me how comfortable they all looked together. I wondered what it was like to have normal in-laws.

Charlie's parents had grown a lot from the first time I met them (her dad more than her mom), but they would never be my favorite people. That didn't matter though. I was happy to sacrifice good in-laws to get to spend my life with Charlie.

And, hey, at least my brother-in-law was okay. I chuckled to myself as I thought about how full circle my life had come. Who knew the guy I met freshman year of college who thought he was much cooler than he actually was would someday be family? I chuckled softly at the thought. This life.

"What are you thinking about?" Charlie whispered just a moment later.

"Your brother," I answered honestly.

Charlie pulled away from me slightly and scrunched up her nose at me. "Not the answer I was expecting."

I took this new angle as an opportunity to lean in and capture her lips with mine. "Don't worry, babe. You're still my number two Miller. After Nana, of course."

Charlie leaned into me once again. "Of course. Nana is everyone's number one."

After the first dances were done, the DJ told us to sit and they began to bring out our food while the toasts were made. Jackie's man of honor was her brother and his speech contained a lot of jokes about all of the signs of his sister being gay. Near the end, he became more serious as he talked about how lucky Jackie was to have found Mary Beth, how perfect they were for each other, and how lucky he felt to now have her as part of their family. Mary Beth's maid of honor was a cousin of hers who I had

obviously never met named Nicole. Honestly, I had never even heard about her which made me wonder how close they could really be.

“Who is this long lost cousin?” I asked Charlie as I listened to the speech that was actually ridiculously funny.

“It’s Nicole Dawson. Well, I guess going by her introduction, it’s now Nicole Dawson-Fields. I actually forgot they were cousins. Nicole went to a high school about thirty minutes from us and was a super athlete. She was also super cocky. When we were in high school, Mary Beth couldn’t stand her, but I think they’ve bonded over the fact that they’re both gay.” Charlie’s eyes went wide as if she had just made a major discovery. “Oh my gosh. I just realized who her wife is. It’s Courtney Fields.” She said it so bluntly as if that was someone that everyone knew.

“Should that name mean something to me?”

Charlie shook her head. “No, sorry. It was an internal realization. Courtney Fields was also super athletic. Although, I’m pretty positive they didn’t go to the same school. I wonder how they met.”

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“I guess we’ll just have to ask.” I was always down for meeting more gay people. I just never expected them to be at this wedding. I really thought we were the only gay people Mary Beth knew. “I can’t believe I didn’t know Mary Beth had a gay cousin.”

“Like I said, they were never super close. I’m actually surprised she would make her the maid of honor.”

“Maybe it’s because two of the people she’s closest to are the guy she dated in high school and the girl she banged. Knowing Mary Beth, she would probably want to avoid having to explain either of those relationships to anyone.”

Charlie snorted quietly beside me. “Probably.”

“We should introduce ourselves to Nicole and her wife, so we have more gay people to hang out with when we come to visit Maryland. I could always use a little extra gayness when we’re stuck here.”

“Don’t you get enough of that at Ethan’s cafe?”

“No. I realize it’s the hang out place for all five gay people within a hundred mile radius, but it’s also overflowing with heteros.”

“Ew,” Charlie responded, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

“I know, right? Disgusting.”

After the speeches were over and everyone was busy eating, Charlie and I made our

way to the table Mary Beth's cousin was sitting at. We decided to act like we just wanted to tell her how good her speech was so we didn't look like the weirdo gays who sought out other gays wherever they went (which was exactly what we were).

Charlie lightly tapped on Nicole's back when we made it to the table. When she turned around, Charlie smiled at her. "We just wanted to come over and tell you how much we enjoyed your speech. I'm Charlie and this is my wife, Reagan."

A large smile that appeared almost devilish spread across Nicole's face. "The infamous Charlie. I've heard so much about you."

Charlie giggled, but there was definitely a strain to it. "I'm not sure whether I should be flattered or worried."

"Honestly, probably a little of both." Nicole winked at Charlie and if she hadn't been sitting by her wife, I probably would have assumed she was flirting with her.

Charlie put her hands over her face and shook her head. "I'd like to say it's all lies, but I'm sure it's true."

"Nothing to be embarrassed about. I've loved all of the stories I've heard. I was actually hoping I would get to meet you here. I was pissed when Mary Beth didn't have a bachelorette party or bridal shower for that reason. Damn her for wanting to make things easier on us parents."

"You have kids?" Charlie asked.

I couldn't help but smile. This was even better than I expected. Not only would we have more gay people to hang out with in Maryland, but gay people with kids.

"My cousin really doesn't talk about me, huh?" Nicole teased. She pointed across the

room where two girls who appeared to be around five or six years old were sitting at a table with other children from Mary Beth's family. "Those are our kind of twin girls, Alice and Shaun."

"Kind of?" I asked. I knew she had more so been addressing Charlie since we hadn't been formally introduced, but I was intrigued since I didn't know there was such a thing as kind of being twins.

Nicole laughed at my question. "My wife and I accidentally got pregnant at the same time and our daughters happened to be born on the exact same day. Speaking of which," Nicole held her hand out toward me and pointed the thumb of her other hand at the woman sitting next to her. "I'm being super rude right now. I'm Nicole and this is my wife, Courtney."

"No worries at all. It's nice to meet both of you. I need to ask though. How do you accidentally get pregnant at the same time? How did you get accidentally pregnant at all?"

Nicole laughed again. "Okay, so it wasn't completely an accident. We were both technically trying to get pregnant in hopes that it would take in one of us. Never in a million years did we actually think it would work in both of us and we'd be pregnant at the same time. We live a pretty crazy life."

I pointed at Charlie. "We know all about that. When we attempted to get pregnant with our first child, we got much more than we bargained for as well—two more than we bargained for to be exact."

Courtney's eyes went wide beside Nicole. "You two have triplets?" When I nodded, she blew out a long breath. "I can barely handle two that are the same age. I don't even want to imagine what it would be like with three. No offense."

I threw my hands in the air. “None taken. It’s a complete shit show.”

Both women laughed as they shared a knowing look. “I’m sure it is,” Nicole said between her laughter.

I pointed to the plates in front of them that were still filled with food. “We’ll let you two get back to eating, but I’m sure we’ll see you out on the dance floor later.”

And that’s exactly what happened. After all of our dinner and many drinks later, I literally bumped into Courtney as Charlie and I attempted to do something that somewhat resembled dancing. “I’m sorry,” I said politely before I turned around and saw who it was I had just run into. With no filter left thanks to the alcohol running through my veins, I put my hand up for a high five. “Hey, it’s our new gay friends.”

Luckily, Courtney seemed to be just as drunk and hit me with a sloppy high five. “It’s me!” She pointed behind me. “Hey, I know you. You own that cafe that Mary Beth took us to last week.”

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I turned around to find that it was Ethan she was addressing. I stepped next to him and proudly put a hand on his shoulder. “This is my brother-in-law, Ethan. He’s married to my other brother-in-law, Jamie. Jamie is Charlie’s brother, but has also been my bestie since college.”

Nicole stepped up beside Courtney and raised an eyebrow. “Oh yes, I’ve heard all about that story.” She looked at Courtney and winked. “I’ll tell you about it later, babe.”

“I’m surprised with living in this area that last week was the first time you’ve ever been to Ethan’s cafe,” Charlie said, clearly attempting to change the subject.

Nicole laughed as if she had just told a joke. “Oh god, we don’t live in Maryland anymore. I love my family and appreciate the place I grew up, but hell no. I had to get out of here. We live in Pennsylvania in a town called King of Prussia. It’s like an hour from Philadelphia. I’m not sure if you’ve heard of it. One of the biggest malls in the country is there.”

“Heard of it?” I laughed hysterically because I couldn’t believe what a small world this was. “We live like thirty-five minutes from there.”

“No way,” Nicole said as she and Courtney laughed along with me.

Courtney put an arm around Charlie and swayed into her. “Now that we are literal besties, I need to tell you something crazy that I just heard from Mary Beth. I’m not sure if you two read, but apparently, sapphic romance goddess Laurel Lake is married to a girl who went to your high school.”

“Oh, we know.” Charlie smirked over at me. “I don’t read, but Reagan does. Speaking of which, do you want to hear something even crazier?” When both Nicole and Courtney nodded, their eyes wide in anticipation, Charlie reached over and squeezed my hand. “We actually met Laurel Lake at an event Ethan hosted a few years ago and this one right here has actually designed the cover of three of her books, one being her newest.”

Both Nicole and Courtney’s eyes went even wider and their mouths dropped open as they stared at me as if I was a celebrity.

“No way,” Nicole said.

“Seriously?” Courtney asked, completely awestruck. “You made the cover for the one coming out next month?”

“Guilty.” No matter how hard I tried, I wasn’t able to hide the proud smile that came to my face.

Nicole and Courtney shared a look before Courtney focused her attention back on me. “That’s literally the most gorgeous book cover I’ve ever seen. We’ve been gushing over it ever since she revealed it. I can’t believe you’re the one who did it. Wow. I feel like I’m in the presence of royalty or something. That’s awesome.”

“What is Laurel like?” Nicole asked. “Is she as funny as she seems to be online?”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Even funnier. She’s such a sarcastic asshole. I love it.”

“Sounds like we’d get along great,” Nicole said.

Courtney laughed and patted her arm. “Oh, for sure. Assholes unite.”

Nicole nudged her wife playfully. “Hey, at least I never broke someone’s nose.”

Courtney looked at us and shook her head. “I promise it’s not what it sounds like. We have quite an interesting backstory.”

“And we definitely want to hear it later,” which wasn’t a lie. I couldn’t believe we found new queer friends who lived near us and were fans of Laurel Lake. I pointed toward the brides that were now walking toward us. “But we need to congratulate the lovebirds first.”

Charlie and I walked hand in hand as we closed the gap between us and the brides. When we were close, I dropped Charlie’s hand and held out my arms. “Congratulations!”

I gave Jackie a hug while Charlie hugged Mary Beth and then we switched. “So, what’s the plan now?” Charlie asked once the hugs were over.

“Well, now that this is all over, we’re going to focus on starting our family,” Jackie explained. “Neither of us want to carry, plus with our age, it would be considered higher risk, so we’re going to adopt.”

“We want a big family,” Mary Beth added excitedly. “At least four or five kids.”

We’ll see if you’re still saying that after you adopt the first one. I bit my tongue and nodded. There was no need to rain on their parade. And, hey, who knew? Maybe someone who didn’t acquire three at one time would be open to more.

“What about you two?” Jackie asked. “How’s the new business?”

“Not so new anymore,” Charlie said with a shake of her head. “We’ve owned it for almost a year now.”

“No way. Time really does fly, huh?” Jackie looked over at me. “Are you still helping out there?”

When Charlie first took over at the practice, I helped with a lot of redecorating then did pretty much any random job she needed me to. Now that she had it up and running more, she didn’t need me quite as much. “I just fill in when someone calls out or goes on vacation.”

Charlie leaned into me and kissed my cheek. “She’s been a huge help. One of the many benefits of having a kick ass wife who works from home.”

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“Speaking of which, how is the graphic designing going? Still getting a bunch of commissions?”

I nodded excitedly. “More and more every day. It’s actually getting hard to keep up.” I didn’t say anything else because I knew if I got started, I wouldn’t be able to stop. I was still so happy with what I was doing for a living. I couldn’t believe there was ever a time I didn’t do it.

After a few minutes, Mary Beth and Jackie moved on to talk to more guests and we spent the rest of the night dancing with Jamie, Ethan, Courtney, and Nicole. When the reception ended, I was so drunk on alcohol and love that I could barely walk straight.

I blinked down at my phone as I tried to open the Uber app to find a ride back to our hotel. Charlie put her hand over the screen so I couldn’t see it. “I have a better idea. Let’s walk to my parents’ house.”

“You want to stay at your parents’ house?” There was no way I heard that right. Charlie had been even more adamant than me about getting a hotel. “What was the point of getting a hotel?”

“We’re still going to stay at the hotel. We’re just going to stop there on the way.” Charlie loosened my tie, then took it off of me and put it around her neck instead. The act was super hot and if she hadn’t just told me she wanted to stop at her parents’, I would have thought she was trying to seduce me.

“No one is even going to be awake at their house.” I needed to think of any excuse not to go there. Charlie looked way too sexy wearing my tie with her dress to

go anywhere with other people.

“That’s kind of the point.” Charlie ran her eyes up and down my body the same way I had caught her doing multiple times throughout the night, and even though it wasn’t the first time, her gaze still set my body on fire. “We’re not even going to go inside. I thought maybe we could reminisce on that first summer we got together.”

“What do you—” My mouth went dry when I realized what Charlie was getting at. “You want to have sex in the lake behind your house.” I swallowed hard, barely able to breathe just at the thought of the first (and only, unfortunately) time we did that.

Charlie had looked so incredibly sexy as she led me to the water that night. Except, the thing was, ten years and three kids later, she was even sexier to me. I wouldn’t have been able to say no if I wanted to, and I definitely didn’t want to. “Let’s do it.”

Charlie and I giggled the whole time we walked to her parents’ house. We tried, and failed, to hold our laughter in as we made our way through the yard. It was as if we were two teenagers who had just snuck out of the house for the first time ever.

We fumbled around as we sloppily removed our clothes. Since Charlie had less to take off, she jumped in before me. Seeing her naked body pop out of the water was enough motivation to get the rest of my clothes off and hop in after her.

Charlie swam over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. “It might not have been our smartest idea to do this after we’ve been drinking all night.”

“I have a solution for that.” I slid my hand between her legs and ran my fingers through her folds. “Why don’t I get you drunk on something other than alcohol?”

Charlie moaned and laid her head on my shoulder. “You don’t need to touch me for me to be drunk on you. I’m always drunk on you.”

“Even after all this time?” I asked softly, my voice cracking since this moment mixed with the alcohol had me on the verge of tears.

Instead of answering right away, Charlie picked her head up and brought her mouth to mine. She kissed me long and hard until I forgot all about where we were. Hell, this kiss was so good it had me forgetting my own name. When she pulled away from the kiss, Charlie stayed still and stared at me silently for what felt like forever. When she finally spoke, her words cracked me open. “Especially after all this time.”

I spent the next hour making love to my wife in the lake behind the house she grew up in. The house where I first met her. The place where we fell in love. This place might have held a lot of bad memories for Charlie, but I hoped she was able to hold dear all of the amazing memories we had made here.

As I held onto her as we both floated in the water (completely spent from what we had just done) and kissed her slowly, I thanked god for bringing me to that awful family reunion all those years ago.

Chapter 7

Charlie

When I woke up the next morning, it took me a minute to remember where I was. I looked around the hotel room as the memories from the night before came flooding back into my mind. The wedding. The lake. The way Reagan looked at me after we made love as if it was the first time all over again. And it really had felt like it was.

I rolled over in bed, expecting her to be beside me, but was surprised when I found nothing but empty space. As if she somehow knew I was looking for her, she walked out of the bathroom at the very moment, already showered and dressed.

“Shit. What time is it?” I moved my hand around the bed as I tried to find my phone.
“Do we need to check out soon?”

Reagan laughed as she walked over to the bed and sat down beside me. “No. Not even close. It’s barely past eight. I couldn’t sleep anymore because I miss the kids.” Before I could say anything, Reagan bumped her shoulder against mine and smirked at me. “I know I couldn’t stop talking about how excited I was to have this night away, but now I can’t stop thinking about how much I miss those cute little faces.”

“Let’s see if you still feel that way when it’s time to put them down for a nap.”

“You mean when we attempt to put them down for an hour then give up and read to Carter while Olivia watches TV and Ronan tries to do flips off of the couch?” Even though I was complaining I still felt a pull of longing as I thought about them. They really were adorable, and I loved their different personalities.

Reagan sighed. “Precisely. Maybe we should give up on the whole napping thing now that they are four. Most things I’ve read say kids stop napping between three and four. We might need to let go of the hope that we can still get them to.”

I pushed my bottom lip out into an exaggerated frown. “But that hope is the only thing that gets me through the morning sometimes.”

Reagan ran her thumb along my lip and smiled. “It also leads to disappointment every time it doesn’t happen.”

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“Very true.” All of this talk of the kids had me itching to see them, so I hopped out of bed. “Do you mind packing while I get ready really quickly? I want to see our little monsters as soon as possible.”

Reagan’s face lit up as she jumped from the bed as well. “There’s nothing I want more.”

Less than an hour later, we pulled into my parents’ driveway, both of us jumping out of the car as soon as it was parked.

“Race you to the front door!” Reagan shouted as she broke into a sprint.

I ran after her, but it was no use since she had gotten a head start. By the time I reached the door, she had already opened it and walked inside. Patch circled around our feet as we shouted for the kids. Just when I had scooped Patch into my arms, all three kids came running around the corner.

“Mommy! Mama!” all three of them shouted in unison.

Ronan almost knocked me over when he ran straight into my legs and wrapped his arms tightly around them. “Mama! Come watch me throw football. Grandpa says I’m good like Uncle Jamie.”

I turned to hand Patch off to Reagan, but Olivia was already in her arms talking at a mile a minute. I looked in front of me at my literal angel, Carter, who was waiting patiently while her siblings fought for our attention. I set Patch back down on the ground, then picked up Carter while Ronan continued to cling onto my leg.

I gave her a tight hug, then kissed her nose, which she wrinkled before letting out the sweetest little giggle. My favorite noise in the world. “Should we go watch your brother throw this football?” I asked her.

Carter simply shrugged. “Sure.”

“Is he as good as he says he is?” I whispered as I struggled to walk with the extra appendage stuck to my leg.

Carter shrugged again. “Sure.”

This sweet little girl was way too nice. I pressed my nose against hers. “Are you sure about that?”

“No, he’s actually not,” she whispered before breaking into another fit of giggles.

As we made our way through the hallway, I knew Reagan was following behind us because Olivia didn’t even stop to take a breath as she gave us the play-by-play on everything they had done the day before. When we reached the kitchen, Nana was sitting at the table with her hand on her forehead as if she was sick.

“Nana, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She pointed between the kids. “Those three rascals of yours are just going to be the death of me.”

“Please don’t joke about dying,” I said as I wiggled my leg to detach Ronan from it and sat Carter down on the chair next to my Nana’s so I could give Nana a kiss on the cheek.

“Why? Because I’m knocking on death’s door? Don’t worry, dear. You have at least

two years left with me. I'm going to make it to one hundred so I can say I lived longer than Betty White. After that, all bets are off though."

"You're going to be one hundred in two years?" I asked in disbelief. My family never talked about ages. Even my parents refused to tell us how old they were. With Nana being my dad's grandma, I knew she had to be old, but instead of doing the math to figure out how old she might be, I kind of preferred to think of her as being immortal. My grandma and grandpa, her son and daughter-in-law, had already passed, but I didn't have the type of relationship with them that I had with Nana. Nowhere close.

Nana nodded. "Yep, and if those bitches don't put me on the cover of People magazine or some other shit, I'm going to be pissed."

Olivia, who was still in Reagan's arms, put her hand over her mouth and giggled. "Nana said bitches."

Both Ronan and Carter giggled along with her, but it was Ronan who jumped up and down and raised his hand as if he was answering a question in school. "She also said shit."

"This is what I mean," Nana said with a shake of her head. "They're always snitching on me. I got lectured by your mom multiple times yesterday because she doesn't think I should speak this way in front of them."

"You know we don't care," Reagan said as she finally dropped Olivia from her arms. "They can say whatever they want as long as they don't say those words at school." Reagan took on a lecturing tone, most likely to get the kids' attention and remind them of our number one rule when it comes to swearing.

"We can't say mean words like stupid, dumb, and hate, though," Carter reminded her, her voice sounding so similar to Reagan's lecture voice that it made me laugh.

Reagan put her hand up to give Carter a high five. “That’s exactly right. Good job, babe.”

Carter scrunched up her nose at Reagan. “I’m not your babe. Mama is.”

“That’s right.” Reagan smacked her hand against her forehead as if she had actually made a mistake. “Thanks for the reminder.”

Ronan clawed at my legs as if he was an animal. “Now we throw football?”

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“Yeah, sure.” I looked around the room for any signs of my parents. “Where are grandma and grandpa?”

“Grandma is cleaning our dirty clothes and grandpa is pooping,” Olivia said matter-of-factly.

Nana threw her hands in the air. “No secrets in this house anymore.”

When my dad walked into the kitchen a few seconds later, we all started to laugh. “Get everything out okay?” I asked when he gave us all a questioning look.

“All right. Who told?” My dad pointed at Ronan. “Was it you? I bet it was you!”

Ronan quickly pointed his own finger at Olivia. “No, it was Livvy.”

My dad nodded. “That would have been my next guess.”

Ronan clawed at my dad’s legs the same way he had done to mine. “Let’s show Mommy and Mama how I throw football.”

“You got it.” My dad scooped Ronan into his arms and carried him through the kitchen and out the back door.

Reagan and I followed, holding Olivia and Carter respectively. We watched as my dad stood close to Ronan and threw him the football, which he awkwardly caught with both hands. When he “threw” it back to my dad it only went about a foot, so my dad had to lean forward to grab it, almost losing his balance in the process.

“So much better than Uncle Jamie,” Reagan said as she held her phone out in front of her, clearly taking a video to send to him.

We watched them throw the ball back and forth a few more times before Olivia huffed. “I’m bored.”

“Hi, bored. I’m Mom.” I cringed as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Holy shit. When did I get so old that I started to say things my mother said to me?

I couldn’t even blame Olivia for the way she wrinkled her eyebrows at me in obvious judgment. “Not funny.” She pointed out toward the lake. “I want to swim.”

“In the lake?” I asked with a cough, remembering the activities that had taken place there last night.

Olivia nodded. “Grandma said we could if you said it’s okay. She said you swam in it.”

“I did. Not that long ago, actually.” I shared a secret smile with Reagan who winked back at me.

“Can we please?” Carter brought her hands together in a praying motion and hit me with the widest, most adorable, puppy dog eyes. There was no way I could say no.

“Fine. But you have to wear your bathing suits and your swimmyies.”

All three of the kids high-fived then ran inside. I pointed in the direction they had just run in. “I guess we should go help them, huh?”

“I suppose they need us.”

After spending the next fifteen minutes wrestling with our kids to get their bathing suits on and putting our own on as well, we headed back out to the lake, this time to do some much different activities than the night prior.

Reagan took turns throwing the kids into the water while I entertained whichever two weren't being thrown at the moment. When they got bored of that, we tried to teach them Marco Polo, but that only lasted about five minutes since Olivia and Ronan got in a fight after she accused him of cheating. Once we were able to break up the fight, they finally seemed content to just swim around, so Reagan and I got out and sat by the edge watching them.

"Would you rather spend every night like last night or every day like today?" Reagan asked as we watched them splash each other. "You can only have one or the other. Not both."

