



Back in the Bay

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Category: Romance, Adult

Description: They were high school sweethearts, torn apart by dreams too big for their hometown. Now fate—and a wedding—has brought them face-to-face again.

Mabel Mawell left Cedar Bay with a suitcase full of ambition and a heart full of Cole Bennett. Years later, she's a successful attorney in Portland, with a sharp wardrobe, a sharper mind, and a career that leaves little room for nostalgia.

Cole never stopped loving her.

When they cross paths at their friends' wedding, the years fall away—and so do Mabel's defenses. Cole is older, steadier, and still entirely hers in all the ways that matter. And this time, he's not letting her go without a fight.

What begins as a spark rekindled quickly turns into a full-blown fire. But can a woman who built her life somewhere else find her future in the hometown—and the man—she once left behind?

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Vivian has perfect teeth, and that's the problem.

They're too white, too straight, too eager when she smiles at me across the checkered tablecloth of Romano's. Everything about her screams "good choice"—the kind of woman my mother would love, the kind Rowan and Fox keep insisting I need to find. She teaches third grade, volunteers at the animal shelter on weekends, and laughs at all my jokes, even the bad ones.

But her laugh isn't Mabel's laugh.

"So you really built that whole community center from the ground up?" Vivian asks, leaning forward with genuine interest. Her eyes are brown and warm, the color of coffee with cream. Not the deep green that used to make my chest tight every time I looked across a room.

"The three of us did, yeah." I cut into my chicken parmesan, trying to focus on the conversation instead of the way Vivian tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. Mabel used to do that too, except her hair was black as midnight and twice as wild. "Rowan handles most of the client relations, and Fox does the heavy planning, and I?—"

"You're the detail guy," she finishes, smiling again. Those damn perfect teeth. "Sarah told me you're meticulous about everything."

Sarah. Right. Fox's cousin, who set this whole thing up, was convinced that what I needed was a "nice girl who'll appreciate a steady man." What I need is to stop comparing every woman I meet to a ghost who walked out of my life thirteen years ago.

Vivian reaches across the table and touches my hand. Her fingers are soft and manicured. "You seem distracted tonight. Everything okay?"

I should lie. I should tell Vivian I'm fine, ask about her students, and make it through dessert like a decent human being. Instead, I pull my hand back and signal for the check.

"I'm sorry, Vivian. You're wonderful, but I should call it a night.

The disappointment in her coffee-brown eyes makes me feel like the bastard I probably am.

She doesn't argue, which somehow makes it worse. A woman like Mabel would have called me out, demanded to know what my problem was, and maybe thrown her napkin at me for good measure. Vivian nods with the kind of grace that makes my guilt sit heavier in my stomach.

"Of course," she says, already reaching for her purse. "I understand."

No, she doesn't. She thinks it's her, thinks she did something wrong when the truth is she did everything right. That's precisely the problem.

I pay the check while she freshens up in the bathroom, and we walk to our cars in the kind of silence that feels like a funeral. The November air bites at my skin, carrying the scent of salt from the bay and dying leaves. It's the same smell that used to cling to Mabel's hair after we'd spend hours walking the shoreline, planning a future that

never came.

"Cole?" Vivian's voice is soft and uncertain. She's standing by her Honda Civic, keys in hand, looking like she wants to say something that might salvage this disaster.

"Yeah?"

"I hope you find what you're looking for."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut because I already found it. Found her. And let her walk away.

I watch her taillights disappear down Main Street before I can bring myself to get in my truck. My phone buzzes with a text from

Rowan: How'd it go, Romeo?

I don't answer. Instead, I drive the long way home, past the old pier where Mabel and I used to sneak out to meet, past the bookstore where she'd drag me to read poetry I pretended not to understand, past the house where she used to live before she decided Cedar Bay wasn't big enough for her dreams.

Thirteen years, and I'm still stuck in the same place, waiting for a woman who's probably forgotten I exist.

My house feels too quiet when I finally walk through the front door. The same house I bought with the money I should have used to follow her to Portland, the same house I've been rattling around in like a marble in a coffee can ever since. I drop my keys on the kitchen counter and head straight for the closet in my spare room, the one I avoid most nights because I know what's waiting for me in there.

The cardboard box sits exactly where I left it, shoved behind my old baseball equipment and a stack of tax returns. My hands shake a little as I pull it down, which is ridiculous. I'm thirty-two years old, not some lovesick teenager.

But that's precisely what I become the moment I lift the lid.

There she is, seventeen years old and radiant in her emerald green prom dress, and my arm wrapped around her waist like I own the world. Her dark hair is swept up in some elaborate style that probably took hours, and she's laughing at something I said, her head thrown back, eyes sparkling with mischief. I remember that moment—I'd just whispered something inappropriate about what I wanted to do to her after the dance, and she'd swatted my chest while trying not to snort with laughter.

"Look at you, you idiot," I mutter to myself, running my thumb over her face in the photograph. "You had everything right here."

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I spread more pictures across my coffee table. Homecoming junior year. The beach party after graduation. That random Tuesday, when we skipped the last period to drive to the lighthouse, she insisted on taking a picture of us kissing against the sunset because she said she wanted to remember the way I looked at her forever.

Forever. Right.

"You should have gone with her," I tell the empty room, my voice echoing off the walls. "Should have packed your bags and followed her to Portland State instead of sitting here like some pathetic fool, waiting for her to come running back."