"Is that supposed to be hard? Obviously today. You know I love our alone time, but nothing compares to this."

"I know." Reagan leaned over and kissed my cheek. "I already knew what you were going to say. I just wanted to hear you say it."

"You wanted to hear me say that I would choose watching our children try to kill each other over ever having sex with you again?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I wanted." She put her arm around my shoulder and pulled me close to her. "Lucky for us, we get both."

"Yes. Lucky us."

I knew my luck had run out as soon as I heard my mother's voice behind us. "Charlotte, why are you letting your children play in that dirty lake?"

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I turned in her direction and shielded my eyes with my hand so I could actually see her. “They said you told them they could as long as we gave the okay.”

My mother scoffed. “Well, I didn’t think you actually would.”

“Why not? Jamie and I played in there all the time. You and dad would beg us to go in sometimes.”

“Yes. Well, that was you, and these are my grandkids.”

“Wow. Thanks, Mom. Glad to hear where I rank.”

My mom laid a blanket out on the ground beside me and sat down on it. “Did you happen to ask Mary Beth why she didn’t invite us to her wedding? We’ve been like family to that girl since you were kids. It’s very hurtful that we wouldn’t be included.”

Really? The woman who skipped my wedding wanted to know why she wasn’t invited to a different gay wedding? “I didn’t ask her, but that’s because I didn’t need to. She told me when they first got engaged that she wasn’t planning on inviting you.”

My mother scoffed and shook her head, looking absolutely disgusted that Mary Beth wouldn’t want someone at her wedding who was still fairly homophobic, in spite of “trying” not to be. “Did she tell you why she decided not to include your father and I after everything we’ve done for her?”

After everything you did for her, I thought to myself. Ever since the great Miller

Reunion Blow Up, my mom hadn't gone out of her way to include Mary Beth like she did in the past (even when we had asked her not to). "Yes, she did. She didn't want me to be upset if you decided to come after skipping my wedding. I told her I thought that made perfect sense, because it definitely would have upset me, even if I tried to not let it get to me."

"Really, Charlotte? You've been married for years. I thought we moved past this. We've come so far."

"You're right. We have." The last thing I wanted was to fight with my mom when things had been decent between us, but I had made a promise with myself a long time ago that I would always be honest with her about how I was feeling. I held my feelings in for way too long, and I wasn't going to do that any more. "But that doesn't make it hurt any less that you chose to miss one of the biggest days of my life."

"I thought I was making the right choice. It turns out I made a mistake. I didn't know you were going to hold it over my head for the rest of my life."

Hold it over her head? Seriously?" "I haven't held it over your head. I've never even brought it up before. You asked why Mary Beth didn't invite you, so I told you the truth. Now, let's just drop it."

"I didn't realize Nana was going to be one hundred in two years," Reagan said as if it somehow fit into our conversation, even though I knew she was just trying to help me out by changing the subject. "I know that seems far away right now, but if we're going to throw her the huge party that she deserves, I think we need to start planning as soon as possible."

"You want to throw my nana a birthday party?" I asked, all of my anger from a moment before being melted away by just a few words from my perfect wife.

“Of course I do! Nana’s the best, and she deserves the best.”

“You do know she’s never going to agree to that, right?”

“Of course I do. That’s why it’s going to be a surprise.” Reagan smiled over at me, and at that moment, I was pretty sure I had never loved her more.

Chapter 8

Reagan

Two years later

I never considered how hard it would be to plan a surprise birthday for a one-hundred-year-old woman until I was the one responsible for planning it. It was especially hard since the party was obviously going to be in Maryland which was definitely not where I spent most of my time. Luckily, I was able to get everything worked out with the venue, an old rec hall where Nana used to go for poker nights, over the phone.

Ethan used his connections in town to help find us a caterer and my parents had taken on the task of providing the alcohol—complete with plenty of red wine for Nana.

It was the little details that were killing me—who to invite, how to invite them, when to send said invites, what decorations to hang, and so many more that seemed to keep popping up.

As I drove to Jamie’s house the week before the party, I finally felt like I could breathe. Well, as much as one can breathe when driving a fair distance with three six-year-olds fighting in the back of the car. Charlie wasn’t coming until the end of the week because she didn’t want to close her practice for too long, so until Friday night,

it was me, Jamie, Ethan, their newly adopted ten-year-old son, Finn, and my three wild children. Luckily, since it was summer, Jamie wasn't working, so he would be free to help me.

I considered staying home until we could all ride down together, but since I was the one who had been dubbed as the party planner, I didn't think it was right for me to wait to show until the night before.

As soon as I pulled into his driveway, Jamie opened the front door and waved wildly at us. The car had barely come to a stop before Ronan was freeing himself from his harness and trying to open the door. Thank god for child locks.

"Patience," I said as I turned off the car and undid my own seatbelt.

"But I want to see Uncle Jamie," Ronan whined.

"You can see him by looking out the window. Remember, we see with our eyes, not our hands or our feet."

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I turned around just in time to see Ronan roll his eyes at me. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?” I pointed a finger at him and tried to keep a straight face, but it was no use. He was way too cute with his messy dirty blonde hair and smug grin.

“I sure did.” Ronan crossed his arms in front of his chest, which only added to the cuteness. Damn him. “What’s it to you, poopy butt?” He broke out in a fit of giggles as if he had just said the funniest thing in the whole world, and given that his sisters were laughing along with him, apparently it was.

I rolled my eyes at him this time. “Aren’t you a little old to be making poop jokes? You are going to be starting first grade next year.”

“You still make poop jokes and you’re the oldest person I know,” Olivia said in her brother’s defense.

I put my hand on my chest as if I was offended, and I honestly kind of was. “I do not make poop jokes.” At least not in front of you. Not intentionally, anyway. “And I am definitely not the oldest person you know.”

Olivia scrunched up her eyes as if she was actually considering what I had just said. “Okay, sure. Nana is older. But she’s like a million, so that doesn’t count.”

“She’s one hundred but good try.”

“I can count to one hundred. Want to hear?” She tilted her head to the side and

flashed me her trademark grin.

“No, thank you, but do you know who does want to hear that?” I pointed out the window. “Uncle Jamie. Make sure you count to one hundred for him over and over. Also, definitely sing that song you insisted on singing one million times on the way here.”

Now that they knew what was expected of them, I got them out of the car.

When Jamie reached me, he held open his arms to me. “Look who it is!” He wrapped me up in a tight hug and kissed my temple. “When I first asked you to go to my family reunion with me did you ever think that one day you would be throwing a surprise birthday party for my nana?”

“Absolutely not, but I also didn’t know that your nana was cool as shit and your sister was sexy as hell.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” He playfully pushed me away. “Now leave me alone. I have more important people to greet.”

He squatted down to give hugs to all three kids and when he stood up, Ronan and Olivia each grabbed onto one of his legs. As he jokingly tried to shake them off, Carter held her arms up toward him. “Uncle Jamie, will you please carry me?”

“Of course, sweetie.” Jamie took Carter in his arms and carried her in while dragging the other two on his legs.

I grabbed the two large suitcases and followed behind. “Hey, Jamie, think you could grab these bags too?” I yelled at him. “That’s a man’s job, right?”

Jamie looked back to glare at me, but the smile on his face gave away that he wasn’t

actually angry about my comment. Which was a good thing, since I took any opportunity I could to make fun of the way he acted the first time I went home with him.

When we made it inside of the house, Jamie looked behind me and sighed. “It’s weird not seeing Patch following behind you.”

The sound of my dog’s name was like a stab to the heart. It had been a few months since he passed away, after living a long happy life, and the wound was still fresh. Every time it seemed to be scabbing over, I was reminded of him in one way or another and it was as if it had been picked back open.

I stared down at the floor to try to hide my sadness from the kids. “I still look for him every time I come into the house.”

“I still have my shoe that he chewed up the last time he was here. I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away.” Jamie chuckled softly.

“Why are you both so sad?” Carter asked.

Of course, Carter would notice, because Carter noticed everything. Her siblings might have too if they slowed down long enough to pay attention to what was happening around them.

I grabbed Carter from Jamie and held her tightly up against me. “We’re okay, sweetie. We just miss Patch.”

Carter’s eyes turned down, and for a moment, I thought she was going to cry, but just a second later a wide grin spread across her face. “But Patch is in Heaven now with all the treats, blankets, and toys in the world. He’s happy so we should be, too. That’s what you told me, remember?”

I hugged Carter even tighter and kissed the top of her head. “You’re exactly right, sweetie. Thank you for reminding me.”

I looked around the hallway and realized that Ronan and Olivia were no longer there. “Shit. Where’d they go?”

“I think they went upstairs,” Carter said with a shrug.

How did she do it? Did she have eyes in the back of her head or what? Wasn’t that supposed to be my superpower?

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I gave Jamie a wide-eyed look to try to convey to him that if we didn't find them immediately, he would probably end up with some household item being broken. He must have understood because he subtly nodded his head before hopping up the stairs two at a time. I hoisted Carter higher up on my waist and tried my best to follow after him as quickly as I could, but it was nearly impossible while holding an extra forty-five pounds.

When I lost track of Jamie, I followed the faint sound of giggles, which only got louder when Jamie's voice shouted, "What are you doing with my shoe?"

After a few seconds, I found all three of them in Jamie and Ethan's room, with the closet door open, and a pair of shoes sitting on the floor. "What happened?" I asked as I tried to catch my breath.

Jamie shook his head, but I could tell by the way he was curling his lips into his mouth, that he was trying not to laugh. "These two decided to chew on my shoes as if they were animals."

What the hell?

Olivia smiled at me innocently and shrugged her shoulders. "Uncle Jamie said he missed Patch chewing on his shoes. We figured this would make him feel better."

Now I had to work to hold in my laughter as well, because what the actual fuck? Did I literally raise a bunch of animals? Sweet, well-intentioned animals, but for fuck's sake. I knelt down and let Carter out of my arms to stand next to me, holding her hand while I addressed her brother and sister. "Your uncle Jamie misses Patch. He doesn't

actually miss Patch's bad behavior."

Ronan crossed his arms in front of his chest and scrunched up his nose. "Nuh-uh. If that was true, why would he save the shoe?"

I looked at Jamie for backup, but he simply shrugged, clearly just as lost for words as I was. "It's sentimental."

Ronan kept his arms crossed and shook his head. "I don't know what that means."

"It means that it's special because it reminds you of something. In this case, that chewed up shoe reminds Uncle Jamie of Patch."

Ronan uncrossed his arms to throw them in the air. "I don't get it."

"Me either." Olivia pointed into the hallway. "Let's find something else to do. This is boring."

Olivia and Ronan ran out of the room while Carter followed slowly behind them. I stood up and let out a long sigh that mixed with the laughter I had been trying to hold in a moment before. "My children. Literal animals. Good god." I looked around the room and into the hallway that was now eerily quiet. "Speaking of children, where's your little dude?"

"You mean my ten-year-old who is somehow up to my chin? He's at the cafe with Ethan. They should be getting home any minute now."

Like clockwork, I heard the front door open at that very moment. A split second later, there was the sound of little footsteps running through the downstairs and squeals of delight, which I assumed meant my children were now with their uncle and cousin. I watched as Jamie threw his sneakers that my disgusting children had just been

chewing on into his closet and then followed him out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

“There’s my girl,” Ethan said as soon as he noticed me. “Or shall I say Party Planner Extraordinaire?”

When I made my way to the front door, I pushed past my children to give Ethan a hug. “Ugh. Don’t remind me. This is the first time in weeks I’ve gone a few minutes without thinking about it.”

Ethan stepped away from me and pretended he was locking his lips. “Sorry. I’m done. No more reminders about the huge 100th birthday bash you’re throwing this upcoming weekend.”

“Gee, thanks.” I moved my attention from Ethan to the boy standing next to him. “Hey, Finn! How are you, buddy?”

Finn looked down toward the floor, his shaggy brown hair falling in front of his eyes in the process. “I’m good, ma’am. Thank you.”

This was how Finn had acted every time I was around him over the past year while he lived with Ethan and Jamie as they waited for everything to come together to officially adopt him. He was shy and reserved, but at least now, he didn’t seem scared anymore like he did at first.

“Remember what I told you last time?” I asked him. “Call me Aunt Reagan or just Reagan. Honestly, you can even call me asshole if you want. Just not ma’am. It makes me feel like my mother-in-law.” I shuddered to try to make my point that that definitely wasn’t a good thing.

This finally made Finn smile and he moved his eyes from the floor to look up at me.

“Sorry, Aunt Reagan.”

I waved a hand at him. “No need to apologize. We’re family.”

“You make me say sorry and I’m family,” Olivia said as she crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at me.

I laughed and ruffled her hair. “That’s because you do things you need to apologize for, like trying to eat Uncle Jamie’s shoes.” When Ethan’s eyes shot toward me to give me a questioning look, I waved my hand at him. “Don’t ask.”

He put both hands in the air. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The week flew by as I worked through all of the last minute party plans. I couldn’t believe it when Charlie sent me a text to say she was on her way. After what only felt like a few minutes (because I was busy finalizing the details of how to get Nana to the rec hall), the front door of Jamie and Ethan’s house opened and Charlie walked in.

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“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” I asked as I pulled her into my arms, breathing in her familiar scent that I had missed so much over the past week. How was there ever a time I lived without this woman? Was I really even alive before I met her?

“I missed you,” Charlie whispered, echoing my thoughts. She held me tightly for a moment before pulling away. Even when she was no longer holding me, she still kept a tight grip on my arms as if she thought I might drift away if she let go. “How did it go this week? How were the kids? Did they behave?”

“It depends who we’re talking about.”

“Well, since I have no doubt that our little angel behaved, I obviously mean the other two.”

“In that case, no, but they at least weren’t any worse than usual.”

“Speaking of which, where are they? I expected them to run to the door to greet me.”

“They are down in the basement. Finn is showing them how to play his video games, so it’s very serious business.”

“And where are Jamie and Ethan?”

“They are at the cafe. I told them I’d stay with the kids so Jamie could help him with a few things there.”

Charlie moved her hands onto my hips. “That was nice of you.”

I closed my eyes and basked in the feelings of her hands on me. God, I missed this. It was less than a week apart and I could hardly stand it. “It’s no big deal. After dealing with our children, adding Finn to the mix is nothing.”

“Is this your way of telling me you decided that you want a fourth?” Charlie joked.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.”

Charlie threw her head back in laughter, and it was one of the most beautiful sights in the whole world. My heart tugged to remind me how much I loved this woman (not that I needed a reminder).

Once she stopped laughing, Charlie pointed down the hallway. “Can we go see them? I’ve missed those little assholes so much.”

“Of course.” I opened my arms to direct her to go in front of me since I knew she was itching to get to them.

“Where are my babies?” she shouted as she walked down the basement stairs.

Almost immediately, all three kids were at the bottom of the stairs, bouncing up and down and holding their arms out for hugs. Charlie greeted each of them with hugs and kisses before crossing the room to squeeze Finn’s arm and tell him that she had missed him, too.

“Mommy, guess what?” Olivia said as she sprinted back across the room to where Charlie was now standing. “Me, Ronan, and Carter get to help with Nana’s surprise.”

When Charlie looked up at me with questioning eyes, I nodded. “We told Nana that we are coming to visit for the weekend and want to take her out to lunch. You four can go pick her up, then make up some excuse about why you need to go to the rec

hall to pick me up. I was thinking we could tell her Ethan is hosting an event there. Once you get there, you can tell her he really wants to see her, or something like that.”

Charlie poked herself in the chest with her pointer finger. “Me? I thought you would want to be the one to get her over there.”

The truth was, I really did, but since she was Charlie’s blood relative, I figured I should let her do it. “Nah. You should. She’s your nana. Plus, I’ll have to make sure all the last minute details come together.”

Charlie shook her head. “I can tell by the sound of your voice that you want to do that part. You’ve worked so hard. You deserve to be the one standing beside her when we all shout surprise. Seriously. I can take care of the last minute details. Don’t worry about that. I got this.”

I had no question that she did, so I readily agreed. By eleven a.m. the next day, Nana had already called three times to ask why we hadn’t picked her up yet, even though I told her multiple times that we weren’t coming until 11:30. When we arrived at the Millers’ house a little bit after that time, she was already waiting on the front porch.

“It’s about time,” she grumbled as I got out of the car and took her by the arm to help her walk.

She was moving even slower this time than the last time I had seen her, which made my heart hurt since it reminded me of just how old she was now. She had the mind of a twenty-year-old, but her body was definitely starting to shut down.

I quickly shook these thoughts from my head. Today wasn’t about what was to come. It was to celebrate all of the amazing years she had lived so far. “Sorry, Nana. I was struggling to get three kids into the car by myself. Charlie, Jamie, and Finn are all at

the rec hall in town with Ethan, helping him prepare for an event he's doing today. Speaking of which, we need to stop by there and grab Charlie so she can come to lunch with us. I was worried if I picked her up first and got here even later that you might murder me."

Nana laughed and patted my hand. "You know me so well. The thought definitely crossed my mind." Nana opened her door and struggled to step into the car, but when I tried to help, she pushed me away. "I'm not dead yet. I'm still ninety-nine. Maybe tomorrow once I'm one hundred I'll let you help me, but probably not, so don't get any ideas."

I got in the car and started to drive while the kids all talked over each other at Nana. Instead of responding, Nana shut her eyes and let them continue to shout with no response. After a few migraine-inducing minutes, we arrived at the rec hall. I got out my phone and texted Charlie that we had arrived while I prepared myself for the fight I was inevitably going to have with Nana when I tried to get her to go inside.

"Charlie just texted and told me that Ethan really wants to see you. Do you mind going inside really fast?"

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Just as I suspected, Nana huffed. “I’m starving. I’ll see him later.”

Think fast. It felt like a lightbulb went off above my head when the perfect idea suddenly materialized in my mind. “We can wait I guess, but he told me he got some wine for the event that he thinks you’ll really like. If we wait to see him, it will probably be gone by the time we do. That’s okay though. If food is more important than w—”

“Never mind. Let’s go.” Nana had her seatbelt unbuckled and her car door open before I had even processed the fact that my plan had actually worked.

When I turned off my car, all three kids started to giggle. I turned around and put my finger up to my lips. “Sh. Don’t give it away now.”

I helped the three of them out of the car then watched as they sprinted right past Nana, only coming to a stop when they got to the front of the building. I took Nana’s arm, ignoring her huff of disapproval. When we reached the door, Carter held it open while I walked through with Nana. I almost tripped when Ronan and Olivia pushed past me to go in first. As expected, the lights were out and the room was dark when we walked in.

“Are you sure they’re here? The lights aren’t even on.”

I tried (and failed) not to smile as I opened the second set of doors and hit the lights. As soon as the lights went on all of the guests screamed, “Surprise,” in unison.

“Is this... what... for me?” Nana turned to me and there were already tears pooling at

the corners of her eyes, which was big since I could probably count the amount of times I saw her cry on one hand.

My heart felt more full than it ever had as this woman who had become so important to me stared at me with all the wonder in the world. “Happy Birthday, Nana.”

We were joined at the door by the rest of her immediate family, who all wished her happy birthday with tight hugs. The majority of the party was family, but other people who spent time with Nana throughout the years were also there, including her hair dresser, a few of her doctors, the cashier whose line she always went in at the grocery store, and even her favorite waitress from Applebee’s.

Nana was so excited about the surprise that she was even more wild than usual throughout the day. She roasted pretty much every person in attendance and drank more wine than an almost hundred-year-old probably should. I wasn’t too worried since the doctors in attendance didn’t seem concerned, but then again, they were drinking just as much as her.

By the end of the party, it was just the Miller clan remaining, which felt strange since I hadn’t been around the whole family since Charlie’s mom made a scene with my engagement ring. Luckily, Nana wasn’t the only one who had been drinking so it wasn’t as awkward as I would have expected it to be.

If I was being honest, I was actually having fun. I laughed when I looked at Jamie and saw him counting on his fingers. “What are you up to over there, Mr. Mathematician?”

“I’m just trying to figure out how we have a great great grandma who is only one hundred.”

“Only?” I asked with a laugh. Surely Jamie wasn’t so drunk that he thought that was

young.

“Considering that we’re thirty-eight, yes.” He looked over at his parents, determination etched on his face. “Mom and Dad, how old are you?”

“That really doesn’t matter,” his dad said, his face turning slightly red as if he was embarrassed to say his age for some reason.

“Oh, for god’s sake.” Nana spilled wine on her shirt when she threw her hands in the air. “Your father is sixty-one.”

Jamie looked toward the ceiling and counted on his fingers again. “That’s only a thirty-nine year difference between you and him and he’s not even your oldest grandchild.” I still didn’t know what he was getting at until his eyes went wide and he pointed an accusatory finger at his nana. “Nana, did you get knocked up?”

Nana laughed and spilled even more of her wine on her shirt. “Why would you assume it was me who got knocked up? That would have given my mother a heart attack. Luckily, I was a cool mom. Didn’t throw a big fit when your grandfather knocked someone up as a teenager. Your great-grandfather on the other hand... he thought it was a disgrace. And he instilled that same shame on your grandfather and his children, which is why no one in this family ever talks about it. One of the only things me and my husband ever fought over.”

“Wait, are you saying—” I cut myself off because I couldn’t wrap my head around this. The “perfect” Miller family got less and less perfect all the time.

“Yep.” Nana pointed across the room at Charlie and Jamie’s Uncle Shane. “My grandson is a bastard, and I’m not just talking about his personality.”

I spit out my drink from laughing so hard. I loved Nana for saying exactly how she

felt, especially about people I wasn't so fond of.

Unfortunately, he was too far away to hear, but he did notice her pointing and pointed his own finger at himself. "Me?" He shouted across the room. "What are you saying about me?"

I smiled because I knew Nana wouldn't let this opportunity pass, and I was right. "I said you're a bastard," she shouted back. "In more ways than one."

Uncle Shane's face turned such a bright shade of red that I could see it from across the room. He grimaced and opened his mouth (most likely about to be an asshole), but quickly shut it again.

That's right, bitch. Don't even think about being mean to my girl.

Carter, who had been sitting on Charlie's lap, crawled into mine and tapped Nana's shoulder. When Nana looked over, Carter tilted her head at her. "What's a bastard?"

Mrs. Miller scoffed. "It's a word we don't say."

Nana scoffed right back at her. "She can say whatever she wants to say as long as she's not an asshole like some people." The smile returned to Nana's face as she focused her attention on Carter. "A bastard is someone who is born to two parents who aren't married. It can also be a name for someone who is mean."

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Carter shook her head. “It’s not nice to call people names.”

Nana leaned in close and rubbed her nose against Carter’s. “You’re right, sweetie. It’s normally not. But certain people in this family deserve it.”

“I think I’ll just be nice to everyone,” Carter said with a shrug.

I hugged her tight up against me and kissed the top of her head. This little girl was way too good for this world. I looked across the room to where her brother and sister were taking turns jumping off of a chair to see who could go further and laughing hysterically each time one of them landed on anything other than their feet. Well, one out of three ain’t bad.

An hour (and a lot of water chugging later), Nana asked if I could give her a ride home. It made more sense for Charlie’s parents to take her since they were going to the same place, but I could tell she wanted the extra time with me, so there was no way I was going to say no. After cleaning up, Charlie took the kids in her car and I took Nana in mine.

As soon as I started driving, Nana put her hand on top of my hand that was resting on the middle console. “I wanted to thank you personally for doing that for me today.”

My heart swelled at the sincerity in her voice. It wasn’t often that Nana was serious, so the fact that she was being so open had my heart on the edge of bursting. “It was a joint effort.”

“That’s not what I heard. Everyone else, even the assholes in this family who don’t

particularly like you, told me that it was all you.”

“It’s what you deserved. Ever since that first summer, you always made me feel like family. That’s more than can be said for most of the Millers.”

“As the oldest living member of the family, I feel like I need to take the blame for that.”

My eyes darted to her face to see if she was smirking, because she couldn’t be serious. Much to my surprise, there wasn’t even the slightest hint of a smile. “Bullshit. You’re like the most amazing person ever. You don’t even deserve to be associated with the majority of the assholes in your family, let alone take the blame for their decisions.”

“Hate breeds hate. That’s what they say.”

I shook my head. There was no way she could ever convince me she was to blame for her terrible relatives. “And you’re the most loving person I know, so clearly it wasn’t you. You’re too good for this family, honestly.”

“So are you, you know. Charlie and Jamie are too, so I’m glad you busted into our lives and stuck around through all the craziness. They need you.”

Thinking about my two best friends—my favorite people in the entire world—had me fighting to hold back my tears. “I need them, too.”

“Promise me something?” Nana squeezed my hand once again. “When I’m gone, please take care of them for me.”

“You mean you’re not going to live forever?” I forced out a laugh because I knew if I didn’t laugh, I would definitely cry. The last thing I wanted to think about was a world

without Nana. She was everything good in this world packaged in a small but fierce old woman.

“Sweetie, when you get to be my age, you realize that immortality ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. The more I see of this world, the more I want to leave it.” We were both silent for a minute, and I figured the conversation was over until she spoke again. “As long as you can promise you’ll take care of my babies.”

I swallowed hard, a heavy lump forming in my throat over the turn this conversation had taken. “I promise.”

Nana might not like the idea of immortality, but selfishly, that’s exactly what I wanted for her.

Chapter 9

Charlie

You should skip this chapter...

It had only been two weeks since my Nana’s birthday and I was itching to get back to my hometown again. Since I normally avoided Maryland like the plague, I had no idea why I was feeling such a strong pull to go back. My thoughts kept circling back to my nana and how I needed to spend more time with her. Her big hundredth birthday celebration was the worst reminder of how little time I had left with her, and I didn’t want to have any regrets once I (heaven forbid) did lose her.

“Would you hate me if I went back to Maryland this weekend?” I asked Reagan as we sat together and watched TV after all of the kids were asleep.

“I don’t hate you, and I’m coming too,” Reagan said without hesitation. “We all are.”

Luckily, Jamie and Ethan were more than okay with a few last minute house guests, so a few days later, we went to stay with them.

I called Nana as soon as we arrived and felt a strange sense of relief when I heard her voice on the other end of the phone. “Hey, Nana. I was just wondering if you wanted to get dinner with just Reagan and I tonight. Jamie and Ethan volunteered to watch our kids for some reason.”

“They must have a death wish.” Nana laughed her trademark laugh and it breathed life back into me. “But I do want to see those three rascals, so I’ll have your dad drop me off at Jamie’s house before we go. It’s a double positive for me because I can make sure I don’t starve to death waiting on you two.”

I told Nana to be at Jamie’s house at four-thirty, so she arrived right on time (for her) at four o’clock.

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“Nana!” All three kids shouted as they ran to greet her at the door.

Nana let out a noofsound as all three of them ran into her at once. She laughed as she wrapped her arms around them. “There’s my three crazy monkeys.”

They all giggled then grabbed her hands and dragged her into Jamie’s family room to show her the virtual reality game they were playing with Finn.

Finn handed the headset to Nana. “You should try it,” he said shyly.

Nana looked at the object in her hands as if it had come from outer space. Honestly, to her, it might as well have. Finn explained how it worked and helped her put it on, then put a game on for her. After a few minutes of struggling with what to do, Nana became entranced by the game and was swearing while she swatted at something on her screen. It was an image I’d never forget. At least I hoped not. I wanted to etch it in my brain forever.

Why am I being so sentimental this weekend? What is happening to me?

When she was done playing, she threw herself onto the couch and blew out a long breath. “You all wore Nana out, but that was fun.”

Carter crawled onto the couch, book in hand as usual, and snuggled up next to Nana. “Nana, can I read this book to you before you go?”

“There’s nothing I want more, sweetie.”

Carter moved to sit on Nana's lap and opened her book. Both of them appeared completely content and happy as they sat close and shared this moment together. I pried my eyes away from them to see if Reagan noticed the sweetness happening in front of us.

What Reagan didn't notice was me looking over at her because all of her attention was on Nana and Carter. She was beaming—wide, unblinking eyes, an infectious smile filling her face. I looked back and forth between Reagan and Nana and Carter and could have cried from all the love filling my heart. This was my world, and I loved it.

The moment was broken when Ronan shouted. "Watch me do a flip!"

I moved my eyes to where he was now standing on the far end of the couch. Before I could say or do anything to stop him he jumped off and flailed his body in a way that could somewhat resemble a flip if you really used your imagination. Of course, he didn't land on his feet. Instead, he flopped onto his side and hit his head on the floor. Thank god Jamie has carpets. I held my breath as I waited for his response, which came in the form of him laughing hysterically and saying, "That was awesome."

I let out my breath and shook my head at him. This was my actual world, and it was crazy, but that didn't matter. I really did love it, and I wouldn't change a thing. Fifteen minutes (and many hugs) later, we were finally able to get out of the house to take Nana to dinner.

"Where to?" I asked once we were in the car, expecting Nana to immediately answer with one of the usual chain restaurants she went to like Applebee's or Red Robin.

"There's actually an Italian Restaurant about ten minutes from here that opened a year ago. I've been meaning to try it, but I haven't had the chance. Do you mind if we go there?"

“Of course.” I hoped it wasn’t an overly fancy restaurant since I was only wearing jeans and a long sleeve shirt, but either way, it didn’t matter. If this was what Nana wanted, it was what we were doing.

The dinner was spectacular and it wasn’t even because the food was out of this world (which it was). She told stories of when I was young. We laughed about that first summer when Reagan came to visit with Jamie. We discussed our relationship and the ups and downs Reagan and I have had throughout the years, and Nana offered advice for a long, healthy relationship. We even talked about the future and what was to come for us and the kids. Nana listened intently and gave her opinion where it was warranted. I had so many amazing memories with my nana, but this night might have been the best ever.

When we dropped her off, I gave her a long hug. Even though we had plans to see her again in the morning, there was a part of me that felt like this goodbye was permanent. I tried to shake these thoughts from my head, because I didn’t want to think like that. Nana was healthy. At least as healthy as one would expect from someone her age. She didn’t have any terminal illnesses. There was no reason to believe I wouldn’t see her again. Still, as I held her tight, I took in everything about the moment—the scent of her perfume, the way her arms felt wrapped around me, how safe she made me feel. When I pulled away from her, I kissed her forehead and told her how much I loved her. As we got into the car, I took one last look at where she was standing by the door. Most people don’t know the last time they’ll see someone, but deep down, buried inside of me, I knew I wasn’t going to see Nana alive again.

When my phone rang early the next day with a call from my mom, I thought about not answering it. My stomach was in knots over what I knew she was about to tell me. I had no ideahowI knew, but I did.

“Mom?” I asked, my voice shaky. “Is Nana okay?”

The silence on the other end of the phone seemed to stretch on forever until my mom said a barely audible, “No.”

It took forever for me to actually comprehend everything that followed, even if my premonition told me it was coming. Nana wasn’t breathing when they went into her room that morning. She had gone into cardiac arrest while she was sleeping and never woke up. She had gone peacefully and hadn’t experienced any pain.

A fog settled around me when I told her I would catch up with her soon and hung up the phone. I woke up Reagan and we cried together. After a few minutes, there was a light knock on our door and Jamie and Ethan walked in. There was no doubt from the look on their faces that they had gotten the call as well. Instead of saying anything, I moved closer to Reagan and patted the empty spot next to us on the guest bed. Jamie and Ethan joined us and the four of us hugged and cried some more.

“Mommy? Mama?”

The sound of a sweet young voice coming from the hall made another horrible reality crash into me. “We need to tell the kids.” I looked over at Reagan whose face was streaked with tears. “God, how do we do this? I need to be strong for them, but right now, I feel anything but strong. How do we tell them?”

Reagan reached out and squeezed my hand. “Together. We tell them together. It’ll be okay.”

“We’ll be right out, sweetie,” Reagan called out. “Just give us a minute.”

By the time we pulled ourselves together enough to get out of bed and open the door, all four kids were waiting outside of it. Olivia tilted her head at Jamie. “Why are you in my mom and mama’s room?”

Jamie gave me a very brief questioning look before smiling back at Olivia. “We were just talking.”

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“Speaking of which.” Reagan cleared her throat. “Olivia, Carter, and Ronan, could we talk to you inside the room?”

Jamie put his hand on Finn’s shoulder as he and Ethan walked out of the room. “We need to talk to you, too.”

“Are we in trouble?” Olivia asked as we all sat down on the bed.

Ronan shared a look with Olivia and put his hands in the air. “I swear that lamp fell on its own last night.”

“This isn’t about a lamp, I promise.” I put my arms around Olivia and Ronan at the same time Reagan pulled Carter onto her lap. “It’s about Nana.”

I could feel my heart rate increasing as I tried to think of what to say. Luckily, Reagan touched my arm and gave me a look that said I’ve got this.

“Last night, Nana went to be with Patch.”

“In heaven?” Carter asked softly. When Reagan nodded, her eyes turned down toward the comforter. “Is she coming back?”

“No. When people and pets go to heaven, they don’t come back. At least not in the physical sense. We might not be able to see Nana anymore, but she’ll always be with us.”

For a long time the kids were eerily quiet, and I wondered if they fully understood

what was happening. Then Ronan looked at me with tears in his eyes and my heart broke all over again.

“Is it okay to be sad?” He wiped his eyes with his arm. “Because I feel really sad right now.”

His question finally helped me to find my voice. “It’s always okay to be sad, sweetheart. I’m sad, too.”

“So am I,” Reagan said.

Olivia and Carter both nodded in agreement as well. For the next few minutes, we all sat in silence. If my heart wasn’t so heavy with grief, I would have loved this detour from our usual craziness. Even with the sadness, I still took a moment to appreciate this time with my family. I may have lost a very important person, but knowing I had these four helped me to carry on.

The next week flew by, yet also seemed to stretch on forever. I canceled my appointments for the week and Reagan told her clients that their commissions might end up a bit delayed. We helped my parents prepare for the funeral and stood by her casket at the viewing as person after person came by to tell us about how much she meant to them. The funeral was small and the get-together that followed was even smaller. We all felt the real celebration of Nana’s life had taken place at her birthday party. Nana deserved to be remembered the way she was that night—alive and thriving. Not just a body in a casket that was lowered into the ground.

As Reagan and I lay in bed together the first night back at our house, I thought about how thankful I was that we had so much time with my nana leading up to her death. “I know I’ve said it multiple times, but I mean it even more now. Thank you so much for planning that birthday party for Nana. This obviously isn’t easy, but I think having that final hoorah with her made it a tiny bit less hard on everyone.”

“You don’t have to thank me. It was clearly meant to be. I just put it in motion. I should be thanking you for having us go there last weekend. As soon as you mentioned it, I knew we needed to go. I couldn’t explain it, but something in me clicked and told me this needed to happen.”

“That’s why I suggested it. I felt this strange pull, like I had to see her. Thank god. That last night with her was perfect.”

Reagan leaned over and kissed my temple. “It really was, wasn’t it? I almost felt like Nana knew her time was coming really soon. Like she wanted to leave us with something.”

“Wait.” Her words suddenly reminded me of something. I hopped from the bed and went through our bag we had yet to unpack until I found the two envelopes my dad had given to me a few days prior. “Nana apparently gave these to my dad a few months ago. It looks like they’re letters or something. I’m not sure why mine is in such a big envelope though.”

I handed Reagan the smaller envelope and opened up my large Manila envelope that contained two smaller envelopes inside. One said my name and the other said my mom’s but had a note that it shouldn’t be read until a year after Nana’s passing.

I waved my mom’s envelope in the air. “I’m not sure why I got this one.”

Reagan shrugged. “Maybe there’s an explanation inside yours.”

I opened the envelope to find a handwritten note from my nana. As soon as I saw her handwriting on the page, my heart clenched and the tears started to fall, so I wasn’t even sure how I would possibly get through it. But I owed it to her to try.

My dearest Charlie,

If you're reading this, it means my time has come to an end (finally, right?!). Please don't be sad for me. I lived a long, happy life. The best part of that life was definitely the past 38 years because I got to watch you and Jamie grow up. I watched you grow from a wild little girl to an outgoing teenager and into your own person throughout college and optometry school. But my favorite version of you was definitely the version I've seen these past ten years or so, because you were being your true, authentic self. I can't even begin to tell you how proud I am of the woman you've become. You are a wonderful doctor, a loving wife/sister/friend/daughter/etc, and the best mom in the entire world (so much better than the one that raised you).

Never give up on your dreams. Never stop being true to yourself. And remember—you are never too old for sex!

I know none of this is groundbreaking, but it turns out I don't have all the answers (just most of them). I just wanted to make sure you had one last piece of me to always keep with you. Take care of those crazy kids and that trouble-making wife of yours. Most important—never stop making your mother feel uncomfortable.

I love you, sweetie. You are everything right about this world, and I want you to know that you changed mine.

All my love,

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Nana

PS—I'm trusting you to hold onto the letter to your mom for a year before you give it to her. I couldn't resist making her think she's the only one who didn't get one. HA!

As I laughed through my tears, I looked over at Reagan and noticed that she was doing the same as she stared down at her own letter. I held mine out toward her. "Wanna swap?"

She answered by grabbing the paper from my hand and holding out hers. I wiped my eyes then began to read the words my nana had written to Reagan.

Reagan,

I know neither of us wants this to be overly sentimental, so I'm going to try my best not to make it too mushy (no promises though). I know I didn't have as much time with you as I did with other people in my life but the years that you were a part of were always an adventure. From catching my great-granddaughter with her hand down your pants when I thought you were engaged to my great-grandson, to watching you awkwardly letting my granddaughter-in-law know that the ring she found was from you for her daughter, to never realizing just how thin walls are, you always keep things interesting.

I loved getting to know you and letting you get to know me too. Bet you never thought a woman born in my time would have so many wild stories, huh?

What I'll never be able to thank you enough for is everything you've done for Charlie

and Jamie. They were wonderful children, but it felt like they lost themselves somewhere along the way. I truly believe you are a big reason they were able to stick up to their asshole parents and become the people they were meant to be.

Please take care of them for me, but also, take care of yourself. I know I like to tease you, but I can't even begin to tell you how much respect I have for you. I love you, and even though I know they don't like to admit it, your in-laws do too. Honestly, I think it kills them how much they like you since they wish they could hate you.

Thanks for everything you have done for my family. I know I'm leaving them in good hands with you (especially Charlie since you can't seem to ever keep your hands off of her).

All my love,

Nana

"I can't believe Nana is withholding your mom's note just so she thinks she didn't get one," Reagan said with a laugh. "That woman is savage even from the grave."

"I really wonder what she wrote in my mom's letter."

"I guess we'll find out next year."

I rolled my eyes. "I doubt it. There's no way my mom is going to tell us what it says, especially because it's probably mean. Or at the very least, contains some harsh truths. I'm half tempted to sneak a peek now."

Reagan shook her head. "Absolutely not. I feel like Nana's ghost would haunt us."

"That's insane, but also, probably true. So, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Chapter 10

Charlie

1 year later

It felt like I had been waiting for this day forever, but really, it had only been three hundred sixty-five days. Even though there was a heaviness because of it being the anniversary of my nana's death, I was also excited to finally (maybe) find out what Nana had written in my mom's note.

When we pulled into my parents' driveway, I grabbed the envelope and shoved it into my back pocket. We had already dropped the kids with Jamie and Ethan, so it was just me and Reagan with nothing to soften the blow if this didn't go well. Oh well. Totally worth the risk.

I knocked on the front door, but instead of waiting for someone to answer, I walked right in. "Anyone home?" I shouted while looking around for any signs of my parents.

When my mom came around the corner, her eyebrows were furrowed. "Charlotte? Is everything okay? I thought we weren't getting together until tonight."

"That's still the plan. We are going to go get the kids in a little bit and come back, but I need to give you something first." I grabbed the envelope from my back pocket and held it out to my mom.

My mom stared at the envelope for a long time then looked back at me. "What is this?"

"It's a note from Nana. She included it with my stuff and was very insistent in the

letter that she wrote me that I wait a year to give it to you.”

My mom grabbed the envelope from me, but instead of opening it, she stared down at it. “Why would she want to wait a whole year to give it to me?”

Because she loves fucking with you. Instead of telling the truth, I shrugged. “I’m not sure. All I know is that she told me I absolutely couldn’t say anything and I had to hold onto this until today.”

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My mom still didn't open the envelope. She simply shoved it inside the apron she was wearing. "I guess I'll read this at some point over the next year."

"Wait. What?" No. No. No. I've been waiting too long for this.

"Oh, come on, Charlotte, it's clearly not that important if she waited a whole year to get it to me. What difference does it make if I read it now or wait until some other time?"

The difference is I've been waiting, and I'm desperate to find out what that letter says. "It's Nana. This is a part of her. You need to read it."

"And I will, Charlotte. Just not right now." My mom pointed her thumb down the hallway.. "I have some fresh cookies in the kitchen if you want any. Why don't you come sit down rather than standing by the door all day?"

I shook my head. What a disappointment. "We'll be back later. We need to get back to Jamie's house to make sure the kids get ready in time."

Before my mother could say anything else, I turned on my heels and opened the door. Once I was in the car, I slapped the steering wheel. "All that waiting and wondering for nothing. Now we'll never know what the letter says."

"Who knows. Maybe she's just saying that and she's going to read it as soon as we leave."

"Maybe, but if that's the case, I highly doubt she's going to let me see it."

By the time we got back to my parent's house, I had given up all hope of ever seeing that letter, but as soon as we walked inside, my mother asked if she could speak to me privately. I agreed and followed her upstairs where she led me to her bedroom and closed the door behind us.

"I want you to read the note your nana wrote to me and tell me what you think."

I didn't know what was crazier—the fact that my mom was willing to show me the note or the fact that she wanted my opinion on it. But I definitely wasn't going to give up this opportunity. "Oh? Really? I didn't even think you were going to read it today."

My mom let out a long sigh. "Your father talked me into it. Or, I guess I should say he guilted me into it." Without another word, she shoved the letter into my hands.

I immediately started to read it because I worried she would suddenly change her mind and take it back from me.

Sharon,

I know I've always been hard on you (I'm not apologizing, it was well deserved), but now that I'm gone, I'd like to offer you some grandmotherly advice. Get your head out of your ass. You have a sister out there that you refuse to talk to even though you know damn well that she did nothing wrong. Since I'm not a cunt, I had the pleasure of speaking to Patricia at Charlie and Jamie's weddings. I know you'll probably say you also talked to her at Jamie's wedding, but one stiff hug and a promise to call (that you didn't keep) doesn't count. Anyway, she is a very nice woman, and as much as it pains me to say this, you deserve to have a relationship with someone in your immediate family. From the limited amount of information I've gathered, it's come to my attention that your parents were really shitty people, so I guess it makes sense that you turned out the way you did. But there's still hope for you, because I know deep

down you're not actually the person you pretend to be. I can't believe I'm writing this after everything I've seen you do, but you're a good person(deep down... like very deeply buried where no one could ever find it, but I know it's there). You've made some really awful decisions (Okay. Many really awful decisions), but there's still time for you to make this right.

Take it from someone who doesn't have much time left (and by the time you're reading this, it means that time has already run out)—you don't want to end your life with any regrets. I know that's going to be nearly impossible since you skipped your own daughter's wedding and missed out on years and years of having a relationship with your sister, but you can't go backward, only forward. And it's time for you to finally become the woman I know that you wish you could be. You put on a good front, but it's killing you to be the person that you are. You might not think I ever noticed that since I never really liked you very much, but I did. I see everything, even the good in you.

I've watched you grow a lot over the past few years, but you still have a lot more growing to do. I'm only going to write this once, but I hope you take it seriously, because believe it or not, I actually mean it (at least, I think so. I'm practically dead. Maybe I've become senile). I'm proud of you. You're working on getting rid of the prejudices that were ingrained in you by your parents (who were emotionally abusive assholes by the way. Just in case no one has ever told you). It's taking a while, but I know you'll get there. I know you'll eventually become the person I can be proud to call family.

Please think about what I said. If you're considering not taking my advice and finally mending your relationship with your sister, remember that this was my dying wish. Are you really going to ignore a woman who has been dead for a year? You better not because I swear to god I'll haunt your ass.

I love you (yes, believe it or not, it's true) and I really do want what's best for you.

Don't waste anymore time. There will come a day when you don't have any.

Grandma Olivia

(or "Nana" as the most important people in my life call me)

The note was so very Nana that it actually felt like she was standing in that room with me. I didn't know whether to smile or cry, but my body decided to do both.

My mom rubbed my arm. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I didn't mean to make you emotional. I just..." My mom looked toward the ground and for the first time in a really long time, I swore I saw a human there. "I want to know what you think I should do."

Why is she asking me this? "I think Nana was very clear in this letter about what you need to do."

Honestly, I had no idea why my mom hadn't reached out to my Aunt Patty yet. It had been years since I first developed a relationship with her, and I had seen her multiple times since then. The only time my mom saw her was at Jamie's wedding, and as Nana's note pointed out, she barely even talked to her.

"Do you really think she'll haunt me?" my mom asked as if that was actually the important part of the letter.

"Honestly, probably. But even if she doesn't, she's still right. Aunt Patty is awesome, Mom. She's awesome and still willing to give you a chance after all this time. You've refused to have a relationship with her for over forty years and she still hasn't given up on you. That's pretty amazing if you ask me."