But I didn't. I stayed in Cedar Bay, convinced that what we had was strong enough to survive anything, that she'd finish law school and come home where she belonged—with me. I was so damn sure of myself, so certain that love was enough.

I pick up another photo—this one of her in her cap and gown at our high school graduation, her diploma in one hand and her acceptance letter to Portland State in the other. She's beaming, and I'm standing next to her, looking proud but clueless, having no idea that I'm watching my entire future walk away.

"Stubborn bastard," I whisper. "She told you she was scared to go alone. She practically begged you to come with her, and what did you do? You told her Cedar Bay would always be here waiting."

Cedar Bay. Not me. The town.

What kind of man lets the love of his life disappear because he's too chickenshit to

leave his comfort zone?

The kind who builds a successful construction business as a consolation prize. The kind who dates a string of perfectly nice women and sabotages every relationship because none of them can measure up to a memory.

I lean back against the couch cushions, clutching a photo of Mabel and me at the Fourth of July carnival our senior year. She's holding cotton candy, and there's a streak of pink sugar on her cheek that I'm kissing away. We look so damn young, so sure that forever was a given instead of something you had to fight for.

"Where are you now, Mabel?" I ask the silence. "Some fancy Portland law firm? Married to some hotshot attorney who was smart enough to follow you anywhere?"

The thought makes my chest burn. Of course, Mabel's married. Women like her don't stay single—they're too vibrant, too alive, too everything. Some other man is coming home to her every night, listening to her talk about her cases over dinner, watching her tuck that wild hair behind her ear while she reads in bed.

I should have been that man.

My phone buzzes again. This time, it's Fox:

Fox: Rowan says you bailed early. Are you okay, man?

I stare at the text for a long moment before typing back:

Me: Ever wonder what would've happened if you'd made different choices?

His response is immediate:

Fox: Every damn day. Why?

I don't answer. Instead, I gather up the photographs and shove them back in the box, but not before I slip one into my wallet—the lighthouse picture, the one where Mabel's looking at me like I hung the moon. Perhaps I need a reminder of what I've lost. Or maybe I'm just a masochist.

"Thirteen years too late," I tell myself as I head to bed. "But maybe it's time to stop waiting for the past to come back and start figuring out how to live with it."

But even as I say the words, I know I'm lying. Because somewhere deep down, in the part of my heart that never learned how to let go, I'm still that eighteen-year-old kid who thinks love conquers all.

And I'm still waiting for Mabel Maxwell to come home.

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There's nothing quite like the taste of victory mixed with someone else's marital disaster to make a girl question her life choices.

"And that, Aidan, is why I will never, ever get married," I announce, dropping the freshly signed divorce papers onto my desk with a satisfying thud. "The Halloran case is officially closed, and so is my interest in holy matrimony."

Aidan leans against the doorframe of my office, his perfectly tailored suit making my sensible pencil skirt and blouse look like I dressed in the dark. He sips his coffee with an infuriating smirk.

"Mabel Maxwell, relationship cynic extraordinaire," he says, shaking his head. "You know not all marriages end with someone throwing the other's clothing into the swimming pool while screaming about hidden OnlyFans accounts."

I snort, organizing the Halloran file for archiving. "No, sometimes they end with someone's vintage record collection being used as frisbees on the front lawn. Or with secret second families in Wisconsin. Or?—"

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"Or with seventeen years of happiness like me and Marcus," Aidan interrupts, his wedding ring catching the light as he gestures. "You're looking at the exceptions, not the rule."

"I'm looking at reality," I counter, pushing a strand of auburn hair behind my ear. "I've got a dissertation to finish and dogs to feed. The last thing I need is to waste time on another relationship that's going to implode in my face."

Aidan's expression softens. "You'd feel differently if you met the right person."

Something twists in my chest—that familiar ache I try to ignore. "Maybe I already met the right person, and it still flopped spectacularly."

"Wait, what?" Aidan straightens, coffee forgotten. "Who? When? How have I never heard about this?"

I wave him off, already regretting the admission. "Ancient history. Like prehistoric. Dinosaurs-were-witnesses ancient."

"Mabel—"

"I have a client meeting in twenty minutes," I say, gathering my notes and laptop. "And I can't afford to be late. If this case goes well, I may be able to make partner next year."

As I hurry past Aidan, he calls after me, "This conversation isn't over, Maxwell!"

I know it isn't. But some failed romances are better left buried—especially when you've just moved to a small town where running into your past is starting to feel dangerously likely.

I swear I can feel Aidan's curiosity boring into my back as I stride down the hallway. That's the problem with best friends—they can smell emotional baggage from a mile away, and Aidan's got a particularly sensitive nose.

The elevator doors close behind me, and I exhale. Seventeen floors of blessed silence before I have to be "on" again. I check my reflection in the polished metal wall, tucking a stray hairback into place. Portland's top divorce attorney can't look like she's been through an emotional wringer herself.

My phone buzzes. Aidan, of course:

We're having drinks tonight. Non-negotiable. I need ALL the details about this mystery man.

I roll my eyes and type back:

Can't. I have a brief to finish.

His response is immediate:

Liar. You submitted your brief yesterday. 7:00 pm at Cassidy's. I'll bring tissues and tequila.

The elevator doors open, and I step into the lobby, cursing under my breath. This is what I get for having a colleague as a best friend—he knows my schedule better than I do.