"I don't know, Charlotte." My mom rubbed her hand over her forehead. "I don't harbor any hard feelings toward my sister anymore, but it's just been so long. I don't

even know if we'd have anything in common."

"You're sisters. I'm sure you'll find something." I took my mom's hand and squeezed it tightly until she finally looked at me. "You'll never know unless you try. You should just call her."

“It’s not that easy, Charlotte.”

“Maybe it is.”

“Fine. I’ll do it... sometime.”

I knew my mom too well to actually believe that, so I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “No. You’ll do it now.”

My mom shook her head. “No. No way. I haven’t even prepared. What would I say?”

“Start with hello and go from there.”

“No. I can’t.”

I scrolled through my phone and clicked on my Aunt Patty’s name, then hit the call button. If this was what Nana wanted, I was going to respect her wishes, especially because I knew she was right. This needed to happen. “Too late.”

My mom looked at me with wide eyes as if she was a deer in headlights. After three rings, my Aunt Patty picked up the phone. “Hi, Charlie! It’s been a bit. How are you? Is everything okay?”

I waited for my mom to say something, but after almost a minute of silence passed, I knew that wasn’t happening. “I have someone here who wants to talk to you.”

“Oh! Is it Carter? Olivia? I doubt it’s Ronan since you never get him to stay still long

enough to talk to me.” My aunt laughed, completely unaware of what a big moment this was.

I held my breath while I waited to see if my mom would actually say something this time. After a few seconds, she finally spoke. “It.. it’s me.”

“Sharon?”

My mom nodded. “Yes.”

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

Wow. This is going well. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes because at least my mom had said something. That was a start.

“My mom is ready to talk, but I think it’s better if we do it in person.” I looked right at my mom as I said the next part. “And as long as it’s okay, I think I’ll come along.”

My mom gave me an appreciative smile, so I knew volunteering to come along was the right decision.

“That would be wonderful,” my aunt said after a moment. “Is it really what you want, Sharon?”

I nodded at my mom and she nodded back at me before she finally spoke again. “Yes, it is.”

We spent the next few minutes comparing schedules and finding a date that worked for all of us that was a month away. After I hung up, my mother sat down on her bed

and put her head in her hands. “I’m scared, Charlotte.”

I was pretty sure my mom had never admitted that to me before so I knew this moment was important. I sat down beside her on the bed and took her hand in mine. “What are you scared of?”

My mom shrugged. “I don’t know. Talking to her about the past. Disappointing her. Losing her again. It was easy to get by when I was able to blame her for everything, but this talk could change all of that. I know we haven’t had a relationship in years, but she’s still my big sister. After all this time, when I throw out all my prejudice and blame, I still love her so much and want her to love me, too. Even if I don’t deserve it.”

“I didn’t know you felt that way,” I told her honestly. I truly thought my mom still blamed my Aunt Patty for everything that happened. I was sure she still lived in the fantasy world where she believed she didn’t do anything wrong. “When did it change?”

“It’s been changing slowly over time. You and Jamie have never hesitated to tell me how great she is and of course your nana made a few snide remarks. But the biggest change came after Jamie’s wedding. It was so nice to see her again and I’ve thought about reaching out multiple times, but my fear has always held me back.”

“Well, not anymore.” My mother and I might not have the greatest relationship, but I still knew how important family was, whether it was blood family or chosen family, so I wanted to help her with this.

And who knew? Maybe this could strengthen our relationship even more than the pot brownies did all those years ago.

Since Aunt Patty and my mom lived over seven hours apart, we chose a halfway point in Connecticut to meet up. Since it still wasn't a short drive, we decided to stay in a hotel for one night. Luckily, no one complained when I suggested all getting separate rooms. I knew I would need that space after what was sure to be a mentally taxing day.

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My mom and I left early in the morning, so we could meet my Aunt Patty for a late lunch. The restaurant we met at was a small seafood restaurant that had excellent reviews. As soon as we walked inside, I could tell the reviews hadn't lied. It smelled excellent, so I had to assume the food tasted just as good.

"Charlie?"

I turned around to the sound of my aunt's voice and found her by the entrance looking completely shell-shocked. When my mom's eyes met hers, she wore the exact same expression. With both of them standing motionless as if they didn't know this reunion was taking place, there was no question that they were sisters. Their blonde hair was styled differently and my mom was a bit more stout than my Aunt Patty, but everything else about them was exactly the same.

"Sharon." Aunt Patty laughed and shook her head. "I can't believe you're standing in front of me. I never thought this would actually happen."

My mom held her arms around her body as if she was trying to protect herself from my aunt. "We saw each other at James's wedding a few years ago."

My aunt took a tentative step closer to us. "I know, and that was great, but when I never heard from you again after it, I assumed you still wanted nothing to do with me."

My mom opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the host interrupted. "Are you ladies ready to be seated?"

“Of course,” I said right away since I was pretty sure the other two women with me weren’t going to answer him.

“Great.” The host gave me an awkward smile as if he could sense the tension between them.

But then again, who couldn’t? If tension was fire, this whole town would be up in flames.

The host grabbed three menus then waved his hand at us. “Follow me.”

Once we were sitting, it seemed like the very small baby steps we had made by the door had completely vanished and we were back to square one. I cleared my throat and looked at my mom. “Mom, I think you have a lot you want to say, so why don’t you start?”

“Okay.” My mom brought her hands onto the table and kept her eyes on them as her fingers fidgeted with each other. “I’m not sure where to start or how to put everything I’m feeling into words, so please bear with me.”

Aunt Patty reached across the table and put a hand on top of Mom’s. “Of course. Take your time.”

My mom took a deep breath and blew it out. “First of all, I want you to know I’ve missed you. And even though I spent years convincing myself that I hated you, I never really did. You’re my sister and I’ll always love you no matter what.”

“I’ll always love you no matter what too. I always have.”

“When everything happened... back when I was a teenager... I didn’t understand. All I knew was that my big sister—my best friend—had left without looking back

because she had decided that she liked other girls.”

My Aunt Patty shook her head. “It wasn’t like that at all. I didn’t want to leave. With the way Mom and Dad were treating me, I didn’t feel like I had any other choice.”

“Also, Mom, she didn’t decide to like girls. Please try your best to stay away from those deeply ingrained homophobic beliefs.”

“Oh... I... I didn’t mean it that way, I guess. When you spoke about your preference.” My mom looked at me. “Is that better?”

“Yes.” Minimally, but I’ll give it to you since you’re clearly trying.

“I’m still trying to make sense of how a woman could fall for another woman, but I feel like I’ve made progress. Charlotte might disagree, but I am trying.”

“I can tell you are.” Aunt Patty nodded at me. “You raised an amazing daughter by the way.”

“I don’t know how much I had to do with that, but thank you. She really is wonderful.”

As pathetic as it was, I had to blink back my tears. I think that was the first time my mom complimented me just for being myself. The compliments I received from her growing up came when I was doing the things she wanted me to do, not when I was being true to myself.

“Anyway,” my mom’s hands were still pinned down by Aunt Patty’s so she began wiggling in her seat instead. “I guess I don’t know the whole story of what happened around the time you moved away. Do you think you could share it with me?”

Aunt Patty nodded, her face becoming solemn. It was clear how hard it was for her to relive that time. Still, she did it. She told my mom about the year of conversion therapy her parents put her through. She explained how they made her feel like a stranger in her own house. She let my mom know how badly she wanted to confide in her, but their parents had sworn her to secrecy. With no one to turn to, it got to be too much, and the only choice was to leave.

“My intention was never to leave you,” my aunt explained. “It just so happened that they explained everything to you before I could, and by the time I talked to you, they had already convinced you that I was a monster.”

My aunt removed her hand from my mother’s, then rooted through her purse and grabbed a tissue that she dabbed on her eyes. “Losing you was the hardest thing I’ve ever been through.”

“I... I didn't know any of that. They painted a completely different picture.”

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My aunt chuckled through her tears. “Oh, I know. That’s what they did. It was like that our whole lives. They were always just very good at covering it up.”

“I can’t hate them.” My mom shook her head. “I’m not happy that they did that, but after being without them all this time and only having the memories, it’s not possible for me to see them as monsters—whether that’s what they were or not. So, if that’s what you want, I can’t give it to you.”

My aunt took my mom’s hand once again. “I would never ask you to hate them. Even after all this time and with all of the hard feelings I harbor toward them, I wouldn’t say I hate them. Just like I never hated you. I’ve just missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” My mom smiled for the first time since arriving at the restaurant. “Tell me about your family.”

The rest of lunch was spent swapping stories and making up for way too much missed time. The food was just as amazing as I expected it to be, but it was far overshadowed by watching two sisters mend their broken relationship one story at a time.

After lunch, we stopped by a few shops in town, then went back to the hotel to relax and freshen up before going for dinner at the hotel restaurant.

After showering, I threw myself down on my bed, happy to have some time to myself to breathe. I grabbed my phone and facetimed Reagan, unsure if she would be able to talk when she had all three kids. I was pleasantly surprised when the phone only rang twice before she picked up.

She was sitting on the guest bed at Jamie and Ethan's house looking completely relaxed, and much to my surprise, there were no sounds of children around her. I lifted an eyebrow at her. "Did you finally do it? Did you murder our children?"

Reagan threw her head back in laughter and it was the most beautiful sight in the whole world. It made my heart sting though because all I wanted was to be sitting there beside her.

"Believe it or not, your dad and Ethan volunteered to take them somewhere special so Jamie and I could relax."

"My dad and Ethan? Doing something special? Just the two of them?"

"Well, the two of them and four kids, but yes."

This was crazy. My dad didn't have a bad relationship with Ethan per se, but they also never shared a tight father andson-in-law bond. "Huh. Is the world coming to an end? Because neither of my parents are acting like themselves."

"Speaking of which, how was lunch?"

I perked up at the mention of the meal. "It was great, actually. Mom and Aunt Patty really cleared the air. I think they might actually have a relationship moving forward."

Reagan's face lit up. "That's amazing, babe! There's hope for your parents yet. Wait a second." Reagan smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Are you naked right now? How did I miss that at first?"

"I am. I just got out of the shower."

Reagan licked her lips as she stared wide-eyed at the phone screen. “Move the phone down. I want to see more.”

My body immediately heated up as if her request had set me on fire. There was only one problem. “Where is my brother?”

“He literally just got in the shower. You know how long he takes when he gets one. We have plenty of time.”

Now I was the one who raised my eyebrow. “Plenty of time for what?”

“I think you know exactly what.”

I slowly moved the phone down my body and back up again while Reagan made sounds of appreciation.

“How are you so hot?” she asked when I brought the phone back to my face. “Seriously, you’ve only gotten sexier with time.”

I blushed at her compliments. It was nice to have someone who saw me like that, because I definitely didn’t see myself that way. All I saw were stretch marks and the scar from my c-section, but when Reagan looked at me the way she was looking at me now, I truly felt beautiful.

I nodded my head at her. “I think one of us is a little overdressed.”

“One sec.” Reagan must have laid her phone down on the bed because the screen turned completely black. It stayed like that for a minute or two before she picked the phone back up.

She moved the phone up and down her body in the same way I had and just one look

at her had me so turned on I wanted to scream. My pulse was pounding in my center and I had no doubt that I was already wet. I was in desperate need of release, but I didn't want to touch myself until Reagan told me to. This was her idea after all. I owed it to her to let her take control. She only stayed on her face for a second before sweeping the phone across her body again.

I groaned as I stared at the spots on her that I wish I could touch. "I'm sexy? God, Reagan, have you looked in the mirror lately? How are you almost forty? You're a literal goddess."

"Do me a favor?" Reagan asked, her voice heavy with lust.

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I licked my lips. This is when it gets good. “Anything.”

“Move the phone down between your legs to a spot where I can watch you touch yourself but you can still see the phone to watch me touch myself at the same time.”

Good lord. For as sexy as that sounded, I didn’t feel quite as sexy as I fumbled around trying to figure out the perfect position to put the phone in so everyone could see what they needed to, and I’d still be able to get the job done. Luckily, after a minute or so of trying different positions, I finally found one that worked. It apparently didn’t take Reagan as long so she already had the phone directed right at her center, which was already glistening.

Without another word, we both began touching ourselves. I watched Reagan run her fingers through her folds as I did the same thing. I imagined the fingers I was watching on the screen were the fingers touching me right now. I let myself believe that I was touching the beautiful woman I was watching.

I moved my fingers up to massage my clit and picked up the pace when I noticed Reagan doing the same thing. I was already finding it hard to catch my breath and my clit was throbbing underneath my fingers, so I knew I wasn’t going to last much longer.

I was somehow able to push out words between my deep heaving breaths to let Reagan know what I needed. “Inside. Go inside.”

I almost forgot what I was doing as I watched Reagan shove two fingers deep inside of herself. I lost the ability to think as she moved those fingers in and out, first slowly

and then much faster. After a moment, my pounding center reminded me that I had stopped touching myself.

I used two fingers to mimic exactly what Reagan was doing. I had to fight to keep my eyes open because it felt so damn good I could hardly take it. There was no way I was going to miss the moment she hit just the right spot and sent herself over the edge though. Luckily, it only took a few more thrusts for that to happen. Reagan's body shook as her fingers stilled. Watching her come was enough to push me over the edge and soon I was screaming out in pleasure.

I dropped my phone and let my body fall flat against the bed. "Holy shit," I said when I finally caught my breath.

"Holy shit is right," Reagan said with a laugh. "I can't remember the last time I came that hard."

"Apparently I need to work a little harder the next time we're together, if you're giving yourself the best orgasm."

"Trust me, babe. That was all you. My fingers were at your body's will."

"Well, thank you, because that's exactly what I needed. Lunch went even better than I expected, but that doesn't mean there weren't some awkward moments. I'm feeling refreshed and ready for part two now."

"Part two of what?" Reagan asked, the sexual innuendo dripping from her voice.

"Unfortunately, not the part two I wish I could have. That will have to wait until I get home. Right now, I have to get ready. I'm sure my mom is going to want to talk to me before we meet my aunt for dinner."

“Definitely holding you to part two, but have fun tonight.”

“Thanks! Have fun with my brother.”

Reagan pushed her bottom lip out in an exaggerated frown. “I’ll try, but he’s not nearly as hot as you.”

“Goodbye, Reagan.”

Reagan blew me a kiss before ending the call. As predicted, my mom came to my room an hour before dinner so we could discuss lunch and make a plan (her words, not mine) for dinner. In the end, I reminded her she just needed to be herself and not overthink anything, which is exactly what she seemed to do.

With most of the awkwardness out of the way, dinner went even better than lunch had. My mom and Aunt Patty even started to make plans for future get-togethers.

“Charlotte, didn’t you say the kids wanted to have their birthday party at the skating rink close to your house this year?” my mom asked as we ate dessert. “You must invite your aunt.”

Funny since you are the same woman who told me not to invite her in the past. “That’s what they had agreed on after the last time we took them there, but it’s still a few months away, so that could definitely change.” I smiled across the table at my aunt. “But my mom is right. Whatever we end up doing, you should definitely come.”

The smile that spread across my aunt’s face could have lit up the darkest night. “I’ll be there.”

Chapter 11

Reagan

It was a rare occasion when the triplets all agreed on something, so I was shocked when they not only came to an agreement on where to have their eighth birthday party, but also that none of them changed their minds after deciding. Roll 'N' Rock Skating Rink was still the exact same as it had been when I was a kid, down to the multicolored flooring, graffiti-covered walls, and the smell of feet mixed with nachos.

I took a deep breath when we walked inside and let all of the sensations overtake me. “Every time we’re here it’s like coming home again.” I nudged Charlie and pointed to a dark booth in the corner. “Did I ever tell you that that was the spot where I first made out with a girl?”

Charlie rolled her eyes at me. “Only every single time we come here. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you wish you had married... What was her name? Oh yeah—Constantine Clarke.”

“Ah yes. Sadly, that was never going to happen since I found out after we made out that Constantine was only using me to get some guy’s attention.”

“Ouch. What a bitch.”

I waved my hand. “Nah. Worked out for everyone. I married you and she got knocked up by the guy she was trying to impress.”

“Good times. No wonder this place means so much to you,” Charlie joked.

“I know, right? Only the best times at Roll 'N' Rock.”

After checking in, someone led us to the party room. We decided that this year's party would be mostly family again since the triplets were at the age that if you invited a few kids from the class you needed to invite the whole class, and unfortunately since they each had a different teacher, that was way too many kids. We did allow each of them to invite one friend, and while they weren't happy about it, they at least hadn't put up too much of a fight (except Olivia who thought she deserved to invite two friends since she couldn't choose).

Before long, everyone started to arrive. Ronan and his friend went right to the arcade with Finn, while Olivia and her friend didn't waste any time before putting on their skates and hitting the rink. Of course, the friend Carter invited had bought her a book and the two of them insisted on skimming through the pages together before they put their skates on.

Once I was finally able to convince them that they should actually skate at this skating party, I went out onto the rink with them.

“Hey, pretty lady,” I said when I skated past Charlie. “Can I have this skate?”

“Excuse me?” Charlie asked with a laugh.

“You’ve never done a couple’s skate before? One person skates forward, the other backward. That way we can make googly eyes at each other while we go around.”

Charlie laughed once again. “I really hope this is you volunteering to be the one to skate backward, because there is no way in hell I am.”

“Of course I am.” I held my hand out toward her. “Please? It’ll be super romantic.”

“Well, in that case...” Charlie reached for my hand and I spun around so I was now skating backward.

When I smiled at her, she smiled back and my stomach flipped as if it was the first time I was seeing her. I held her hands tighter and picked up my pace slightly.

Charlie raised an eyebrow at me. “Why do I feel like you’re just showing off now?”

“Maybe I am.” I winked at Charlie. “Is it working?”

Charlie dropped one of my hands to bring her thumb and forefinger closer together. “Maybe a little bit.”

I felt like I was a teenager again while I led her around that skating rink. Everything else melted away, and for that moment, it was just the two of us. I took in Charlie’s long blonde hair that I had run my fingers through countless times and those blue eyes that I still got lost in. I stared at the mouth that constantly brought me pleasure in more ways than one. I was about to lean in and kiss that mouth, when I realized it was moving.

Charlie was saying something. I shook my head to pop the bubble I was in so I could

actually comprehend what she was saying.

“Kid.”

Huh? Oh! My smile grew even bigger. “I know. This makes me feel like a kid again too.”

Charlie removed her hand from mine and pointed at something behind me. “No. Kid. Right behind you. You’re going to hit them.”

I looked back just in time to see a little girl sitting right in my path about two feet in front of me. I quickly swerved to miss her, but that caused me to lose my own footing and soon enough I found myself falling to the ground. In that last moment of desperation, I tried to reach for anything that would keep me from ending up on my butt. Unfortunately, the closest thing to grab was my wife, so instead of staying up, I took both of us down.

Charlie landed on top of me with a thud and it took me a second to catch my breath after having the wind knocked out of me. When I focused on Charlie, she was laughing hysterically. “So romantic, babe.”

“Mommy. Mama. Are you okay?” Carter asked as she skated up beside us.

Before either of us could answer, Olivia was standing over us as well with her arms crossed in front of her chest. “You two are so embarrassing,” she said before rolling her eyes and skating away.

Once we assured Carter we were fine, she skated away as well. I stared up at Charlie and pushed a piece of her hair behind her ear. Absolutely breathtaking. “I knew I’d get you on top of me in one way or another today.”

Charlie laughed even harder now. “I hate you.” She leaned down and gave me a quick kiss on the lips. “But I also love you so much.”

As much as I loved the current position we were in, I knew we couldn’t stay like this forever, so I gently pushed her off of me. “Sorry. I think parents might start complaining if we stay here too long. Especially because if you stay on top of me much longer, I won’t be able to control myself. I don’t think anyone would appreciate that show.”

Charlie grabbed onto the wall and pulled herself up, then held her hand down to help me up. I was so wobbly that I almost pulled her back down, but luckily, she had a firm hold on the wall so she was able to keep me upright.

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We only did one more lap before there was an announcement over the loudspeaker that it was time for the triplet's birthday celebration in their party room.

"I saw that spill you took out there," Jamie said with a laugh when I skated into the room.

I pushed him playfully, almost falling in the process, but catching my balance at the last second. "Yeah. Whatever. If you had a hot wife like me, you'd also be doing anything in your power to get underneath her."

Jamie scrunched up his nose and glared at me. "That's wrong on so many levels."

"What's wrong?"

I jumped at the sound of Mrs. Miller's voice behind me. When I turned to look at her, I gave her my sweetest, kiss ass smile. "How slick the floors are out on the rink. I can't stay on my feet out there."

Mrs. Miller laughed. "That's exactly why you won't find me out there today. I'm too old for that."

Jamie snorted after his mom walked away. "Smooth."

I smirked, because he was right. "I know."

I helped the kids get into their seats at the long table that took up most of the room, then turned to find our party host bringing in the pizza with Charlie's Aunt Patty

following closely behind him and juggling three large presents in her arms.

“Let me help you with that.” I slipped behind the host and grabbed the two presents on top.

Aunt Patty smiled at me over the one remaining present in her arms. “Thank you so much. I was sure there was going to be a crash any moment.”

“Of course.” I carried the two presents over to the small gift table in the corner and directed Aunt Patty to lay the remaining one there as well. “Thank you so much for coming. It’s really great to have you.” Now that Charlie’s mom finally didn’t threaten our lives if we invited you.

“I’m so happy to be here. It’s going to be a great weekend.”

Weekend. Huh. I guess that made sense since Charlie’s Aunt Patty didn’t live close, but if I had known she was staying, I would have offered her our guest room. “Are you staying nearby? We don’t have any plans the rest of the weekend, so we would love to spend time with you.”

“That’s very nice of you to offer,” Aunt Patty smiled across the room and gave a slight wave to Mrs. Miller. “Sharon actually invited me to stay in Maryland with them for a few days.”

“Oh, wow! That’s amazing!” I knew things had turned around since Charlie chaperoned the reunion with her mom and aunt, but I didn’t know they were this good.

“Yes.” She leaned closer to me as if she had a secret to share. “Don’t tell anyone this, but I’m actually a little bit nervous. My sister and I have spoken quite a few times over these past few months, but I don’t know too much about her husband.

“I have a little secret for you as well,” I said, leaning close in the same way she had just done. “If you can handle your sister, you can definitely handle her husband.”

Aunt Patty brought her hand to her mouth to mask her laughter. That’s when it hit me that she was the only one present from her family. “I take it she didn’t invite the rest of your crew.”

“She did.” Aunt Patty sighed. “I could tell she was hesitant to offer though and I didn’t want to do anything to make them uncomfortable. My family has gotten through life free from most homophobia. I’m not going to subject them to it now, even if it’s subtle or unintentional.”

“That definitely makes sense. The Millers have come a long way since the time I first met them and they yelled at Jamie for not carrying my bags, which is apparently a man’s job, but they still have a long way to go.”