My client, a tech executive whose husband thought their prenup was more of a suggestion than a legally binding document, is already waiting. I paste on my professional smile and extend my hand.

"Mrs. Whitaker, thank you for coming in."

Two hours later, I've outlined a strategy that will ensure Mrs. Whitaker keeps her company shares and her dignity. As she leaves, visibly relieved, I feel that familiar rush—the certainty that I made the right choice focusing on my career instead of chasing some romantic fantasy that would inevitably disappoint.

Back in my office, I try to focus on my next case, but my mind keeps drifting to Cedar Bay. To Cole Bennett and his stupidly perfect smile. To promises made under a summer sky that neither of us could keep.

"Knock knock." Aidan appears, dangling my coat from one finger. "It's 6:45, and I'm not above physically dragging you to Cassidy's."

"I hate you," I mutter, but I'm already shutting down my computer.

"You adore me," he corrects. "And you're going to adore me even more after you've unburdened your soul and I've provided sage wisdom about your love life."

"My non-existent love life."

"Exactly the problem we'll be addressing." He loops his arm through mine. "Now, let's go unpack whatever trauma has you convinced that every relationship is doomed to end with someone's belongings being thrown off a balcony."

As we step outside into Portland's persistent drizzle, I wonder how much to tell him. About Cedar Bay. About Cole. About how sometimes the right person comes at the

entirely wrong time.

Cassidy's is crowded for a Wednesday night, which means we have to shout over the din of happy hour warriors drowning their workday sorrows. Aidan secures us a corner booth while I order—whiskey neat for me, something with too many garnishes for him.

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"Alright," he says once we're settled, leaning forward like he's about to interrogate a hostile witness. "Spill. Who broke Mabel Maxwell's heart so thoroughly that she swore off love forever?"

I take a generous sip of whiskey, letting it burn away my better judgment. "His name was Cole Bennett. Is Cole Bennett, I assume, unless he's died tragically, which would be just my luck."

"Details. Age, occupation, reason for spectacular failure."

"High school sweetheart." The words taste bitter. "We were going to conquer the world together. He'd build houses, I'd practice law in some charming small town, and we'd live happily ever after in domestic bliss."

Aidan's eyebrows climb toward his hairline. "That sounds... nice, actually. What went wrong?"

"I got accepted to Portland State." I trace the rim of my glass with one finger. "Full scholarship. The opportunity of a lifetime. And Cole...Cole wanted me to stay."

"Ah." Aidan sits back. "The classic small-town-girl-big-city-dreams dilemma."

"He said we could make it work long distance. That love would be enough." I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "I was eighteen and terrified that if I didn't leave right then, I'd never leave at all. So I chose my future over our future."

"And now?"

"Now I'm exactly where I planned to be. Successful, independent, answering to no one." The whiskey isn't helping with the hollow feeling in my chest. "Cole probably married some sweet local girl who never wanted to leave Cedar Bay. They probably have three kids and a golden retriever and argue about whose turn it is to take out the garbage."

Aidan studies me with those annoyingly perceptive eyes. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Whether he's married. Whether he's happy. Whether he ever thinks about you." He signals for another round. "Mabel, honey, in the age of social media, ignorance is a choice."

I drain my glass. "Some choices are self-preservation."

"Or avoidance," Aidan counters, accepting his ridiculous cocktail from the server with a wink. "You've built your entire personality around being unattached and unaffected, but you're still avoiding looking up one guy from your past? That's not preservation, that's fear."

"I'm not afraid," I snap too quickly. "I'm practical. What good would it do to know? If he's happily married with a perfect life, I feel like crap. If he's miserable, I feel guilty. There's no winning scenario here."

"There's truth," Aidan says. "And closure."

I stare into my fresh whiskey. "I had closure. Twelve years of it."

"Says the woman who just admitted he's the reason she's sworn off relationships." Aidan leans forward, his voice softening. "Mabel, you've been my friend for five

years. In that time, I've seen you go on exactly three dates, all of which you sabotaged before dessert arrived."

"That dentist talked about gum disease for forty-five minutes," I protest.

"And you asked him detailed questions about abscesses!" Aidan throws his hands up. "You've turned rejecting potential partners into an art form."

The truth of his words stings more than I'd like to admit. I deflect, the way I always do. "Not everyone needs a partner to be complete."

"Of course not. But you're not avoiding relationships because you're fulfilled being alone. You're avoiding them because you're still hung up on the boy who wanted you to stay in Cedar Bay."

I feel suddenly exposed like he's reached across the table and peeled back my carefully constructed armor. "That's ridiculous. It was a teenage romance."

"That apparently ruined you for all men." Aidan sips his drink, watching me over the rim of his glass. "So what really happened? There has to be more to the story than 'I got into .'"

The whiskey has loosened something in me, some tightly wound coil that's been holding these memories at bay. "We had a plan. We'd do long distance for four years, then figure it out. But then..."

"Then?"

"He joined the army and wanted me to follow him, delaying college until we could get established somewhere."

“What the hell?” Aiden’s response to the news mirrors my own reaction thirteen years ago. “What did you say?”

"I said I couldn't put my life on hold." The memory still makes me flinch. "God, I was so self-righteous about it. I told him I'd worked too hard to delay my future for anyone. And if he truly loved me, he wouldn't ask me to choose."

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"Ouch."