“At least they’re here. That’s more than can be said for some people.”

“I know, and as long as they don’t do anything to potentially mess up my kids the way they tried to mess up my wife and best friend, they can continue to be here.”

Aunt Patty smiled sweetly and squeezed my hand. “You’re a great mother, Reagan. I’m really glad Charlie and the kids have you.”

I pointed toward the table because I needed to end this conversation before I became choked up. I was extra emotional today because of my kids being so old already. I had no idea where the time had gone. Stop. Don’t cry at their birthday party. Don’t be that mother. “Why don’t you take a seat? Lunch is being served. I’m sure you’re hungry after your long drive.”

“Definitely. I’ve been sitting for hours though, so I think I’ll grab a slice and stand to

eat it if you don't mind."

"Of course. Help yourself. Have a nice time. I'll catch up with you more later."

Once the party had officially started, things went by way too quickly to actually catch up with anyone. Right after pizza, the cake was brought out. After singing happy birthday and eating cake, the kids begged to go back out onto the skating rink. They groaned when I told them they had to take a picture with all of their party guests first, but luckily, I was still able to get it.

The kids then pulled me and Charlie onto the skating rink with them and we skated in circles for the next hour until I physically couldn't do it anymore and begged the kids to let me go. They did, which was good since this was around the time the guests started to leave. After fighting with the kids once again to get them off of the rink, we said goodbye and hugged all of our family members. The kids immediately went back out and stayed there until their friends' parents came to pick them up.

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The only way we were able to get them off the rink was by offering to stop for ice cream on our way home. We stopped at our favorite ice cream shop and sat together inside while we ate. With the kids doing sports and starting to hang out with friends without us, it felt like moments when just the five of us were together were fleeting.

“What was everyone’s favorite part of today?” I asked before taking a big lick of ice cream.

Olivia rolled her eyes at me. “Obviously skating.”

Ronan smacked her arm. “Not obviously. That wasn’t my favorite part. My favorite part was getting the new record on the basketball game in the arcade.”

“You got it?” I stuck my hand in the air for a high five. “Good job, dude!”

Charlie gently poked Carter’s side as she smiled at her lovingly. “What was your favorite part, sweetie?”

“Getting a new book from Evelyn.”

“A book?” Ronan laughed. “That’s not fun.”

I gave Ronan my best mom look to tell him I wasn’t happy about him making fun of his sister. “We all enjoy different things, and that’s great. Personally, I love reading. She definitely gets that from me.”

Carter’s face lit up as if I had just told her she had something in common with her

favorite celebrity. “Exactly. I’m just like Mommy.”

“You sure are, kiddo.” I put my arm around her and pulled her tight up against me, then looked back across the table at Ronan. “Now, I think your brother has something he wants to say to you.”

Ronan sighed, but then turned his attention to his sister. “I’m sorry I laughed at you. It’s cool that you like to read. Maybe someday you’ll write a book and Mommy can draw the pictures for it.”

“I would love that,” Carter said, her smile even bigger now. “Mommy, can we do that sometime?”

“There’s nothing I want more.” It was true. Even though they made me want to pull my hair out at times, I would take any special time I could with my kids.

Once we finally got home, we were all tired so we took it easy the rest of the night. Carter read her new book, Ronan played video games, and Olivia talked on the phone with the friend she had just seen a few hours ago. Charlie and I snuggled on the couch and watched mindless television until it was time to help them get ready for bed.

Once the bedtime routine was over and the house was quiet again, I went into the kitchen and opened a bottle of wine. I poured two glasses and carried them into the family room for me and Charlie.

Charlie’s fingers tickled mine as she took the glass from my hand. “It’s like you read my mind.”

I sat down next to her and slowly took that first sip of wine, enjoying the feeling as the warmth traveled down my throat. Today was perfect. Crazy, but perfect. Just like the rest of our life. “Can you believe we have three eight-year-olds?” I asked Charlie.

Charlie laughed. “I still haven’t fully grasped the fact that we have three that are the same age.”

“I know, right? It’s so crazy. Three kids to get ready for middle school dances. Three kids to teach to drive. Three kids to buy prom outfits for. Three kids to send to college. Three weddings.”

Charlie laughed and put her hand on my chest. “I think you might be getting a little ahead of yourself. They’re eight, not eighteen.”

I sighed. I couldn’t shake the feeling that life was racing by. “I know, but think of how fast these past eight years went. Before we know it another eight will pass and then another eight. And then they’ll be gone.”

“Gone where?” Charlie asked with another laugh. “We don’t lose them just because they go to college or move out of town or get married. They’ll always be in our lives in one way or another. And again, let me remind you one more time, they are eight.”

“You’re right. Sorry. I’m just being extra sentimental right now. Maybe I’m getting my period.”

“Probably. It’s normally me who acts like this.”

“Just promise me one thing?” I set down my glass of wine and lay my head on Charlie’s shoulder.

Charlie rested her head against mine. “Anything.”

“Let’s not take any moment for granted. Let’s enjoy all the time we have with them and with each other. Forever.”

“We will. I promise.”

Chapter 12

Charlie

The Middle School Years (11-13)

“All right. Get together, everyone. Say middle school,” Reagan said as she held her phone out in front of her and made an exaggerated smile as if the kids didn’t know how to do it.

Then again, maybe she was right since the only one currently doing what she said was Carter. Ronan had his arms crossed in front of his chest and Olivia was, to no one’s surprise, rolling her eyes.

“This is so lame,” Ronan whined.

“Yeah, really. We’re too old for first day of school pictures,” Olivia said.

“Well, you better get used to it.” I pointed to Reagan. “I’m pretty sure your mom is going to make you take one up until your first day of college.”

“And on the first day of your first adult job,” Reagan joked.

Except, knowing her, I wasn’t so sure it was a joke. The older she got, the more sentimental she became, especially when it came to the kids.

“If you smile, we’ll do something fun after picking you up.”

“Can we go to the batting cages?” Ronan asked, a smile finally coming to his face.

“Seriously?” Olivia asked. “The batting cages aren’t nearly as fun as mini golf. What do you think, Carter?”

For a second, Carter looked like a deer caught in the headlights, most likely due to the fact that she unfortunately wasn’t used to her opinionated siblings asking for her input. Then she looked at me and shrugged. “Why can’t we do both? They are at the same place. Plus, it’s right next to the bookstore. That way, we all get to do something we enjoy.”

Reagan pointed at Carter. “See. That’s why she’s the smart one!”

Olivia scowled at Reagan. “We’re all smart.”

“She’s obviously joking,” I said. “Now please smile so we can take this picture and get to school.”

The kids smiled as if they were perfect little angels and Reagan snapped the picture. If I was like too many other parents my age, I would’ve posted the picture on social media and pretended that the minutes leading up to it weren’t filled with fighting and bribes. Instead, I took Reagan’s phone and sent it to the chat we had with her family and added, “Only had to bribe them with batting cages, mini golf, and the bookstore to get this picture.”

Within seconds, Reagan’s brother replied with, “I love how it’s so easy to figure out who each of those bribes are for.”

When we picked them up from school, the kids were buzzing with excitement. It was hard to figure out what any of them were saying when they were all talking at the exact same time.

“And they already told us when the first dance is going to be,” Olivia said, loud enough to be heard over the other two voices. “It’s only two weeks away. Marty and CJ both asked me to dance with them as soon as they found out. After the dance, I’m going to decide which of them gets to be my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Reagan asked, aghast. “We’re in the boyfriend years already?” She pointed between Ronan and Carter. “Are you two getting boyfriends too?”

Ronan shook his head. “I only like girls.”

“Dope. Me too.” Reagan held her hand out for a fist bump, which Ronan reluctantly returned. “How ’bout you?” she asked Carter. “Any boyfriends or girlfriends?”

Carter’s face became serious as if she was considering the question. “I only really care about school and friends right now.”

“But,” Olivia wrapped her arm around Carter. “We’re going to try out for the soccer team together.”

Olivia’s soccer playing days didn’t even last up until the time of the first dance, when she decided she would rather cheer for sports than play them. Carter had made the team and decided to stick with it, but I had a feeling that was only because she was determined not to quit and probably wouldn’t do it again the next year.

The one thing all three kids could agree on was that they were very excited for the dance. All for different reasons of course. Carter wanted to hang out with some of the new friends she had made, Olivia wanted to decide which suitor would get the pleasure of being her first boyfriend, and Ronan wanted to play basketball in the gym.

Once they were ready, Reagan took their picture and we drove them to the school together. “Their first dance,” Reagan said with a sigh after they were out of the car.

“I know, right? I feel so old.”

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Reagan lifted an eyebrow at me. “Want me to help you feel young again?”

“That depends. What did you have in mind?” If I was being honest, the smirk on her face made me feel equal parts excited and scared.

“Let’s park the car in the overflow parking lot between the schools and reenact that night you jumped me after you figured out I wasn’t actually dating your brother.”

“You really want to reenact the night the cops showed up while we were trying to have sex in my car?”

“It was your ex-boyfriend. He was hardly a cop.”

She did have a point and that parking lot was dark and empty. Not to mention the fact that it had been forever since we had sex and just the mention of it had me very turned on. “Fine. But if we get caught and need to be bailed out of jail, we’re calling one of your high school friends. I don’t care how long it’s been since you’ve talked to them.”

Reagan shrugged. “Fine with me.”

I drove to the parking lot and parked in the farthest and darkest spot. I turned off the car to decrease the risk of someone seeing us, then turned toward Reagan and ran my hands over my legs. “Do these sweatpants turn you on as much as my shorts did that night?”

“Is it weird if I say they turn me on more?”

I laughed a long hearty laugh. Just when I thought I couldn't love this woman more she says something that makes me realize I can. "I'd expect nothing less from you, baby."

"Do I still turn you on as much as I did when I was the straight girlfriend of your brother?"

I laughed again. "That's a definite yes."

Reagan motioned toward her lap. "So, I guess if we are re-enacting that night, you belong right here."

I looked around the parking lot as if someone would have suddenly snuck in and was watching us. When I found that it was still completely empty, I did as directed. It took a bit more maneuvering than I remembered, but finally I was able to find a not-so-terrible position facing Reagan with my hands clasped together behind her neck. I leaned in and kissed her slowly at first, but picked up the pace when she wrapped her arms around me.

As the kiss heated up, I moved my hips against Reagan's lap to get some release from the currents pulsing through my body already. As I pushed into her harder, I felt something in her pants. What the hell?

I moved my hand into Reagan's pants and gasped. "You're packing right now? You've never done that before." That's when it hit me. "Wait. You were planning on this."

"Planning would mean I assumed you'd say yes. I was hoping."

"You're quite the romantic, Mrs. Miller-Cooper." I pulled the object out of her pants and stroked it. "But I don't recall this happening that first night in my car."

“Who knows what would’ve happened if Jarrett hadn’t shown up.”

“Maybe you should show me now.”

Reagan licked her lips and nodded at me. “Take your pants off and I’ll show you.”

After struggling to find a position where I could maneuver my pants off I was finally able to pull them down. I let them rest around my ankles and repositioned myself on Reagan. I leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “Where do you want me?”

“It’s not about where you’re going to be. I want to be inside of you. I guess I should probably get you wet first though, huh?”

“That shouldn’t be hard.” In fact, I felt myself becoming wet the moment I realized Reagan had something extra between her legs.

When Reagan brought her hand to my center, I purred with delight. As if that wasn’t enough, Reagan ran two fingers through my wetness, then brought those fingers to her lips and licked them clean.

I swore I could’ve come just from watching that. I wanted to see her do it over and over again. But Reagan was on a mission and moved her fingers against me harder and harder. I pushed her hand away when everything around me started to disappear and my muscles began to spasm.

“I need you inside of me now.”

Reagan smirked. “Your wish is my command, my queen.”

She held the dildo in place while I lowered myself on top of it. It felt so good going into me that I thought I might orgasm before the first thrust. Luckily, I was able to

hold myself together enough to start moving on top of it.

I lifted my body up and down so I could fuck myself on Reagan's dildo. The pressure built within me as I moved faster and pushed it in further. When the pain came, I only fucked myself harder. Pain mixed with pleasure and the most intense orgasm I ever experienced shot through me.

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I laid my head on Reagan's shoulder as I struggled to catch my breath. "Wow. That was... wow."

Reagan let out a breathless laugh. "That good, huh?"

"Just give me a second and I'll return the favor." Although I had no idea how I would ever top that.

"There's nothing to return. Watching you move against me. Feeling you move against me. Yeah, don't worry. I'm good."

Slowly, the recollection of where we were returned to me and I suddenly became very aware of the position of my half naked body. "I guess I should pull my pants up, huh?"

"I mean I'm not making you, but I guess if you must."

I moved back to my seat and pulled up my pants and underwear. I had just pulled them over my butt when red and blue lights blinded me.

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit." I wiggled around in my seat while I tried to figure out what to do.

"Just act normal," she said out of the side of her mouth. "And let me do the talking."

When the light from a flashlight shined on my window, I rolled it down and sat back so Reagan could take control."

“Hey, officer, we just decided to pull back here to look at the stars while we wait for our kids to be done at their first middle school dance.” She pointed across the parking lot. “We can leave if you’d like.”

The police officer waved his hand and chuckled. “No. You’re fine. I was just making sure you weren’t two teenagers. Do you know they try to come here to have sex?” He scoffed. “Kids.”

Reagan brought her hand to her chest, looking like she had just been scandalized. “No. Please tell me that’s not true.”

He took his hat off and rubbed his balding head. “Unfortunately, it is. I’m just glad tonight I stumbled upon responsible mature adults instead.”

“That’s us.” Reagan smiled widely. “The picture of maturity.”

The officer talked to Reagan for another minute then told us to have a good night and left us alone in the parking lot again.

I let out my breath and realized I had been holding it that whole time. Then I looked out in front of me and saw the stars scattered around the sky. “The stars really do look beautiful tonight.”

“We have permission to look at them. Want to sit on the hood and do just that?”

“Stargaze until our kids are done at their first dance? What could be more perfect?”

We were silent as we sat on the hood of our car, hands resting on top of each other. There was so much I could have said at the moment. I could have told Reagan how much I loved the life we created together and that I was so happy we still had that spark after so many years together, but I didn’t need to. Because she already knew.

She always had from that very first moment that we met out in my parents' driveway.

The night flew by and soon it was time to pick the kids up from the dance. "So, which boy did you choose?" I asked Olivia as the kids got into the car.

"Peter Simcox."

Peter? Was I losing my memory already? That name didn't sound familiar at all. I furrowed my eyebrows at Reagan and was happy when I saw that she seemed just as confused. "Peter? I thought it was two other boys you were choosing between."

Olivia shrugged. "Me too, but then Peter asked me to dance, and he's a lot cuter than the other two." She looked at her siblings. "Isn't Peter the best looking boy in our class?"

"I don't really pay attention to that," Carter said, already picking up the book she had left in the car.

"Maybe second cutest after me," Ronan said smugly.

At least my son doesn't lack confidence.

Olivia scrunched up her nose. "Ew. You're not cute. You're my brother." Her expression suddenly changed to one of excitement. "Oh my god. I was talking to Ellen Geller tonight. She's in eighth grade, and she told me the eighth graders get to have a dance with just them at the end of the school year. They even get to sleepover. How cool is that? I can't wait."

Ronan chortled. "Eighth grade is forever away."

"It'll be here before you know it. These years are going to go by quickly." They

already are.

I wish I hadn't been right, but I was. Middle school flew by, and before I knew it, the kids were getting ready for their eighth grade dance. Luckily, we got to be part of it since Reagan and I had volunteered to chaperone. Ronan and Carter were okay with our decision, but of course Olivia told us we needed to act like we didn't know them. It was useless since we already knew most of their friends and classmates, but we still respected her wishes to let them go in before us.

We stood outside of the car at the school while Carter waited for her siblings to give themselves one last look in the car's side mirrors.

I turned to Carter. "Do you think you'll dance with anyone tonight?" Her brother and sister had both been very vocal about who they would be dancing with, but she hadn't said anything.

Carter shrugged. "I doubt it. The person I like doesn't like me."

As her mother, that was hard for me to believe. I didn't understand how anyone couldn't like my perfect daughter. "How do you know?"

"She has a boyfriend. I don't think she likes girls at all."

Before I could say anything else, Olivia grabbed her hand and started pulling her away. "Come on. Carmen and Isabella are waiting for us inside."

Once our children were out of earshot, Reagan leaned close to me. "Did our daughter

just come out to us?”

I smiled with pride as I watched them walk away. “No. Because she didn’t have to.”

There were many times I questioned if I was doing the right thing as a parent, but this definitely wasn’t one of them. Sure, it was easier for a girl with two moms to admit she liked girls, but the fact that she didn’t feel the need to turn it into a big deal made me happy. Her “coming out” experience was so much different than mine and I was proud I could give that to her.

Reagan must have been feeling the same way I was, because she put her arm around me and sighed contentedly. “We’re doing an okay job, aren’t we?”

“We definitely are.” I nodded my head toward the school. “Now what do you say we really embarrass our children and go bust a move on the dance floor?”

Reagan held her hand out toward me and when I took it, she surprised me by spinning me around and dipping me then placing a soft, yet mind-numbing kiss on my lips.

“Let’s do it.”

The night flew by as we danced together and pretended to look for inappropriate dancing. The only child we ended up embarrassing was Olivia. The other two had fun dancing with us. Once their classmates all said how cool Charlie and I were, even Olivia wasn’t embarrassed anymore.

When it was time for the students to get into their sleeping bags and go to sleep, Reagan and I were assigned hallway duty, which meant we were responsible for making sure no one snuck away to... well, do whatever it is eighth graders do when they sneak away. I refused to think about what I would have been doing at that age now that I had children who could be doing the same thing.

After a few hours of talking and watching shows on our phones, I could hardly keep my eyes open.

“Do you want to take shifts monitoring?” Reagan asked. “I could take the first one so you can shut your eyes.”

“No, I’m fine.” The big, unintentional yawn that followed my words completely blew my cover.

Reagan laughed. “Just shut your eyes. I’m fine. I promise.”

I laid my head against her shoulder and finally let my eyes close. “Can you believe our kids are going to be in high school soon?” I asked sleepily.

“Not one bit. It’s insane. I feel like I was just in high school. How the hell do I have three kids who are?”

“Do you think we’ll survive?” I asked, only half kidding.

“I honestly don’t know, but I guess we’ll find out soon.”

I sighed. Much too soon.

Chapter 13

Reagan

The High School Years (14-18)

“Photo time!” As I lined the kids up on our front porch, I took a good look at them.

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All three of them had my hazel eyes, but aside from that, they really had become their own people. Ronan was tall with shaggy dirty blonde hair that was always falling in front of his eyes (yet, he still refused to cut it). He was wearing athletic shorts and his football jersey and wore the sly grin on his face that I was getting very used to.

Olivia was dressed in jeans and a cheerleading sweatshirt. I knew it killed her to wear a sweatshirt on the first day, but that was apparently what the cheerleading squad had agreed on. Her brown hair was cut to her shoulders and now had purple tips which she had done over the summer to make herself stand out (aka to get people to stop confusing her with her sister).

Carter was also wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, but the sweatshirt was by choice in her case and much baggier than the one Olivia had on. She had kept her brown hair as it was, with its original color and hanging a few inches below her shoulders.

After getting the pictures, we drove them to school. Not one of them looked back when they walked in together, and it took everything inside of me not to cry. When did they get so old?

“You’re trying not to cry, aren’t you?” Charlie asked.

I scoffed. “Of course not. It’s just high school. Why would I cry about that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because our babies are growing up in the blink of an eye.”

There was a crack to her voice and when I looked over I realized that she wasn’t trying to hold back her tears. They were running freely down her cheeks.

“You were right. I was trying to hold them back, but really, when did they get so damn old?”

“I don’t know, but I’m really glad I decided to take today off or else I might start crying in front of a patient. Especially since most of my patients are the same age I feel like our kids still should be.”

I took her hand and squeezed it. No matter how much changed, one thing always stayed the same and it was the amount of love I felt for this woman. Actually, that wasn’t true. I still continued to love her more and more every day, even when it felt like that shouldn’t be possible.

“You feeling up to a breakfast date?”

Charlie smiled at me and it set my heart on fire. “With you? Always.”

“When are your parents getting into town?” I asked Charlie while we ate our breakfast.

Charlie rolled her eyes. “It sounds like they’re coming on Thursday. I don’t know why they can’t wait until Friday. Ronan’s game isn’t until seven.”

Everyone was very excited that Ronan had made the varsity football team as a freshman, but Mr. and Mrs. Miller were especially excited. It was as if watching Ronan play football and Olivia cheerlead was the perfect way to relive the glory days of when Charlie and Jamie were in high school. I was just hoping they didn’t make it into such a big deal that they hurt Carter’s feelings for not participating in any sports. It’s not like they didn’t have a lot to be proud of with her. She was already talking about all of the clubs she wanted to join, including future business leaders of America and mock UN.

“They need time to walk around town and brag about how they have a football playing grandson and cheerleading granddaughter.”

Charlie fake gagged. “I don’t understand why that’s still so important to them.”

“Haven’t you heard? The only way to succeed in life is to be a cheerleader or a football player,” I said sarcastically.

“Does that go for male cheerleaders and female football players, too?”

I brought my hand to my chest as if I was offended that she would even suggest that. “How could you say such a thing? Those do not exist.”

Charlie laughed, but after a few seconds, her face became serious again. “I need to tell my parents Carter likes girls. I don’t want to make a big deal out of it, because it’s not, but if she ends up getting a girlfriend at some point, I want to make sure they don’t do or say something ridiculous.”

I nodded. “That makes sense, because if they ever do something to hurt those kids, they can forget ever seeing them again.” I could feel my face getting red just at the thought.

“I love how protective you are of our family.” Charlie reached across the table and put her hand on top of mine and I felt some of my anger melting away.

“I just know how much they hurt you and Jamie, and obviously I can’t go back and stop that from happening, but I won’t let it happen to my kids.”

“Me either. That’s why we need to have this talk.”

*

Halftime of Ronan's football game, when Carter went to sit with some of her friends and my parents went to the concession stand, brought the perfect opportunity to talk to Charlie's parents.

Charlie was running her mouth about the most random topics and I could tell it was because she was putting off the conversation we actually needed to be having.

I cleared my throat to get everyone's attention and took Charlie's hand. "We have something important we need to talk to you about." I stopped there so Charlie could take over if she wanted to since they were her parents.

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“Um, yeah.” Charlie squeezed my hand tightly. It broke my heart that even after all this time her parents still caused her to return to that scared little girl. “It’s about Carter. We really don’t want to make a big deal about it since it isn’t one, but Carter likes girls.”

Mrs. Miller furrowed her eyebrows. “Did she tell you to talk to us?”

Charlie shook her head. “No, because she doesn’t see it as anything that needs to be discussed, which makes sense, and we’re glad she feels that way. But we wanted you to know so that you don’t hurt her, intentionally or unintentionally, if she tells you about a girlfriend in the future.”

“Really, Charlotte? Are we still stuck in the past? I have a son, daughter, and sister who like the same gender. I think I know how to talk to gay people at this point.”

Charlie huffed. “The fact that you just said you know how to talk to gay people tells me you really don’t since you should talk to gay people the exact same way you talk to straight people, because there’s no difference.”

“Charlotte, don’t tell me—”

Charlie put up her hand to stop her mom. Thank god. “I’m not trying to fight with you. I just want you to know that if Carter ever introduces you to a girlfriend, you need to react the exact same way you would if Ronan introduced you to a girlfriend. Don’t get me wrong, I’m appreciative of the place we’re at now, but if you ever cause her even an ounce of the pain that you caused me, our kids will be out of your lives forever.”

Charlie's mom opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but instead, her body stiffened and she stared straight ahead. Charlie's dad leaned over her to squeeze Charlie's hand. "If or when Carter gets a girlfriend, we will welcome her with open arms. You don't have to worry about that."

With Carter being so focused on school and her extracurriculars, I wasn't sure if that was going to be a worry anytime soon anyway, but I was wrong.

Charlie

In the middle of their sophomore year, Carter and Olivia walked through the front door chattering back and forth excitedly. "You have to tell them. They'll be so excited," Olivia said.

"I don't know. What if it doesn't last?" Carter asked. "I don't want to make it into a big thing and have her end up dumping me next week."

My ears perked up at that. My little girl had a girlfriend. Sure, both Olivia and Ronan had dated but their relationships were never long-lasting. Since Carter never jumped into anything without giving it careful consideration, I figured a relationship for her would be more serious from the beginning.

"Doesn't last?" Olivia laughed. "Marcie Bishop has been making googly eyes at you all year. I can't believe it took you this long to finally ask her out."

"I had to make sure she was someone I could see myself with long-term. I don't see the point in starting a relationship that is destined to fail."

"Because relationships are fun. Kissing is fantastic. If you ask me, it's so much better when you know you'll be kissing another guy in a few weeks. Or in your case, another girl."

There was a moment of silence before Carter responded again and even though I couldn't see her, I pictured her shaking her head while she considered Olivia's words. "That's just not my thing. I really like Marcie. I don't want to kiss anyone else."

"But you do want to kiss her, huh?" Olivia teased.

"Oh, shut up," Carter responded.

"What? My baby sister is going on her first official date and about to get her first kiss. How could I not be excited?"

"Baby sister? Really? It was four minutes."

"Still counts."

A minute later, the two girls walked into the kitchen where I was sitting at the counter. Both of their eyes went wide when they saw me.

"Mom?" Carter asked. "What are you doing home already?"

"My last three patients were siblings and they ended up canceling, so I decided to come home so I could be here to greet you."

"That's cool." Olivia sat down at the table, but she kept making faces at Carter and looking between the two of us.

I pretended I didn't notice because I didn't want her to feel like she had to tell me anything she didn't want to. I wanted it to be her decision in her time.

Carter took a seat next to Olivia and fidgeted with her hands on top of the table. "I want to tell you something, Mama."

I watched her hands and face closely, which both showed signs of hesitance. “Are you sure? Because if this is something you’re not ready to share with me, I completely understand.”

Carter’s face turned red from my words, but they also caused her to stop fidgeting and a large grin to spread across her face. “No, I do want to tell you. I really do. Just don’t make it into a big deal, okay?”

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I put both hands in the air. “Of course. No big deals will be made. I promise.”

Carter took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “I have a date on Friday.”

“That’s really cool. Who is it with?”

“Her name is Marcie Bishop. We’re in FBLA and Mock UN together.”

“She’s also a starter on the JV basketball team and super hot,” Olivia added. “You know, if you are into women.”

“Who’s super hot?” Reagan asked as she walked into the room.

Carter’s face turned even more red, but if Olivia noticed, she didn’t seem to care. She pointed her thumb at her sister. “Carter’s girlfriend.”

Carter shook her head. “She’s not my girlfriend. It’s just a date.”

“But she will be your girlfriend.” Olivia looked from Carter to me and Reagan. “Seriously, Marcie is obsessed, in a super cute way, of course.”

“Oh my god, will you stop?” Carter asked, but the smile on her face told me she actually didn’t mind her sister’s teasing in this case.

“What? I’m serious. This is the real deal, sis. I have a good feeling that it’s going to last. By senior year, you two will be a complete power couple. I would even go as far as to say that you would be named joint homecoming queens, but that title belongs to

yours truly.”

*

It turned out Olivia was right about both of those things. Carter sat on the bleachers holding hands with Marcie while the two of them and the rest of our family watched Olivia get crowned homecoming queen. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t fill me with pride to see my daughter crowned as homecoming queen the same way I had been many many years ago. What made me even more proud was the reason she was voted as queen. Sure, she was loud (and a little bit full of herself), but she also had a heart of gold. She ran fundraisers so people who couldn’t afford the athletics fee at the school would get it covered. She had tons of friends, but still made sure everyone felt included. She wasn’t just the school’s cheerleading captain, but also her brother and sister’s biggest cheerleader. Missing Ronan’s football games was never an option due to cheerleading, but she also never missed anything Carter was involved in. She cycled through boyfriends as if they were fashion trends, but the guys she broke up with all still had excellent things to say about her.

“I’m so happy for her,” Carter said, her voice cracking slightly. When I looked over at her, her eyes were tearing up just as I suspected.

“Aww, babe.” Marcie leaned in close to Carter. “It’s so sweet how happy you are for her.”

“I just know how much she wanted this. I might not understand the hype. No offense, Mama. But she’s been dreaming about this for years. It clearly meant a lot to her, so I’m glad she got it.”

“Is it really a surprise though?” Marcie asked with a laugh. “I haven’t heard one person say they voted for any of the other girls.”

Carter laughed along with her. “That’s very true.”

I stood from my seat when I saw it was time to get pictures. The rest of the family followed me, including both sets of grandparents who came even though it was getting harder for them to climb the bleachers. After getting pictures of Olivia and her escort who also happened to be her current boyfriend, we took family pictures. First Reagan and I stood with her, then each set of grandparents, followed by Carter and Marcie. After that, we took a picture of all of us. The only one missing was Ronan since the homecoming queen was announced during halftime of his football game. That was fine since we would be able to get plenty of pictures of the three of them together before the dance the next night.

As Olivia talked to the rest of the family at a mile a minute, I felt a hand slip into mine. I smiled over at Reagan, and she squeezed my hand. “Life has kind of come full circle. Hasn’t it, homecoming queen?”

“Nah.” I leaned into Reagan as I watched our two daughters laugh together, one with an arm around her boyfriend and the other holding the hand of her girlfriend, while we waited for our son to come out and play the second half of his football game. “This moment is so much better than anything I experienced when I was in high school.”

“This moment is perfect.” Reagan sighed contentedly. “Now we just have to hope they don’t decide to go too far away from us for college. I don’t know if my heart can handle that.”

I laughed at my wife who had become such a softie over the years. “It’s okay if they do, because at least we know in their case they are running toward something instead of away from us.”

“That’s true. They’ll always come back.”

“Especially when they need money.”

“And we should be good for that for at least the next four years.”

Now I sighed. Time really had gone by so fast. But every new adventure made me happy, because I knew our kids were becoming the people that they wanted to be. Not who they thought we wanted them to be. Just like Reagan though, I selfishly wished their dreams never took them too far away from us, but with this big decision coming up, I would never tell them that.

“Hey, you two, get over here.” Ronan waved his hand at Carter and Olivia from where he sat at a big table with a pen in his hand and a paper sitting in front of him.

He was wearing a Bellman University Football sweatshirt since that was the school he had decided on. Since it was Division II, he couldn't get a full athletic scholarship, but he received the biggest one they could offer, plus an academic scholarship on top of it. Even though today was about him since he was signing his letter of intent to play football, he wanted to include his sisters, so he had asked them to come along and wear sweatshirts from their chosen schools.

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I smiled as I watched Carter join him wearing her Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania sweatshirt and Olivia join in her New York University Sweatshirt (following in her mom and Uncle Jamie's footsteps). I was beaming with pride over the excellent schools they had gotten into, but also very happy that none of them were going to be more than a two-hour drive from us.

"This picture is definitely going on the wall," Reagan said as she moved to stand beside me.

Ronan waved his hand at the two of us next. "Not without you two in it. If this is going on the wall, it needs to include the two women who got us to where we are now."

Don't cry, Charlie. Don't you dare cry.

"If you want to make sure our makeup isn't running in these pictures, you better stop saying things like that," Reagan joked.

Ronan shrugged. "I only speak the truth."

Olivia playfully elbowed him. "You're also a huge suck up."

Ronan shook his head and pointed to Carter. "I'm not as big of a suck up as her."

"Carter isn't a suck up. That's just her personality."

"For once, Olivia is right," Carter said with a laugh.

Ronan and Olivia laughed along with her, and I quickly snapped a picture of this beautiful sibling moment. I didn't care how well the picture came out that had me and Reagan in it. This one was definitely going on the wall.

Chapter 14

Reagan

The College Years

(18-22)

Ronan was the first of the college drop-offs since he had to be there early for football pre-season. Both Carter and Olivia came along to see off their brother even though we let them know they didn't have to since their last summer at home was dwindling.

Bellman was the perfect small town atmosphere. It was filled with tiny shops and restaurants, a church on almost every corner, and multiple bars. I knew I would have a nice time exploring every time we came to visit, which would be often since we would be back a lot for Ronan's football games.

As soon as we arrived on campus, we began moving Ronan into the dorm room that would be his home for at least the next year. Apparently, most students moved off campus after the first year so I was sure Ronan would too, but I'm not sure why he would want to when his dorm was at the prime spot—next to the dining hall and feet from the football field.

"This is a nice place you got here," Olivia said as she sat down on his bed. "It's going to be a culture shock when I ride the train in from New York and come to your games with Mom and Mama."

Ronan sat down beside Olivia and looked between her and Carter. “You know you guys don’t have to feel obligated to come to my games. I know it’s going to be hard with your own college plans.”

Carter sat on the other side of Ronan. “I already have all of your home games marked on my calendar and I’m going to try my best to come to all of them as long as nothing comes up. Marcie wrote them down as well and is planning to come with me.”

Ronan smirked and elbowed Carter in the side. “I bet you’re super excited to finally get away and be at the same school as your girlfriend. Don’t waste all of your Saturdays on me.”

Carter’s face turned red, but a small smile still played on her lips. “It’s a few Saturdays throughout the fall. We’ll be fine.”

After getting his room set up, we walked into town to go to a cute little restaurant called Emma’s Cafe that had apparently been in this town for well over fifty years. The food was fantastic and the portions were huge, so the walk back through town after the meal was very much so needed.

We stuck around for another hour, because even though he didn’t say it, it was obvious Ronan wasn’t ready for us to leave. We finally said our goodbyes when it was closing in on the time of his first team meeting. I honestly thought Ronan might start to cry when he pulled me into a bear hug and didn’t let go for a long time. Of course, his tears never came, but mine did. It was no surprise that Charlie cried as well, but it was surprising when both of the girls shed a few tears.

We were all quiet on the drive home. If the rest of the family was like me, they were thinking about what our new normal would be like now that the triplets would all be in different places.

Two weeks later, we went on our next college drop-off trip with one less sibling. Even though it had been years since living in the city, driving into New York still kind of felt like coming home. I was sure it would especially feel like that over the next four years since anytime I went there, it would be to see a big part of my home—my crazy daughter who spent the last eighteen years keeping me on my toes. Thinking about saying goodbye to Olivia in a few hours caused a physical pain in my heart. I was going to miss her attitude and all of the eye rolls, but I was especially going to miss the times she let her guard down. The way she still snuggled up to me as we watched a movie or a TV show. How she shared all of the details of her life with me (even the ones I would rather not know).

“I still can’t believe your campus is just spread out through Manhattan,” Carter said, saving me from my spiral. “I could never handle this.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Olivia playfully poke Carter. “It’s not like your school’s not in a city.”

“Yeah, but Philly is nothing like New York.” Carter smiled sweetly at Olivia. “New York is perfect for you though. Definitely the right fit.”

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Olivia smiled back at Carter and squeezed her arm. I was glad I was able to catch the moment in my rearview mirror. Even though they had a great relationship, sincerely sweet moments weren't their usual love language. With all three kids, they tended to show their love more through teasing each other.

After finding parking, we lugged all of Olivia's crap from the car to her dorm room, where her roommate was already in the process of unpacking. "You must be Jax," Olivia said, not giving the poor girl a chance to answer before running across the room and wrapping her in a tight hug.

The girl didn't seem to mind and immediately embraced Olivia in return. "Olivia! It's so great to finally meet you." She stepped back and studied Olivia as if she was stunned to see her standing there. "I feel like I already know you so well that it's crazy to think this is the first time we're meeting in person."

"And you must be Mom." Jax turned to me with an outstretched hand. She was tall and skinny with long blonde wavy hair that went into a red ombre near the tips. There was a small rainbow tattoo on the ring finger of the hand she was holding out to me and a rainbow of dots tattooed across her wrist. She had a few other tattoos, but I couldn't make out what they were. Jax shook her head. "Or is it Mama? I can't remember which of you Olivia said was blonde and which was brunette."

I took her hand and shook it. "I am Mom." I pointed over my shoulder at Charlie. "That's Mama."

After shaking Charlie's hand as well, she looked between the two of us, literally beaming. "I still can't believe Olivia has two moms. I tell her every time we talk

about how lucky she is. I love my dad, but still.” Jax looked away from us to focus her attention on Carter. “And you must be Carter. Olivia has told me a lot about you.” She bit her bottom lip and didn’t try to hide the fact that she was totally checking out my daughter as she ran her eyes up and down her body. “You didn’t happen to break up with that girlfriend of yours, did you?”

Carter’s face turned more red than I had ever seen it, which was saying a lot for her. “Um, no. We’re still together. Hopefully for the long run.”

Jax ran her eyes over Carter once again. “That’s too bad,” she said flirtatiously.

Olivia playfully smacked Jax’s arm. “If you keep hitting on my sister like this, I’m going to start to think you want to sleep with me.”

Jax scrunched up her nose and waved her hand. “You’re not my type.”

Olivia scoffed and put her hands on her hips. “We’re identical.”

“Yeah, but you have a completely different style.” Jax pointed at Carter. “I like my women more straight edge.”

“Well, don’t hold your breath for Carter. She’s like madly in love or whatever.”

“I’ll be okay. I already have some options lined up.” Jax winked at Carter making her face somehow become even more red.

“But we’re sticking to our deal, right?” Olivia asked. “No serious relationships while we’re here?”

“Obviously. I am way too young to settle down. No one is taming me.”

“Well, Olivia, it sure looks like you got the perfect roommate match,” Charlie said with a laugh. “That makes me feel better about leaving you in this big city.”

Jax threw an arm around Olivia’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Miller-Cooper, I’ll take good care of your little girl. I’ll make sure she only gets herself into the fun kind of trouble.”

Watching Olivia and Jax interact the rest of the day brought back memories of meeting Jamie and how quickly we clicked just like these two were. I was happy she had Jax and even though it was only the beginning, I had no question they would be there for each other throughout college and beyond. Charlie was right. That definitely made me feel better as we got back into the car at the end of the day and drove away from the city.

“Two down. One to go,” I said as I sighed and watched the city grow smaller through the rearview window.

Another week passed before it was time to take Carter to school. Since she was going to school in Philadelphia, she was the closest of the three. It would be simple to go back and forth to see her whenever we wanted, which only made this drop-off the slightest bit easier. I would no longer walk downstairs in the morning to find Carter already awake, sitting at the kitchen counter with her nose in a book. We would have to drive to exchange our favorite books with each other rather than walking down the hallway. Even though I was sure she would call me much more often than the other two, over the phone I wouldn’t be able to see her face light up over something that really excited her.

“I’m sorry you only get us for your drop-off,” I said as we carried the last of her items into her dorm. Unlike Olivia, Carter’s roommate wasn’t there yet because she had insisted on arriving early.

Carter shrugged. “It’s no big deal. I’m glad I could be there for the other two. Plus, it’s a lot easier for me than it is for them. I can see you two whenever I want. Plus, I’ll have Marcie here with me.”

“When is Marcie arriving?” Charlie asked.

Carter picked up her phone then set it back down. “They should be arriving any time now, but she’s going to spend the next few hours with her family. We already have a reservation made for a dinner date later tonight.”

“So, what I’m hearing is you’re all ours for now, huh?” I asked.

“Yep.” Carter ran a hand over the sheet she had just put on her bed. “I was hoping we could walk around campus and figure out where my classes are so I don’t have trouble finding them on Monday.”

Ah. My responsible child. One out of three ain’t bad, I guess. “That sounds wonderful.”

After finding her classrooms, then doing another lap around campus so Carter could figure out the best way to navigate from one place to another, we spent the next few hours walking around the city.

When it was time to say our goodbyes and I started to cry, Carter reminded me that she would be seeing me in a week for Ronan’s first football game. I gave her one more hug and took a few steps away before I remembered the present I had in my bag for her. I pulled out the book and held it in the air. “Carter. Wait. I have something for you.”

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Carter turned around and stared at the tattered book in my hands. “What is it?”

I closed the space between us and handed it to her. “It’s the first book I ever illustrated the cover of. This was actually the first official copy ever printed. Kinsley gave it to me because she knew how much it would mean to me. But I want you to have it, because I know it will mean just as much to you.”

Carter stared down at the book as she skimmed through the pages, running her hands over it as if it were the most precious gold. When she closed the book and looked up at me, there were tears in her eyes. “Mom... this is...” She wiped her eyes. “It’s everything. Thank you so much.”

When we said goodbye this time, Carter hugged me as if she wouldn’t be seeing me soon. And at that moment, a week really did feel like forever.

“I miss them all so much already,” I said as I got in the car.

Charlie took my hand and smiled at me knowingly. “Me, too. But at least we have each other.”

I looked down at the hand I had been holding for over twenty years, and I knew I could get through this. No matter what life threw at us (and it had certainly thrown a lot), Charlie and I had gotten through it together. This was just another adventure that we were taking together and there was no one else I would rather have by my side for it.

“Do you think the next four years are going to fly by just as fast as the first eighteen

did?" I asked.

"Probably even faster." Charlie sighed. "Is there a way to slow down time?"

"Unfortunately, not yet. But I'll tell you what we can do. We can make the most of every single moment these next four years."

Charlie smiled through her tears and squeezed my hand. "Let's do it."

There were a few moments throughout those four college years that stuck with me more than the others. The first one happened when we went to Ronan's last home football game of his junior year. After the game ended, he grabbed my hand and pulled me across the stadium as if he was a little kid again. As he dragged me along, he yelled for Charlie and the girls to follow as well.

When we made it to the far end of the bleachers, there was a small, yet muscular girl with brown hair that was pulled up into a ponytail and blue eyes that were so bright they rivaled Charlie's. She had a wide smile on her face, but the way she was fidgeting with her sweatshirt told me she was nervous.

Ronan pointed to the girl as if he was showing off a piece of art. "Family Unit, I'd like you to meet Mallory, my girlfriend." He ran his hand in front of us. "Mallory, this is my family."

He was so excited, he was bouncing up and down and his voice sounded like one of a giddy little boy who was just told he could get a happy meal.

"It's so nice to meet all of you." Mallory did a small wave then pushed a piece of stray hair behind her ear. "I've heard so much about each of you."

“All lies of course.” Ronan honest to god giggled, which was especially funny coming from a very large guy in a football uniform. “I made you all sound excellent.”

Mallory giggled with him and slapped his stomach. She left her hand resting there and smiled at the rest of us. “I have no doubt that all of the excellent things he said were very true.”

After talking to Mallory for a few minutes, we found out that she was on the school’s soccer team and she and Ronan had a few classes together the past few years since they were both exercise science majors, but they didn’t start talking regularly until this year.

Charlie invited Mallory to go to dinner with us and she graciously accepted. Ronan said he needed to get himself cleaned up before he could go and headed toward the locker room. I used the excuse that I had to use the restroom (not a complete lie) to walk with him.

“You really like Mallory, don’t you?” I asked as we walked together.

“Mom, I don’t just like her.” He stopped walking and turned toward me. “Mark my words—I’m going to marry that girl someday.”

At that moment, I had no doubt that he would.

Another memory I’ll never forget was the time Charlie and I decided to spend a long weekend in New York when we went on one of our many trips to visit Olivia. We drove in late on Thursday afternoon and checked into a hotel in Times Square. Since Olivia had classes for most of the day on Friday, we spent Thursday night and Friday morning walking hand in hand as we searched for new things to discover in the city

we both knew so well at this point.

When we started to run out of ideas, I showed Charlie the first apartment Jamie and I shared together. “So, this is where it all began, huh?” she asked as she stared up at the old building.

“Yep. Just think, if Jamie and I had never decided to move in here together, we would have never met.”

Charlie shook her head. “I don’t believe that. We were always meant to find each other.”

I leaned my head against hers, basking in this moment of pure bliss. “That’s true.”

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“Since we’re reminiscing, you know what we should do next?” Charlie asked.

Honestly, I had no idea. “What?”

“You’ll see.” Charlie smirked as she led me down the street and back to our hotel. She gave the valet our car information, but wouldn’t tell me why we needed the car.

It was only a few minutes into our drive when it finally hit me. “Are we going to see our first apartment?”

Charlie’s smile grew even bigger. “We sure are.”

She parked in the parking lot of her old practice, which was now apparently owned by someone different than the person she sold it to (at least, that’s how it appeared given the name change and makeover it had undergone).

I pointed to the building. “They’re open. We should go in.”

Charlie scrunched up her nose. “Really? Isn’t that a little strange? ‘Hey you don’t know me, but I actually used to own this place.’”

I shrugged. “I don’t think it’s strange at all. In fact, I’m going to go in either way.”

Charlie turned off the car and followed me to the entrance. As soon as we walked inside, we were greeted by the receptionist. “Hi! How can I help you? Do you have an appointment?”

Much to my surprise, Charlie stepped up to the front desk. “No. I actually used to own this practice many, many years ago. Is Dr. Griffith still here?”

The receptionist shook her head. “I’m afraid not. He sold the practice a year ago.” The receptionist’s face lit up. “Wait! You’re the doctor that was here before Dr. Griffith? When I got a job here, your manager was still working here, and she had nothing but good things to say about you. I feel like I’m meeting a celebrity with how much she talked about you.” She walked out from behind the desk and waved us on as she led us down the hallway that held so many memories for us. “Doctor Manning is about to go on her lunch break. You need to meet her.”