"Yeah." I take another sip. "The night before I left, we had this massive fight. He said I was choosing ambition over love. I said he was trying to clip my wings. We both said unforgivable things. And then..."

"And then?"

"I left. I blocked Cole's number, his email, and everything else. Made a clean break." The words taste ashy in my mouth. "I was so sure I was right."

"Were you?" Aidan asks quietly.

"I don't know anymore." I stare into my glass like it might hold answers. "I got everything I wanted professionally. But sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I'd stayed that one year. If his dad recovered. If we could have made it work."

"You can't live in what-ifs, Mabel."

"I don't. I live in concrete reality. Contracts, evidence, precedent." I straighten my shoulders. "And the reality is, relationships end. Marriages fail. I see it every day."

"You see people at their worst," Aidan corrects. "Nobody comes to you when their marriage is thriving."

"Fair point," I concede. "But it doesn't change the fact that Cole and I were

fundamentally incompatible. He wanted small-town life. I wanted?—"

"The corner office, which you now have," Aidan finishes. "But are you happy, Mabel? Really happy?"

The question hangs between us. Before I can formulate a deflection, my phone buzzes. I glance down, grateful for the interruption.

Until I see the name on the screen.

"Mabel?" Aidan prompts. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I stare at the message, unable to process the six words glowing on my screen.

Mom: I have news.

"Not a ghost," I whisper, turning the phone so Aidan can see. "My mother."

Aidan squints at the name. "Marjorie Maxwell? What's the emergency?"

I shake my head, already typing a response. "With my mother, it could be anything from a genuine crisis to a sale at Nordstrom." I hit send.

Me: What's wrong? Are you okay?

The reply comes instantly: Rowan is getting married next week. You need to come home for it. There will be no excuses this time.

My blood runs cold. "Oh no."

"What?" Aidan leans across the table, trying to read my screen.

"My cousin is getting married," I say numbly. "And he's one of Cole's best friends."

Aidan's eyes widen. "Cole as in?—"

"As in the man we've spent the last hour dissecting, yes." I drain my whiskey in one desperate gulp. "And my mother insists I come home for the wedding."

"This is..." Aidan searches for words. "Cosmic. The universe is literally forcing you to confront your past."

"The universe can go fuck itself," I mutter, signaling for another drink. "I'm not ready for this."

I type furiously.

Me: He didn't invite me. Why would I go?

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Mom: Sorry, honey. He didn't know your address, so he sent us the invitation. I've been so busy helping your aunt plan the event I forgot to tell you. But you have to come. Please don't make me look bad!

Aidan reaches across the table and takes my hand. "Maybe that's exactly why it's happening. When was the last time you went home to Cedar Bay?"

"Four Christmases ago," I say automatically. "For two days. In and out, minimal interaction with anyone outside my immediate family."

"And Cole?"

"Haven't seen him in twelve years, and that was an accident." My new whiskey arrives, and I take a fortifying sip. "What if he's married, Aidan? What if he has kids? What if he hates me?"

"What if he doesn't?" Aidan counters softly. "What if this is your chance to finally get closure—real closure, not the kind where you run away and pretend the past doesn't exist?"

I close my eyes, feeling the room spin slightly. "I can't do this.

"You can," Aidan says firmly. "You're Mabel Maxwell. You make grown men cry in depositions. You can handle seeing your ex-boyfriend."

"Former love of my life," I correct without thinking, then clap a hand over my mouth. "I did not just say that."

Aidan's smile is gentle. "You did. And it's okay to admit it." He raises his glass. "To facing the past, so you can finally move forward."

I clink my glass against his reluctantly. "To cosmic jokes at my expense."

As I sip my whiskey, I can't help but wonder what Cole Bennett looks like now. Are his eyes still that impossible shade of blue? Are his hands still calloused from work? Does he ever think about the girl who left him thirteen years ago?

I guess, I'm about to find out.

I wake up the next morning with a whiskey headache and six missed calls from my mother. The universe isn't just pushing me toward my past; it's shoving me with both hands.

"You're going," Aidan announces when I trudge into the office, sunglasses still on, clutching my extra-large coffee like it contains the elixir of life.

"I haven't decided," I lie, slumping into my chair.

"Your flight's booked." He slides a printed itinerary across my desk. "Next Thursday. I cleared our schedule with Margaret. I'm going as your plus one. A part of me wants to see this train wreck unfold, and the other part just likes weddings."

I peek over my sunglasses at him. "You went to the managing partner?"

"I told her you had a family emergency." He shrugs. "Which isn't entirely untrue. Your emotional well-being is at stake."

"This is kidnapping," I mutter, but I take the itinerary. "A week? Aidan, I can't be away from the office for an entire week."

"You haven't taken a vacation in three years. The firm legally has to let you go." He perches on the edge of my desk. "Besides, you need to arrive in time for the rehearsal dinner, and I figured you'd need a day to acclimate to your surroundings."

I roll my eyes, instantly regretting the movement as pain shoots through my temples. "Christmas is a horrible time to dig up the past."

"That's where you're wrong. The holidays make everything lighter and happier." Aidan's smile fades into something more serious. "Besides, when was the last time you did something that scared you?"

"Yesterday, when I let you order me that third whiskey."

"I mean really scared you. The kind of fear that means you're growing."

I stare at the itinerary, at the neat columns of flight times and confirmation numbers. Cedar Bay, Oregon. Population: too small. Current weather: probably raining. Likelihood of awkward encounters: one hundred percent.

"Fine," I say finally. "But when I come back emotionally devastated, I'm going nag incessantly for weeks."

"Deal." Aidan looks far too pleased with himself. "I'm used to your constant complaining. And If you rekindle your romance, I will repeat the words I told you so until you until you hire someone to kill me."

"Don't be so flip. I spent a year as a public defender and have connections," I warn him, only half-joking. "And there will be no rekindling. That fire went out a long time ago."

Even as I say the words, I'm not sure I believe them.

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I stand on a ladder, hammer in hand, working on the final piece of crown molding for Mrs. Hendrickson's primary bedroom. Just then, Fox thinks it's the perfect moment to ask me about my love life.

"So," he says, holding the end of the molding steady, "who are you taking to Rowan's wedding?"

I focus on the nail, tapping it carefully into place. "My cousin Ellie. She's visiting from Seattle that weekend."

Fox's silence is judgmental enough that I have to look down at him. He's wearing that expression—the one that makes me want to drop my hammer on his foot accidentally.

"Your cousin," he repeats flatly. "You're taking your cousin to a wedding."

"She's never been to Cedar Bay before," I defend, turning back to the molding. "Besides, it's not like I need a date. I know everyone who'll be there."

"That's pathetic, man. Even for you."

I drive another nail with more force than necessary. "What's pathetic about spending time with family?"

"The part where you're thirty-two and using a relative as a shield so you don't have to actually date someone." Fox hands me another nail. "When was the last time you went on a real date? One that didn't end with you boring some poor woman to tears talking about Mabel?"

"I don't talk about Mabel on dates," I lie, knowing full well I mentioned her twice during coffee with Sarah from the bank last month.

"Right." Fox's tone drips with sarcasm. "Just like you don't keep checking your phone whenever someone from the Portland area code calls."

I climb down the ladder, wiping dust from my hands onto my jeans. "I'm just tired of the whole dating scene. Everyone in this town either wants to get married tomorrow or is already divorced and bitter about it."

"So bring someone new. Weddings are perfect for hooking up." Fox grins, wagging his eyebrows suggestively. "Remember Tobias's sister's wedding? That bridesmaid from?—"

"I'm not looking to hook up," I interrupt, packing tools back into my belt. "And taking someone to a wedding sends the wrong message. It's like saying, 'Hey, want to watch two people commit their lives to each other and then consider if we should do that too?'"

Fox stares at me like I've grown a second head. "It's just a party with free booze and cake."

"To you, maybe." I move the ladder to the next section of the wall. "Anyway, Ellie's excited about it. She's a house flipper, so she'll appreciate all the work we've done on the Lighthouse Inn."

"Your loss." Fox shrugs, handing me more nails. "Rowan's inviting half the single women in the county. Including that new physical therapist with the?—"

"I'm good," I cut him off again. "Hand me that level, would you?"

Fox tosses it up. "You know, sooner or later, you're going to have to admit that Mabel's not coming back."

The level nearly slips from my grip. Even after all these years, hearing Mabel's name out loud feels like pressing on a bruise. "This has nothing to do with her."

"Everything you do has to do with Mabel," Fox's voice softens slightly. "It's been what, thirteen years since the break-up? She's probably married with 2.5 kids and a golden retriever by now."

I focus on the bubble in the level, making minute adjustments to the molding. "I don't think about her anymore."

This lie is so transparent that Fox doesn't even bother calling me on it. Instead, he sighs and says, "She may come to the wedding. Mabel and Rowan are first cousins."

The hammer freezes mid-swing. "What? No way. Rowan already told me she never replied to the invite."

"That's not what I heard."

My heart is suddenly pounding so hard I can feel it in my fingertips. "Mabel wouldn't come back for a wedding. She hasn't even been home for Thanksgiving in years. She hates Cedar Bay.."

"Maybe." Fox shrugs. "But if she does show up, you might want an actual date

instead of your cousin. Just saying."

I hammer the nail with more force than necessary, sending it deep into the wood in one stroke. "Mabel Maxwell doesn't care who I bring to a wedding."

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"Right." Fox's tone makes it clear he doesn't believe me. "Just like you don't care if she shows up."

I climb down from the ladder again, needing to move, to do something, with the nervous energy suddenly coursing through me. "We should finish the bathroom fixtures before lunch."

Fox allows the subject to change, but his knowing smirk follows me down the hallway. The idea of Mabel returning to Cedar Bay—of seeing her again after all these years—makes my stomach twist in ways I haven't felt since I was eighteen.

It's ridiculous. I'm a grown man who runs his own business, who's built a life here. I shouldn't be affected by the mere possibility of running into my high school girlfriend.

But as I mechanically install the bathroom sink, my mind betrays me with questions: What does she look like now? Is she still as driven, as brilliant, as stubborn? Did she become the hotshot lawyer she always wanted to be? Is there someone in her life who makes her laugh the way I used to?

Does she ever think of me at all?

By lunchtime, I've convinced myself it doesn't matter. Mabel won't come. She's made it clear over the years that Cedar Bay is her past, not her present. And even if she did show up, we're different people now, whatever we had died a long time ago, buried under years of silence and separate lives.

But as Fox and I pack up our tools for lunch, my phone buzzes with a text from Rowan:

Just got Mabel's RSVP. She's coming. I thought you should know.

The wrench slips from my hand and clatters to the floor.