She practically ran right into the young woman as she walked into the hallway from her exam room. “Oh, Dr. Manning. You’ll never believe who is here. This is...” She turned toward us and put her hand on her head. “I’m sorry. I never asked your names.”

Charlie held out her hand. “I’m Charlie and this is my wife, Reagan. I actually owned the practice before Dr. Griffith.”

“No way! You have to let me show you around.”

I thought it was strange when there was a storage area where I could have sworn the break room had been, but I figured I must have been remembering it wrong.

“Where is the break room now?” Charlie asked as if she had read my mind.

Dr. Manning pointed up toward the ceiling. “You know that small little apartment up there? That’s the break room now.”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud. “That small little apartment housed us and our three kids at one point.”

Dr. Manning's eyes went wide. "No way! I'm shocked there was enough space for all of you."

"There really wasn't," Charlie said. "Hence the move."

Dr. Manning nodded. "That makes sense! We should definitely go up there. I'm sure it looks much different now, but are you guys interested in seeing it?"

"Hell yeah," I said before Charlie could answer.

Dr. Manning led us out of the building and up the stairs I had taken more times than I could count. As soon as she opened the door, the memories came flooding back. Walking in for the first time. Patch eating all of our wedding invitations. Bringing our kids home from the hospital. Watching our kids take their first steps.

Just as the tears started to sting my eyes, I felt a hand slip into mine. "So many great memories here, huh?" Charlie whispered.

I nodded as I continued to take in the apartment. "This is where our family began. Some of my favorite memories are here."

"All of my best memories have something in common." Charlie turned toward me and booped my nose. "You're part of every single one."

With all the good memories there's bound to be a few that you wish you could forget. After the three graduations fell on different days, we were pretty sure we were the luckiest people on the planet. In fact, I was thinking I was so lucky that I was highly considering playing the lottery. I mean, what are the chances that none of the graduations would fall on the same day?

Plus, our kids were doing great. Olivia had decided to stay in the city after graduation. She wasn't exactly sure what she wanted to do with her marketing degree yet, but she knew New York was where she was meant to do it. She and Jax were still best friends after all these years so they were staying in the apartment they already lived in together.

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Ronan and Mallory were moving toward Pittsburgh where Ronan was going to play semi-pro football while she went to school for Occupational Therapy. I didn't see them having much money over the next few years, but they were both happy, so that was all that mattered to me.

Carter was staying at the University of Pennsylvania to pursue a master's in Business Analytics. Marcie was moving home with her parents to save money, but the two of them were still very happy together. At least, that's what we thought.

Just three weeks after graduation, I saw Carter's car unexpectedly pull into the driveway. I walked outside and waved to her from the front porch. "Hey, sweetie, what's up? Were you visiting Marcie?"

As Carter walked toward me, she kept her eyes toward the ground and nodded her head.

Very strange. "Is everything okay?"

This time, Carter shook her head, and when she lifted it to look at me, what I saw broke my heart. Her eyes were puffy and her face red and tear-stained. When she reached me, her body began to shake and tears poured from her eyes. "She... she... dumped me. I wanted to start our future together and she... she doesn't want me anymore."

I wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly right out there on the front porch. A few minutes later, Charlie pulled into the driveway and ran from her car when she saw the scene on the porch.

“What happened?” she asked between gasps of breath.

I mouthed the words “Marcie dumped her,” so Carter didn’t have to hear them spoken out loud like a dagger to her already broken heart.

Charlie immediately began to rub her back. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.”

“Mama,” Carter said as she pulled away from me and fell into Charlie’s arms.

I had never seen her like this—so very broken and lost. I wanted to make it better, but I knew there were two people who could do a much better job than me. I walked upstairs and made a three-way call with Olivia and Ronan, praying they would both actually pick up. Ronan was the first to answer, but it wasn’t long before Olivia answered as well.

“What are you two up to this weekend?” I asked without even saying hello.

“Mallory and I have a ton of unpacking to do,” Ronan answered quickly.

“I don’t have anything that important, but if you’re trying to get me to come home, it’s not happening,” Olivia said. “Jax and I are planning to go out this weekend now that we can finally enjoy the city without worrying about classes.”

Shit. “You know I normally wouldn’t ask you to come home, especially at the last minute, but your sister needs you.”

I had barely gotten the words out when Olivia responded. “I’ll take the first train in the morning.”

“Yeah, fuck unpacking. I’m driving home tonight.”

Chapter 15

Charlie

By the next morning, the whole family was back together. Normally, I would be ecstatic about this, but the reason had me less than thrilled. If going through a heartbreak is hard, watching your child get their heart broken is a million times worse.

“So, what happened?” Ronan asked as we all ate breakfast together.

Carter shook her head as she stared down at her uneaten cereal. “I honestly don’t know. I missed her so I decided to surprise her. She was acting weird from the moment I got there, but things weren’t too bad until I started talking about the future. I was curious when she wanted to move in together. I wasn’t pushing it. I just wanted to let her know that I’d be happy to take that next step whenever she was. I mean, we’ve been together so long. It seemed natural that that would come next. But instead of talking about that, she told me she didn’t think we had a future. She said that...” Carter took a long, shaky breath. “That she had been thinking about it and she felt like she wasted so many years. That... that she needs some excitement in her life and I can’t give her that.”

“What a bitch,” Olivia said through gritted teeth.

Carter shook her head. “She’s not. She told me that if we were older, I’d be the perfect life partner, but she needed to have fun right now. And she’s right—I’m not fun. I’m boring, but I’m fine being boring. And I thought she was okay with that, too.”

Olivia scoffed. “You’re not boring, trust me. I’m literally one of the most fun people ever, and you always keep me entertained. That has to say something.”

Ronan put his hand on Carter's shoulder. "Seriously. If she can't see how amazing you are after all these years, that's her loss."

Carter shrugged. "If she can't see how amazing I am then maybe I'm not actually that amazing."

I couldn't take this. I could literally feel my heart breaking in response to her broken heart. I stood up and hugged her from behind. "Well, I've known you much longer than Marcie has, and I happen to think you're super amazing."

"You have to say that. You're my mom."

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“Well, as your big sister, I definitely don’t have to say it, and I also think you’re amazing.”

This finally made Carter crack a smile. “It was four minutes.”

Olivia smiled triumphantly and I knew it was because she was proud of herself for cracking Carter’s shell, even if it was just a little bit. “Still counts.”

“So, what should we do today?” Ronan asked as he stood from the table to take his dishes to the sink.

“I’m not in the mood to do anything.” Carter moved her spoon around in her bowl, but still didn’t eat anything.

“I have an idea.” Reagan put her dishes in the sink as well, then sat down. “How ’bout Mama and I finally tell you the real story of how we met? It’s a pretty good one.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “I thought you two met because Mom and Jamie went to college together. It’s really not that exciting and probably the last thing Carter wants to hear about.”

“There’s a lot more to it. Trust me,” Reagan said with a laugh, her eyes getting that far away look they always did when she was reminiscing.

I did my best to catch her eye and give her a look that conveyed exactly how I felt about sharing this story with our children. Sure, they were older now, but there were

still certain parts they didn't need to know.

Reagan subtly nodded at me. She then smiled at the kids. "The SparkNotes version, of course."

Olivia put her hand on her hip and looked between her brother and sister. "That just means they're going to cut out the parts where they had sex."

Ronan brought his finger to his mouth and fake gagged. "Thank god."

Carter chuckled. "Yeah, really."

"Anyway," Reagan sat her hands on the table and lifted her eyebrows as her eyes darted between the rest of us. "I met your mama when Uncle Jamie convinced me to go home with him for a family reunion."

Olivia yawned dramatically. "You told us that. And it was love at first sight, yada yada."

Reagan put her hand up. "Okay, fine, but what we didn't tell you was that I went with Jamie to pretend to be his girlfriend."

Ronan sat up straight, a sudden sparkle coming to his eyes. "Wait. What?"

Reagan nodded. "Yep. He wasn't out yet, and it was a different time, so he worried about how his parents would react. I figured out once he asked me to come with him that he had been telling his family that we were dating for years."

Olivia now sat up straighter as well and she lifted one eyebrow. "And Grandma and Grandpa actually believed what you were saying? Did you look more straight back then? Because I could pick out you and uncle Jamie as being gayer than gay from

over a hundred feet away.”

I laughed, because it was true. I still couldn’t believe that I actually thought Reagan was straight at one point. “People will see what they want to, even if it’s glaringly obvious that they should be seeing something else.”

“So, Grandma and Grandpa wanted you to be straight?”

I sucked my lips into my mouth as I tried to figure out how to answer this. I never wanted to lie to my kids, but I also didn’t want them, especially Carter, to ever think their grandparents didn’t accept every part of them. Especially with what she was going through now. “Like Reagan said, it was a different time.”

“Well, I’m glad they came around,” Carter said with a smile.

I faked a smile back because had they really come around? Sure, they hadn’t said anything about Carter dating Marcie, but I still didn’t believe that meant they weren’t homophobic anymore. Not after everything else they had done.

Ronan waved his hand. “Okay. Keep going. Did you know that Jamie had a gay sister?”

Reagan shook her head. “I didn’t even know he had a sister at first. Neither Charlie nor Jamie were out to each other, which made the whole thing even more crazy.”

“So, what happened when you got there?” Olivia leaned onto the table as if she was trying to get as close as she could to Reagan so she didn’t miss anything.

“Well, as I’ve told you guys, I was smitten with your mama from the moment I laid eyes on her. Since Grandma and Grandpa thought Jamie and I were dating, they didn’t want us in the same room, so I ended up sharing a room with your mama. One

night, we were sitting out on the roof, and without even thinking, I kissed her.” Reagan stared into my eyes as if it was the first time she was ever seeing me. “That was it. I was completely done after that.”

“Oh, come on.” Olivia crossed her arms in front of her chest. “You have to give us more than that. How long did it take you to finally tell everyone? How did they take it?” She giggled. “Was Uncle Jamie pissed? I bet he was, right?”

“That is actually the best part of this story.” When I stared daggers at Reagan, she nodded at me once again. “Nana caught Charlie giving me a kiss. It became this whole big thing because she thought I was cheating on Jamie with his sister. The whole family became involved and we had to clear up what had actually happened. It wasn’t funny at the time, but it’s hilarious now.”

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Carter furrowed her eyebrows. “You know what’s weird? That sounds a lot like a scene in one of Laurel Lake’s books.” She pointed to me and moved her lips as if she was calculating something. “You know Laurel pretty well, right? You guys used to hang out when you first started doing her book covers?”

Reagan looked at me for backup, but when all I could do was shrug, she nodded in response to Carter’s question.

“So, did she get the idea from you guys? It’s almost the same except that in her story...” Carter cringed and smacked her hand against her forehead. “Ew. I’m never going to get this picture out of my mind.”

“Wait. I want to know.” Olivia smacked Carter’s arm a bunch of times, but Carter didn’t look over at her. “What happened in the book? What is Mom not telling us?”

“Seriously. You don’t want to know.”

Much to my surprise, Carter burst into laughter. Even though the reasoning might have had my face turning red, it was still great to hear her laugh like this. Much too soon, though, her laughter warped into sobs. “What if I never find what you two have? This was supposed to be it for me and now it’s over. Just like that. With no warning.”

Reagan shot up from the table and ran over to wrap her arms around Carter. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. I didn’t tell you that story to make you feel bad. I thought it would make you laugh.” Reagan motioned for Ronan to stand, then took his seat next to Carter, leaning in close to talk to her. “If there’s anything you should take from that

story, it's that finding love isn't easy. All of the best love stories are a little bit crazy. This is just a bump in the road. It's not the end for you. You'll find love. I know you will. You know how I know?"

When Carter shook her head, Reagan pushed a piece of hair behind her ear and smiled sweetly at her. "Because you, my dear, have so much love to give. It would be a shame for that to go to waste, so I have no doubt that it won't."

"Is it okay if we don't talk about Marcie or the breakup for now?" Carter asked. "It makes me sick to think about it. I just want to enjoy the time I have with all of you."

"Of course." Reagan stood from the table and patted Carter on the back. "You just let us know what you want to do. We're all yours."

Carter chewed on her bottom lip as if she was nervous. "There is one thing I would really like, but I feel bad asking since Ronan and Olivia already had to travel to come here."

"Whatever you want to do, I'm in," Ronan answered quickly.

Olivia nodded. "Me, too."

"So, you'd be okay with going to Maryland? It's been a while since I've seen any of our family down there, and I really miss them."

"You want to see Grandma and Grandpa?" I asked. "Today?"

If I was being honest, I was worried about what my mom would say when she found out Carter and Marcie broke up. Would she say it was for the best? Would she suggest that Carter could try men now? Just the thought of it made me sick.

“And Uncle Jamie, Uncle Ethan, and Finn if they’re around. But only if it’s okay,” Carter said, now sounding more hesitant. “I know it’s a lot to ask of everyone.”

Olivia hopped up from the table. “That sounds perfect to me. Let’s do it.”

Ronan smiled and nodded. “I agree.”

Within an hour, we were all packed into the car driving down to Maryland together. I couldn’t remember the last time we traveled anywhere with all three kids, and even though these weren’t the best circumstances, it still made my heart warm with happiness to have us all together again.

As soon as we pulled into my parents’ driveway, my mom came out the front door as if she had been watching for us (even though I hadn’t even told her we were coming). “My eyes aren’t deceiving me, are they?” she asked when we started to get out of the car. She put on her glasses and blinked at us dramatically.

Ronan held his arms out wide as he walked toward the front porch. “It’s not a dream. I’m really here.”

While my mom was occupied with Ronan and then Olivia, I fell into step with Carter. “Do you want to tell Grandma and Grandpa about Marcie? It’s completely up to you. I understand either way.”

Carter shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll just wait and see if she comes up in conversation at all.”

She didn’t have to wait long, because as soon as my mom hugged her, she told her she was surprised Marcie hadn’t come with us.

My heart felt heavy once again as I braced myself for more tears. For a moment,

Carter blinked her eyes a few times as if they were about to start falling, but then she held her head high instead. “We actually aren’t together anymore.”

My mom pulled her into another hug, this time kissing her cheek as well. “Oh, sweetie. I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Carter nodded slowly. “I will be. It was her choice, and it was a huge shock, but having family around definitely helps.”

“Well, I’m glad you came.” My mom gave Carter one more squeeze before letting her go. “This is definitely her loss. Soon enough you’ll find someone new and you’ll understand why this happened.”

Someone new. Did my mom think this new someone would be a guy? It wouldn’t surprise me if she did.

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Carter nodded again. “I’m trying my best to believe that, but it’s hard.”

“I know that, dear.” My mom ran her hand up and down Carter’s arm. “But trust me, there are plenty of other girls out there who would feel so very lucky to be with you. I have no doubt about that.”

A fog came over me as soon as I heard my mom say the word girls. Even after all this time, she barely acknowledged the fact that I loved women and I had been happily married to one for almost twenty-six years. I just barely made out my mom greeting Reagan, then telling everyone to head inside to see my dad.

“Are you okay, Charlotte?” my mom asked when I stayed rooted in place.

The fog slowly drifted away and after a few seconds, I finally felt like I could speak again. “Thank you for saying that.”

“For saying what?” My mom tilted her head as she studied my face as if it held all the answers.

“That there were plenty of girls that would feel lucky to be with Carter.”

“Oh. Psh.” My mom waved her hand nonchalantly as if this wasn’t a huge moment. “It’s true. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Of course I agree. It’s just, you said girls. You never said anything inappropriate about Carter being with Marcie, but I don’t know. I kind of thought...”

I let my voice trail off because I wasn't sure how to put my thoughts into words.

Luckily, my mom understood. "That I would hope this break-up meant she wasn't gay anymore?" My mom chuckled and shook her head. "I'm sure a few years ago that would've been the case, but losing your aunt last year really changed things for me. My prejudices kept me from her for so many years, and now that she's gone, I realized I can never get that time back. Just like I can't take back everything I put you and James through." Her lip quivered, and I worried she might start to cry. "For what it's worth, I am sorry. I'm so very sorry, Charlotte."

I couldn't take it anymore. Between Carter's broken heart and the apology from my mom, my emotions were being pulled in every direction. I had no idea how to express how I was feeling, so instead, I broke into tears.

My mom wrapped me in a hug. "Oh, sweetie, please don't be sad. I don't think my heart can handle both Carter and you being upset."

I shook my head, then tried to wipe my tears away, but it was impossible when they kept coming. "I'm not sad. Well, I mean, I'm sad that Carter is going through this, but that's not what my tears are about. At least, not completely. I just honestly never thought I'd hear you say those words, and it means more to me than you'll ever know."

My mom put her arm around me. "I know it's too little too late, but I promise to do better with whatever time I have left."

As my heart practically beat out of my chest, I thought it might explode. My mom was saying all of the things I wished she had said for years, and while I wished it hadn't taken so long, that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that for the first time in my life, I actually felt like my mom fully accepted me for the person I was. I knew I wasn't the only person who needed to hear this though. "You need to

say all of this to Jamie, too.”

My mom’s eyes fell to the ground as she nodded. “You’re right. I will. I promise.” She lifted her chin up and smiled at me. “Now, what do you say we make that little girl of ours smile?”

I couldn’t stop my own smile from spreading across my face. “That sounds perfect.”

The day really was perfect. Reagan called Jamie and he and Ethan came over to our parents’ house. Unfortunately, Finn was on a trip so he couldn’t make it, but the rest of us, including Carter, had a great time. Later that night, while my dad and Ethan grilled and my mom baked, the triplets, Reagan, and Jamie went for a swim in the lake.

I smiled as I watched all five of them splash around as if they were kids again. For the first time in maybe forever this place actually felt like home to me.

When my dad walked up to me and put an arm around my shoulder, I leaned into him. “Your mom told me that you two had a bit of a moment earlier,” he said as he stared out at the lake with me.

“We did. It was nice.”

“I know things have been much better between us than they were with your mom, but I hope you know that I’m sorry, too. Not only for how I acted, but for how I allowed her to act. It should’ve never happened. I’ve learned a lot about being a parent by watching you and Jamie and your significant others. You’re everything I wish I would have been.”

I squeezed my eyes shut to try to keep myself from crying. This weekend had been way too emotional already. “Thanks, Daddy. That means so much coming from you.”

My dad cleared his throat and removed his arm from around my shoulder. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go back to the grill and act like I’m not on the verge of tears.”

“Roger that.”

As soon as my dad walked away, Ronan jumped out of the lake and ran over to me, not hesitating before wrapping me in a big, wet hug. “You looked a little too dry,” he said with a laugh.

I shivered as a light breeze hit me. “Yeah. Thanks for that.”

Ronan bounced from foot to foot then leaned close to me as if he was going to tell me a secret. “So, I didn’t want to say anything in front of Carter because of what she’s going through, but I can’t hold it in anymore. I’m going to start shopping for rings. I probably won’t propose for at least another year, and I don’t see the wedding happening anytime soon, but I am going to ask Mallory to marry me.”

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The hole in my heart from Carter's news closed slightly from Ronan's admission. Being a parent was funny that way. I took Ronan's hand and kissed the top of it. "I'm so happy for you. Do you remember what you told your mama the first time we met Mallory?"

Ronan nodded enthusiastically. "Of course. I told her I was going to marry that girl someday."

"You sure are." I smiled contentedly as I let Ronan's words settle and watched Carter laugh along with her sister and uncle. She was going to be okay. We all would.

Chapter 16

Reagan

A little less than a year after Ronan told Charlie he was going to propose, he did it while on vacation with Mallory. Two and a half years after that, it was finally his big day. In that time, he had also hung up his football cleats and taken teaching classes, so he could become a physical education teacher. A few months after the wedding, he would be starting as a teacher and coach at the middle school in their hometown.

That wasn't what we were celebrating today though. Today we were celebrating the love he and his soon-to-be wife shared. I couldn't help but beam with pride as Charlie and I walked our amazing son down the aisle. We each gave him a hug then sat in the front row. I turned to watch Carter and Olivia walk down the aisle, both wearing light blue bridesmaid's dresses. Carter's long hair was pulled up in a simple updo and Olivia's hair was falling by her shoulders, styled in a way that showed off the blonde

pieces underneath.

When the music changed, we all stood. Mallory looked absolutely breathtaking. She was wearing a princess style ivory gown with very intricate beading. Her hair was half up and her smile was wider than I had ever seen it before. I quickly turned my attention from Mallory to Ronan so I could catch his reaction to seeing his bride for the first time. He chuckled through his tears as he stared at Mallory, his eyes wide as if he was worried he would miss a pivotal moment if he blinked.

The officiant was someone they had gone to college with who became ordained just so she could do their wedding. Having the ceremony performed by someone who knew them both so well made it extra personal. It was perfect, and there wasn't a dry eye in the room. At least, I had to assume there wasn't. I couldn't exactly see through my own tears.

After the ceremony, it was time for pictures. I held Charlie's hand as we waited patiently for the new couple to finish their pictures with Mallory's family. Once it was our turn, I stood by Ronan with Carter on my other side and Charlie stood between Mallory and Olivia.

After taking a few pictures, the photographer excitedly showed us her favorite one. As I stared at the picture, all of our memories from the past twenty-five years came flooding back. It honestly felt like just yesterday that we brought our three kids home from the hospital with no clue what we were doing. Somehow we had helped to shape them into upstanding individuals. Sure, Olivia had yet to stick with a job for more than six months, but in the little bit of time she was with each company she put all of her heart into her work. She also knew how to still have fun on top of working hard, which was something I was hopeful Carter would figure out. Carter had a great job and was ridiculously successful, but as far as I knew, she hadn't dated anyone since Marcie broke up with her after college. According to Olivia, she hadn't even done anything casual.

“That one is definitely getting blown up and hung above the fireplace,” Charlie said from over my shoulder, bringing me back to the present moment.

“No doubt. We all look so happy.”

Charlie gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and rested her chin on my shoulder.

“That’s because we are.”

“We sure are.”

The reception was a blur of toasts, dancing, and drinks. Charlie and I laughed together as we stumbled back to our hotel room at the end of the night. “I’m way too old to be drinking like this,” Charlie said as she struggled to unlock the door.

I took the key from her and somehow was able to get the door opened even though I was just as drunk as her. “Nonsense. Are you even old enough to drink?”

“Ha. Good one,” Charlie said as she pushed me backward.

When the backs of my knees hit the bed, she pushed me onto it and crawled on top of me. I lifted my eyebrows at her. “If I knew this was where the night was heading, I would have left the reception earlier.”

“No you wouldn’t have.” Charlie loosened my bow tie then leaned down to pepper kisses along my neck that already had my body buzzing.

“I would’ve thought about it at least.”