"Everything okay?" Fox asks, but I can tell from his expression he already knows.

I stare at the screen, reading the message three more times as if the words might change. "She's coming to the wedding."

"Shit." Fox runs a hand through his hair. "You want to call Ellie and tell her plans changed?"

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intended. "I'm not scrambling to find a date just because my ex is going to be there. That would be pathetic."

Fox raises an eyebrow. "More pathetic than bringing your cousin?"

I pocket my phone and head for the door. "I need air."

Outside, the October breeze carries the scent of salt and dying leaves. I lean against my truck, trying to process the fact that in two weeks, Mabel Maxwell will be back in Cedar Bay. The same woman who swore she'd never return, who couldn't wait to shake the dust of this town off her designer heels.

"You know what this means, right?" Fox joins me, unwrapping his sandwich. "This is your chance."

"My chance for what? To embarrass myself in front of everyone we went to high

school with?"

"Your chance to get closure. To see if there's still something there, or if you can finally move on." He takes a bite, chewing thoughtfully. "Either way, you'll know."

The problem is, I don't want to know. For thirteen years, I've lived with the possibility that maybe—just maybe—we could find our way back to each other someday. It's a fantasy I've never admitted to anyone, barely admitted to myself. But it's kept me from fully committing to anyone else, from building something real with someone who wants to be here.

"What if she's married?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

"Then you'll know it's really over, and you can stop waiting for someone who's never coming back."

Fox is right, but it doesn't make the prospect any less terrifying. I've spent so long imagining what I'd say to Mabel if I saw her again, how I'd prove I've become the man she thought I could never be. Now, I might get that chance, and I have no idea if I'm ready for it.

My phone buzzes again. Another text from Rowan:

Also, she's not married. I thought you'd want to know that, too.

This time, I manage to keep hold of my tools, but just barely.

Fox must see something on my face because he stops mid-chew. "What now?"

"She's not married." The words feel strange in my mouth as if I'm speaking a foreign language.

"Well, hell." Fox sets down his sandwich. "That changes things."

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Does it? I'm not sure anything really changes. Mabel left for a reason—multiple reasons. She wanted bigger things than Cedar Bay could offer, and I wasn't willing to follow her to get them. The fact that she's still single doesn't erase thirteen years of different choices and different lives.

If only I have to convince my heart that I've moved on before next week.

mabel

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The scent of cedar and salt air hits me like a slap of nostalgia the moment I step off the plane.

"Mabel, honey!" Mom's voice carries across the small terminal, and I spot her immediately—same auburn hair as mine, though hers is streaked with silver now, same blue eyes crinkled with excitement. She's practically bouncing on her toes as she rushes toward us.

"Hi, Mom." I barely get the words out before she's crushing me in a hug that smells like vanilla and the lavender fabric softener she's used since I was twelve.

"And you must be the boyfriend I've heard absolutely nothing about!" She releases me and turns expectantly to Aidan, who's standing there looking like a deer caught in headlights.

"Oh God, no." The words tumble out faster than I intended. "Mom, this is Aidan, my

colleague. He volunteered to be my plus one."

Her face falls slightly, but she recovers with the grace of a woman who's spent thirty years married to a small-town mayor. "Of course! How silly of me. Though you two do make a lovely pair."

"Drop the fantasies, Mom. Aiden is married to a man." I burst her bubble before she can begin to hope.

Aidan clears his throat awkwardly. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Maxwell."

"Please, call me Rachel." She loops her arms through both of ours as we head toward baggage claim. "Now, Mabel, you'll never guess who I ran into at the grocery store yesterday."

My stomach drops. There are exactly three people in this town she could be referring to with that particular tone of barely contained glee, and I'm praying it's not the one I think it is.

"Cole Bennett."

Fuck. Of course, it is.

"He looks wonderful, honey. He has really filled out since high school—all muscle now from that construction work. And still single, can you believe it? Such a catch and no one's snatched him up yet."

I focus on breathing steadily through my nose while she prattles on, but my hands are already clenching into fists.

"Mom," I interrupt, trying to keep my voice level. "I didn't come back to Cedar Bay

to discuss Cole Bennett's relationship status."

"Oh, I know, sweetheart. But you should see him now—he's got his own business with Rowan and that Fox boy—you remember Fox? They're doing so well. Cole just finished renovating the old Miller place down by the water. Gorgeous work." She sighs wistfully as we wait for our luggage to appear on the carousel. "He always was so talented with his hands."

Heat crawls up my neck at the unintended innuendo, and I catch Aidan smirking beside me.

"Rachel," Aidan chimes in, clearly enjoying my discomfort, "Mabel's mentioned Cole before. High school sweethearts, right?"

I shoot him a look that could melt steel, but Mom's already off and running.

"Oh yes! They were inseparable. Prom king and queen, of course. I always thought..." She trails off, studying my face. "Well, water under the bridge now."

My black suitcase finally appears, and I grab it with more force than necessary. "Can we please change the subject?"

"Of course, honey." But there's a gleam in her eye that I recognize from childhood—the same look she got when she was planning surprise birthday parties or scheming to get me to eat vegetables. "It's just that he'll probably be at the wedding, you know. Since he's friends with the groom's family and all."

My chest tightens. Of course, Cole will be there. In a town of three thousand people, everyone's invited to everything.

"That's fine. We're both adults." The words taste like sawdust in my mouth.

We pile into Mom's ancient Honda, and she chatters nonstop during the fifteen-minute drive through downtown Cedar Bay. The place looks exactly like the same—quaint storefronts, American flags hanging from every lamppost, the kind of Norman Rockwell perfection that used to make me feel suffocated.

Now, it just makes me feel exposed.

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"Oh, and he bought a house!" Mom announces as we pull into the familiar driveway of my childhood home. "Right on Maple Street, three blocks from here. He fixed it up himself—you know how he is. Added a whole second story and everything."

Three blocks. Jesus Christ. I could literally walk there in five minutes if I lost my mind completely.

"How nice for him," I manage, stepping out of the car and breathing in the scent of Mom's rose garden. Even that smells the same—sweet and overwhelming, just like everything else in this place.

"The yard is just beautiful now. He planted all these native flowers, and there's this gorgeous deck overlooking the water. Very romantic." She gives me a pointed look as she unlocks the front door. "Perfect for entertaining."

"Mom." My voice carries a warning that she completely ignores.

"I'm just saying if you wanted to stop by and say hello while you're in town?—"

"I don't."

"—it would be the neighborly thing to do."

The house wraps around me like a time capsule. It's the same burgundy couch where Cole and I used to study for calculus tests. The same family photos march up the staircase, including several that feature a younger, happier version of myself wrapped in his arms.

Aidan whistles low. "Wow, this place is like a museum. Is that you at prom?" He's pointing at a photo where seventeen-year-old me is beaming up at Cole in his rented tux, his hands resting on my waist like I might disappear if he let go.

"Ancient history," I mutter, dragging my suitcase toward the stairs.

"He still asks about you, you know," Mom says quietly, and something in her tone makes me freeze halfway up the first step.

I turn around slowly. "What?"

"Cole. Whenever I see him around town, he always asks how you're doing in Portland, if you're happy." Her expression softens. "He seems... lonely, honey."

My throat constricts. "That's not my problem anymore."

But even as I say it, something twists painfully in my chest.

Mom's eyes follow me up the stairs, and I feel them burning into my back like twin lasers. "Your dad will be home for dinner at six," she calls after me. "He's so excited to see you."

"Great," I say, not turning around. I can't let her see my face right now.

I push open the door to my childhood bedroom, and it's like stepping into a time warp. Everything is exactly as I left it when I packed for college—the pale blue walls, the white eyelet curtains, even the framed sketch of the Cedar Bay lighthouse that Cole drew for me on our first anniversary.

Aidan appears in the doorway behind me, whistling low. "Well, this is like the Mabel Maxwell museum exhibit. I half expect there to be a velvet rope and an audio tour."

I toss my suitcase onto the bed with a groan. "This was a mistake. I should have stayed at the Bay View Inn."

"And miss all this maternal matchmaking? Not a chance." He flops down on the bed beside my suitcase. "It's good to know I'm not the only one who believes you should give that small-town Romeo another chance."

"You're both delusional." I counter while unzipping my suitcase.

"Am I, though?" Aidan picks up the framed lighthouse sketch, examining it with the critical eye of someone who appreciates art. "This is good. Your boy's got talent."

"He's not my boy." I snatch the frame from his hands and shove it face-down in the top drawer of my dresser. "And talent doesn't excuse abandoning someone when they need you most."

"Mabel—"

"Drop it, Aidan." I pull out my cocktail dress for tomorrow's rehearsal dinner, shaking out the wrinkles with more violence than necessary. "I came here to see my cousin Rowan get married, smile for photos, and leave. That's it."

But even as I say it, Mom's words echo in my head. He seems lonely, honey.

Good. Cole should be lonely. He chose this town over me, opting for his safe, little life over our future together. If he's lonely now, that's exactly what he deserves.

A knock at my bedroom door interrupts my internal spiral of righteous anger.

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"Mabel?" Mom's voice is softer now, tentative. "Can I come in?"

I glance at Aidan, who's now examining my old collection of Nancy Drew books with entirely too much interest. "Sure."

She steps inside, carrying a steaming mug that smells like chamomile and honey—the same tea she used to make when I had nightmares as a kid.

"I'm sorry," she says, settling on the edge of my bed. "I shouldn't have ambushed you with all that talk about Cole. Your father always says I have the subtlety of a freight train."

Despite everything, I feel my mouth twitch. "Dad's not wrong."

"I just..." She sighs, wrapping her hands around the mug. "I worry about you, sweetheart. You work so hard, and you never mention dating anyone, and I thought maybe?—"

"Maybe what? That I'd come crawling back to my high school boyfriend because my life in Portland is somehow incomplete without a man?" The words come out sharper than I intended, and I see her flinch.

"No, that's not what I meant at all." Her voice is quiet but firm. "I meant that you haven't seemed truly happy in years, and the last time I saw you light up like the sun was when you were with him."

The mug trembles slightly in her hands, and suddenly, I see her as she is—not the

meddling mother trying to orchestrate my love life, but a woman who misses her daughter and wants her to find joy.

"Mom." I sit down beside her, and she immediately passes me the tea. "I am happy. I have a career I love, a beautiful apartment, independence?—"

"But are you fulfilled?" she asks softly. "There's a difference, you know."

I take a sip of the chamomile, letting the familiar taste ground me. Through my childhood window, I can see the harbor in the distance, dotted with fishing boats heading out for the evening catch. Somewhere out there is probably Cole's boat—he always talked about getting one, about lazy Sunday mornings on the water.