“Do you think about this often?” Charlie slid her hand down my body, then unbuttoned my pants and slipped her hand inside, immediately running her fingers over my already-wet center. I bit my lip as the spot she was touching pulsed against

her fingers.

“Only every single day,” I said once I remembered Charlie’s question.

She continued to move her fingers over me as she leaned in and took my ear between her teeth. The whispered words that followed caused goosebumps to pop up all over my body. “What do you think about?”

“I think about how sexy you look all the time, even when you’re not trying. I think about how your body just keeps getting better with time. I think about the way your touch still drives me wild and how I hope there never comes a day when you stop touching me.”

Charlie massaged my clit with her thumb, causing my body to feel as if it was on fire. “Don’t worry. I don’t plan on ever stopping. I love touching you.” As if her words were a lie, she removed her thumb from my clit at that very moment. “Although, there is one thing you didn’t mention thinking about.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” I asked as I tried to maneuver my body in a way to get her fingers back on me.

Charlie sat up and pulled off her underwear, then hiked up her dress. She grabbed my hand and brought it to her own center. “Touching me,” she whispered seductively.

Once I began to run my fingers over her, she finally touched me again as well. I mimicked her motions, running my fingers through her folds as she did the same to me then giving attention to her clit as she massaged mine.

I moaned as Charlie pushed a finger inside of me, then once again when she pulled it out. “More,” I gasped while I struggled to catch my breath.

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Charlie lifted an eyebrow at me. “If you want more you’re going to have to earn it.” She looked down at where my fingers were resting on her clit.

I moved one finger inside of her then quickly added a second which prompted Charlie to do the same thing. I was about to add a third when Charlie’s soaking wet fingers touched my lips. “Taste yourself,” she commanded.

I moaned once again when the taste of my own pleasure hit my tongue. I licked her fingers clean, but that only made my hunger worse. I brought my own fingers to my mouth and tasted Charlie now. The mix of tastes from the two of us made my stomach growl. I was like an addict. I wanted more.

“Why are you the only one who gets a taste?” Charlie pushed out her bottom lip and I took it between my teeth, then kissed her hard so she could taste what I was.

Charlie moved her fingers back inside of me as we continued to kiss, so I did the same. This time, when she took them out, she brought them to her mouth. After licking them clean, she gave me a sly smile. “The kiss was great, but it doesn’t compare to tasting it directly.”

“In that case...” I moved two fingers in and out of Charlie, then brought those fingers to her mouth so she could taste herself.

After removing my fingers from her mouth, Charlie brought her own fingers to her mouth and tasted me. Then Charlie leaned in and kissed me once again. I groaned from the taste of our mixed pleasures passing from her tongue to mine.

We continued this pattern of fingering and tasting each other until we were both gasping for breath. I knew I wasn't going to make it much longer, so I wanted to make sure Charlie came just as hard as I was about to. I fucked her hard with three fingers, moving them farther inside of her with each push. After a particularly deep thrust, I curled my fingers and brought my thumb over her hard clit at the same time.

Charlie must have liked this idea, because she did the same thing, and soon I was seeing stars. My body went rigid at the same time Charlie crashed down into me. For a few minutes, the only noise in the room was the sound of our heavy breathing.

When I opened my eyes, Charlie's beautiful blue eyes were already looking back at me. I pushed a piece of hair behind her ear as I stared up at her. Even after all this time, it still didn't feel real that this woman was mine. Mine. My heart fluttered at the thought. I was the luckiest woman in the whole world.

"You're so gorgeous," I said softly.

A small smile parted Charlie's lips, and I could feel that smile as she kissed mine. A warmth spread throughout my body as we continued to kiss slowly.

When Charlie pulled back from the kiss, she looked down at me with so much love that it was as if I was the person who put the sparkle in her eyes. "I love you."

My toes curled at the sound of those words rolling from her lips. How does she still do this to me?

"Marry me." The words were out of my mouth before I even had the chance to think about what I was saying.

Charlie giggled and kissed me once again. "I think we already did that about twenty-seven years ago. Did you forget?"

I shook my head and put my hands on her hips. The idea might have come out of nowhere, but now that it was out there, I couldn't shake it from my mind. "I want to marry you again. We should renew our vows."

Charlie laughed once again. "Do I need to remind you that we just spent the last year and a half helping to plan our son's wedding? You really want to jump right into our own wedding?"

I shrugged. "It doesn't have to be anything big. We can mostly have family and maybe a few close friends if they feel like coming." I felt my face light up when another idea popped into my head. "Let's do it for our thirtieth anniversary. That way we still have three years, and it's also not completely random."

Charlie nodded. "That'll work as long as we don't have another wedding to plan at that time."

"It's fine. If Carter or Olivia are engaged, we can make it a double wedding." I laughed at the thought of that.

Charlie laughed along with me. "Can you imagine the adult tantrum Olivia would throw if we told her we were going to share her wedding day with her?"

"I don't want to imagine it." I shuddered. "I would seriously fear for my life. That girl is fierce."

Charlie poked me in the chest. "She's your daughter. It's no question who she gets that attitude from."

I grabbed her finger and lightly bit it. "I'm not so sure about that. I think she got it from her namesake. We should've known she'd be a handful as soon as we gave her that name."

Charlie laughed again, but it quickly died off. “I still really miss Nana. Even after all these years, I think about her all the time. It’ll be weird to get remarried without her there.”

I took the hand I was still holding and intertwined my fingers with hers. “She’ll be there. I don’t think we have to worry about that.” I chuckled to try to clear the heaviness of the moment. “I also really don’t think we have to worry about there being another wedding in three years. Olivia doesn’t seem interested in settling down any time soon, and unfortunately, I’m worried Carter might not ever date again.”

“I don’t know. Olivia was hitting on the bartender tonight. Maybe wedding bells are in their future.” Charlie squeezed my hand. “When the time is right Carter will find someone.” She lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “Jax is still single.”

I let out a boisterous laugh, because even though Charlie and I had never discussed it before this, I was also holding out hope for that pairing ever since things ended between Carter and Marcie. “Okay! So I’m not the only one who is Team Jax. Good to know.”

Charlie laughed and gave me another kiss. “The answer is yes by the way. There’s nothing I want more than to marry you over and over again.”

Chapter 17

Charlie

“Everyone good to go?” Reagan asked as we pulled out of her parents’ driveway to head to Maryland for a week of pre-wedding festivities.

Reagan’s Mom and Dad both gave her a thumbs up. Both of Reagan’s parents were now over ninety and neither one was in great health. Her mom was in a wheelchair and her dad used a walker most of the time. Still, they insisted on being part of the renewing of our vows.

What was even more surprising was where the wedding was taking place—outside at my parents’ house in Maryland. With the lake as a backdrop, it really was a gorgeous setting, but if someone had told me after the shit hit the fan at that family reunion all those years ago that Reagan and I would one day renew our vows at that very same spot, I would have thought they were crazy.

Honestly, I still didn’t quite believe it. A part of me was waiting for a call from my mom where she told me she had changed her mind and didn’t feel comfortable hosting this event. I had no reason to believe that with how much stronger our relationship had become over the past few years, but sometimes it was hard to escape the trauma from my past.

All of those fears flew away when we pulled into the driveway and found a sign hanging outside of the house that said, “Congratulations, Charlie and Reagan. Thirty years down. Forever to go.”

“That’s...” I couldn’t even get the words out because I was so choked up. “Shit. That’s really sweet.”

“It really is.” Reagan grabbed my hand and squeezed it but quickly dropped it. “Since this week is all about reminiscing and celebrating the past, I need you to do me a small, but strange favor.”

“Why am I suddenly scared?”

Reagan shook her head and laughed. “It’s nothing crazy. I just want you to get out and take your hair out of your ponytail in front of the car.”

“Excuse me?” Is my wife completely losing it?

“Please.” Reagan ran a hand through my hair. “I want to relive the first moment I saw you.”

“You remember what I was doing the first time you saw me?”

“Of course I do.” Reagan shrugged as if this was no big deal, even though to me it was a huge deal and made me love her even more. “That was the moment I gave my heart away.”

My own heart clenched from her sweet confession. I was so glad that in a few days I would get to make this woman my wife all over again. “When you say things like that, how could I possibly tell you no?”

“That’s what I was hoping for,” Reagan said with a wink.

I looked back to check what response Reagan’s parents had to all of this, but they were fast asleep with their heads resting against one another. The perfect picture of

where I want our relationship to be in another thirty years.

I got out of the car then looked around to make sure there wasn't anyone watching aside from Reagan. When my eyes met hers, she licked her lips and gave me a thumbs-up. It took me much too long to get my hair out of the ponytail and I was pretty sure even though I was attempting to look sexy when I shook it out that I actually looked like a wet dog shaking off after getting out of the pool.

If Reagan found my display to fall short on the sexiness scale, she didn't show it. She quickly undid her seatbelt and hopped out of the car, closing the distance between us in no time at all. She put an arm around my back and leaned so close to me that our noses were touching. "Now let me show you what I really wanted to do when I met you that day."

I squealed when she surprised me by dipping me back. Her strong arms held me tight as she placed a quick kiss on my lips. My head was still spinning when she lifted me back up and gave me another kiss on the cheek.

"Okay, that was adorable." I put my hand on her chest so I could feel her rapidly beating heart. "It's probably for the best that you didn't do that though. I think I would've found it a bit strange if my brother's girlfriend kissed me before even introducing herself."

"But it would have been okay if I introduced myself first?" Reagan teased.

"I mean that's essentially what you did and we have been married for thirty years, so I'd say it worked."

"Aw, come on. That's not true. I at least let you come out to me first."

"Yep. And kissed me as soon as I did," I said with a laugh.

Reagan laughed along with me. “What can I say? When I see something I like, I go for it.”

We woke Reagan’s parents up, then helped them get inside and got them settled in the downstairs room my parents had built into the house for my Nana when it became harder for her to climb the stairs. Next, we grabbed our own bags from the car and took them up to my childhood bedroom, which my parents hadn’t changed even after all these years. There were a few times they tried to convince me to take my old cheerleading trophies and other memorabilia back to my house, but when I never did, they gave up. Thank god. I had no idea what we would do with all of this, but I also knew I wouldn’t want to let it go. Thank god my parents kept my room as a shrine to me.

Even though we almost never stayed at my parents’ house when we came to visit, we figured we needed to this time. It was only fitting since this was the room where we first fell in love. Reagan set our bags on the floor then walked over to the window and opened it up. She crawled through it onto the roof and motioned for me to follow.

When Reagan sat down and patted the spot beside her, I slowly lowered myself onto the roof.

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Reagan put an arm around my waist and leaned into me. “The first time I put a ring on your finger out here, it was a complete disaster. I’m hoping this time goes a little better.”

“This time?” What the hell is she up to right now?

Reagan pulled what appeared to be a ring out of her pocket, but before I got the chance to get a good look at it, it slipped from her hands and rolled down the roof then completely disappeared over the edge.

“Fuck!” Reagan shouted as she stared in disbelief at the edge of the roof. “Shit. Fuck.”

My heart rate picked up as I leaned forward as if I would actually be able to see where the small object went. Shit. Before I could lean far enough to slip, Reagan grabbed my arm and pulled me back. Much to my surprise, when I looked over at her, she was laughing. What could possibly be funny about this?

Reagan shook her head and whistled. “You should see your face right now.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Why aren’t you freaking out?”

Reagan pointed to the edge of the roof. “Because that was a fake. Sorry. I couldn’t resist.” Reagan pulled a small bag out of her other pocket. She dumped it into her hand and the most gorgeous diamond ring fell out. It was somehow even more beautiful than the one on my finger.

“But... I thought we agreed we were only doing new wedding bands. This is a whole new engagement ring.”

Reagan shrugged nonchalantly but the wide smile on her face told me she knew what a big deal this was. “It’s not just from me. It’s from the whole family. The different stones are everyone’s birthstones.” She pointed to each colored stone going around the big diamond. “There’s yours. That’s mine. The triplets right there. This one is Mallory’s and then of course Duncan.”

“Can’t forget Duncan.” I smiled at the thought of our first grandson, only three months old but already my entire world. I couldn’t wait for him to get here in a few days.

Reagan slid the ring onto my finger, then ran her own finger along the stones. “The best part is that the jeweler said it would be easy to get these small diamonds replaced with more birthstones as our family grows.”

“Which birthstone do you think will be added next?” I asked as I stared at the ring. “Quinton? Another baby for Ronan? Jax?” I winked when I said the last name since it was an ongoing joke between me and Reagan that Carter and Jax would someday end up together.

“I would love to say Jax, but I think at this point, we can forget about that ever happening. They’ve known each other so long and still don’t have any sort of relationship. Who knows when Quinton and Olivia will settle down. They still don’t even live in the same city.”

Quinton was the bartender Olivia had chatted up at Ronan’s wedding. It took them another year after the wedding to finally make things official, and even now, Olivia was still in New York while Quinton lived outside of Philadelphia (which was at least closer than when he lived in Pittsburgh). I was secretly hoping Olivia would decide to

move to him so she could live closer to us.

“So, what you’re saying is that I should probably get used to how this looks now because it’s not changing any time soon?” I moved my hand around to bask in the way the sunlight reflected off the stones. “Luckily, I think it’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

“Anything to show you how much our time together has meant to me.”

“I thought that’s what this whole week was about.”

“Of course it is.” Reagan brought my hand to her lips and placed a light kiss on it. “Starting with the reenactment of our first date tomorrow.”

My stomach fluttered at the thought. “I know. I’m so glad Jamie decided to buy a boat now that my parents don’t have theirs anymore.”

*

The next day, Reagan and I walked hand in hand to the spot where Jamie and Ethan’s boat was docked. I smiled when I saw the open water. “I’m glad it’s early enough in the season that a ton of people aren’t out yet.”

Reagan turned toward me and put her hands on my waist, a devilish smirk on her face. “What I’m hearing is that you were hoping to get me all alone.”

I leaned in and rubbed our noses together. “I mean, I don’t hate it.”

Once we climbed onto the boat, Reagan laid the blanket down and I set out our picnic. After eating our sandwiches and chips, we laid side by side and held hands as we both stared up at the beautiful blue sky.

Reagan sighed contentedly. “Even after all this time, I can still remember our first date as if it was yesterday.”

“And that’s saying something coming from the woman who forgets what I asked her to look up on her phone the moment she picks it up,” I teased.

“Right?” Reagan laughed. “Just goes to show how much that day meant to me. I remember thinking I must be crazy to have such strong feelings for someone I barely knew, but there was something about you.” Reagan rolled onto her side and looked at me as if I had hung the sun in the sky. “There’s still something about you.”

I leaned in to kiss her, and I didn’t stop. We spent our whole date laying on that blanket and making out as if we were teenagers. It didn’t go any further than that, but I didn’t need it to. It was perfect.

By the time we were walking back to the car, I could barely feel my lips from all the kissing. “Today was amazing. I’m so glad we did it.”

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“I’m sure you are,” Reagan said with a wink. “Are you going to be just as glad when we relive high tea in a few days?”

I thought Reagan was crazy when she said we should go to “high tea” for old time’s sake, but the way my mom’s face lit up when I told her we wanted to made it all worthwhile. “I have a good feeling about it. My mom is a completely different woman than the last time we went and it’s just family this time, so we don’t have to worry about trying to impress anyone.”

“Carter and Olivia are going to hate it.”

Reagan and I both laughed together. “I know they are,” I said. “That’s part of the reason I want to do it.”

“Exactly. Everyone deserves to be subjected to high tea at some point.”

*

“Remind me again why we have to do this,” Olivia said, her voice whiny as if she was a child.

“Because it’s important to your grandma.”

Olivia pushed out her bottom lip. “I still don’t understand what the hell high tea is if it doesn’t involve marijuana.”

I tried to keep a straight face as I leaned in to whisper to Reagan. “Totally your

daughter.”

Olivia lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “What was that?”

Reagan playfully slapped Olivia’s arm. “She said don’t do drugs.”

Olivia snorted. “Yeah. Sure she did.”

Carter shrugged. “If it makes grandma happy, how bad can it be?”

“Kiss ass.”

Olivia rolled her eyes at Carter and Carter stuck her tongue out at her in response.

All I could do was shake my head. “How is it that you two are nearing thirty and whenever you get together you still act like children? It’s the same with your brother.”

Olivia put her hand on her hip and raised both eyebrows at us. “That’s what you get for having three of us at once.”

“Nobody asked for that. Trust me,” Reagan said with a laugh.

“Whatever.” Olivia tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Get what over with?” my mom said as she walked into the hallway where we were waiting by the door to leave.

“Mama’s driving,” Olivia answered quickly. “She always makes me sick.”

My mom waved her hand and headed out the front door. “Don’t worry. High tea isn’t

far from here.”

“Perfect,” Olivia said with a sarcasm everyone but my mom caught onto.

As soon as we walked into the building, I noticed both Olivia and Carter eyeing up the bar. “Just say you’re going to the bathroom,” I whispered to them. “Your grandma will never know the difference.”

The girls took my advice to heart and three different times announced they were going to the restroom together, each time coming back a little more giggly than the time before.

“Like mothers like daughters, huh?” Reagan whispered after their third bathroom trip.

“Not going to lie, I’m kind of jealous,” I whispered back.

My mom looked between all of us with a big grin on her face. “I’m glad to see everyone is having such a nice time.”

If my mom was completely unaware of what was happening at high tea when she was in her fifties, she was even more unaware now that she was in her eighties. So much so that it almost made me feel guilty. Almost.

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“How could we not be? This is great,” Olivia said with another giggle.

“I’m just sorry Mallory had to stay home with the baby while the men are out golfing and we’re having so much fun here.”

“Yeah, it’s just too bad,” I said, trying to make my voice sound as convincing as possible. The truth was, the rest of us wished we had an excuse like Mallory. She was the lucky one. I would’ve offered to stay home with her to save myself, but I knew Reagan would kill me.

“You know what?” Carter quickly stood from the table. “You’re right. We shouldn’t be here having fun while she’s taking care of Duncan by herself. I think we should head back.” Carter smiled mischievously.

I practically fell out of my seat because this was so unlike her. Must be the alcohol. I stood up beside her. “Carter is right.” I looked at my mom. “What do you say?”

My mom nodded. “You’re right. I need to get home to cuddle my great-grandson.” She pointed at me and Reagan. “And you two need to get some rest for your big day tomorrow.”

The next day, I stood at the edge of my parents’ backyard, staring at the small makeshift ceremony space we had made. It was nothing fancy. Just a few rows of chairs for our limited guests with a space down the middle for the aisle.

“Ready to marry me again?” Reagan said from behind me as she put her hands on my hips.

I leaned back into her. “I’m always ready.”

I turned around so I could get a good look at her. She was wearing black pants and a white button up with a black bow tie. It went well with my simple white sundress. I looked behind her toward the house. “Where are the kids? They are supposed to be here to walk us down the aisle.”

Reagan put her hands in her pockets and rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. “It turns out there has been a change of plans.”

“A change of plans?” We had decided months ago that Ronan would walk me down the aisle and Olivia and Carter would walk with Reagan. Why the sudden change?

Reagan nodded. “Olivia and Quinton are going to walk down together and Ronan and Mallory are going to pull Duncan in a wagon. Carter is still going to walk me down.”

What the hell? Did Reagan not realize that she forgot to account for a pretty pivotal person? “Who’s escorting me?”

“Someone who should’ve been there for you a long time ago.” I turned to find my mom standing next to me with her arm outstretched for me to grab onto. “I’m sorry I’m so late, Charlie.”

Tears immediately sprung to my eyes. All of the years I spent wishing and hoping for this suddenly felt like a distant memory. My mom was here now, and even as a sixty-year-old woman, that still meant the world to me. “You’re not. You’re right on time.”

My mom patted my hand but didn’t say a word, most likely because she was just as choked up as I was. We stood together by the house while everyone else walked

down the aisle.

When it was almost our turn to go, my mom finally spoke. “If I could give advice to all new parents, do you know what it would be?” When I shook my head, she continued. “I would tell every parent out there that they need to accept their children unconditionally, no ifs ands or buts. Because when you’re nearing the end of your time on earth, it doesn’t matter what the gender of their spouse is. What matters is that they have someone to take care of them and you and Jamie do. You both found the perfect life partners, no thanks to me.”

Speaking of perfect life partners... When I looked down the aisle, mine was staring at me with tears running down her cheeks. Standing next to her were our three kids that we had somehow raised to be (somewhat) fully functioning adults. This was my whole world, and if the tears hadn’t already started, they definitely would have from the sight of all of them waiting for me.

My mom gave me a hug when I made it to the end of the aisle and Carter held my hand as Reagan and I re-promised our lives to each other. The officiant, AKA my father, spoke once more after we said our vows.

“I’ve watched you two love each other for over thirty years, and I’ll admit there was a time that I didn’t want to see it, but there was never any denying it—a love like yours doesn’t come along often. You two define what love should be, and after thirty years of marriage, there is just as much love between you two as there was that first time you said I do. I know the next thirty plus years will be even better for you. It is my absolute pleasure to pronounce you wives for the second time. You may now kiss the bride.”

When Reagan dipped me and kissed me the same way she had in the driveway a few days earlier, it was as if I was floating. I couldn’t even feel the ground below me. The small crowd of friends and family cheered as Reagan lifted me back up and we walked down the aisle hand in hand.

After greeting each of our guests and thanking them for being part of this special day, Reagan and I snuck away to stand by the lake together.

Reagan shut her eyes and took a big breath through her nose. “A lot of memories here, huh?”

I nodded my head, but she didn’t understand the extent of just how many memories this lake held for me. It was where I sat and prayed to God to take these feelings from me. It was the lake I jumped in after I kissed Mary Beth for the first time in hopes that it would wash me clean. This was the spot where I made love to the most important person in my life before I was willing to admit that that’s what it was. It was where I finally saw the smile return to my daughter’s face after she had her heart broken. It held my highest highs and my lowest lows.

But nothing it gave to me even came close to what the woman standing beside me had given to me. “You know how much I love you, right?” I asked Reagan as I leaned into her.

Reagan kissed the top of my head. “Not as much as I love you.”

Before I could argue with her that I clearly loved her more, we were both wrapped in a big bear hug from behind. “I hope you both realize that none of this would’ve been possible without yours truly,” Jamie said with a chuckle.

“Oh yes, all great one.” Reagan motioned for Jamie to come on the other side of her and wrapped an arm around both of us. “Thank you for lying for years about your huge lesbianroommate being your girlfriend,” she said sarcastically. “I owe you my life.”

Jamie leaned against Reagan in the same way I was. “I mean you kind of really do.”

“You’re right.” Reagan looked over at me and I knew exactly what she was thinking,

her whole life was standing right beside her. I knew, because I felt the same way.

THE END!!!!!!!!!!