"It's complicated, Mom."

"The best things usually are."

mabel

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The unmistakable aroma of hairspray and gossip hits me the moment we walk through the door of Shear Perfection, and I already know this was a mistake.

"Mabel honey!" squeals Mrs. Henderson from beneath a towering beehive of foil, her voice carrying across the entire salon. "Look at you, all grown up and gorgeous!"

Mom beams beside me, practically vibrating with pride as she steers me toward the reception desk. "We're here for our four o'clock appointments," she announces to anyone within earshot, which in this echo chamber is everyone.

Within seconds, we're surrounded. Mrs. Patterson abandons her pedicure, hobbling over with cotton balls still wedged between her toes. Betty Carmichael emerges from under a hair dryer, looking like she's been electrocuted, and somehow, even Mrs. Foster materializes from the back room, her face mask cracking as she smiles.

"So tell us everything," Mrs. Henderson demands, patting the empty chair beside her. "Are you seeing anyone special? Your mother mentioned you might have your eye on someone."

I shoot Mom a look that could melt steel, but she's already being whisked away to the shampoo station, conveniently deaf to my silent pleas for rescue.

"I'm focusing on my career right now?—"

"Oh, nonsense," Betty interrupts, waving a manicured hand. "A pretty girl like you needs a good man. What about that Jonas Dillon? He's still single and quite the catch, honey."

My stomach drops. "Jonas?"

"Mmm-hmm," Mrs. Patterson nods sagely. "Handsome as sin, that one. I just moved back to town, you know. Opened up that fancy law practice downtown."

The room suddenly feels smaller, the chemical smell more suffocating.

"Law practice?" I manage to squeak out while trying not to choke on the cloud of hairspray being liberally applied two chairs over.

"Partner track at Gillespie and Associates," Mrs. Henderson confirms with a knowing nod. "And still unmarried at thirty-four. Criminal, if you ask me."

I'm saved from responding when Trina, my stylist since high school, beckons me toward her chair. But Betty Carmichael follows, dragging her rolling chair behind her like some determined beauty salon stalker.

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"You know," Betty continues as Trina drapes the cape around my shoulders, "my Fox says Cole has been asking about you."

My heart does a stupid little flip that I immediately resent. "It's good to hear that Fox and Cole are still friends."

"Construction crew," Betty says, leaning in conspiratorially. "My son doesn't say much—you know how he is—but he mentioned Cole's been working overtime on that riverside project. Something about needing extra money to..." she pauses dramatically, "expand his house."

Trina's hands freeze. "An expansion? For what?"

"Well, a man his age is probably thinking about a family." Mrs. Patterson chimes in, somehow now positioned at my other side.

The stupid heart flip inverts into a stomach plunge.

"But he's not seeing anyone," Mom pipes up from two chairs down, clearly eavesdropping despite pretending to be engrossed in a year-old copy of People magazine.

"Not that we know, but some men like to keep their private lives to themselves," Mrs. Henderson says with authority.

Trina, bless her, cranks up the water pressure at the shampoo bowl, drowning out the conversation for a moment. She leans down and whispers, "Cole is single, and he

hates people trying to set him up. He told me as much when he came in for a haircut last week."

Before I can process that information, we're back in the styling area, and Mrs. Foster has materialized with a plate of mini muffins and more questions.

"So, how long are you back in town, Mabel? Are you leaving after the wedding or staying through the holidays?"

"Just until Sunday." I try to sound casual like my heart isn't pounding at the mere mention of Cole's name. "I have a big case waiting for me back in Portland."

"Sunday!" They all gasp in unison as if I've announced I'm leaving for Mars.

Trina works her magic with the round brush, creating soft waves that frame my face. I catch my reflection in the mirror and barely recognize myself—something about being back in Cedar Bay makes me look younger and more vulnerable.

"That handsome little house on Maple Street is for sale," Mrs. Foster says, offering me a mini muffin that I politely decline. "It's a perfect starter home."

"I have a condo in Portland," I remind her. "With a view of the river."

"Views don't keep you warm at night, dear," Mrs. Henderson says with a wink that makes me want to slide under the cape and disappear.

Mom pipes up, "Mabel's place is beautiful. So sophisticated."

"I bet it is," Mrs. Patterson nods. "But you know, Cole's been doing some incredible work lately. The Johnsons' kitchen renovation was featured in that regional home magazine."

"Cedar Living," Betty supplies helpfully. "He's quite talented with his hands."

The way she says it makes my cheeks flush, and Trina snickers quietly behind me.

"Did you know," Mrs. Foster leans in, her half-removed face mask cracking further, "that he turned down that big Seattle contract? Everyone thought he'd jump at the chance to expand the business, but he said he didn't want to leave Cedar Bay."

"Roots," Mrs. Henderson nods sagely. "That boy has roots."

I try to focus on the sensation of Trina's fingers working through my hair rather than the implication that Cole—my Cole, once upon a time—had chosen to stay in the town I couldn't wait to escape.

"You look just like you did at senior prom," Betty sighs nostalgically. "Remember that beautiful green dress? Cole couldn't take his eyes off you all night."

"That was thirteen years ago," I say firmly, though the memory surfaces unbidden—Cole in his rented tux, the corsage he'd saved up for, dancing under twinkling lights in the gym.

"Some things don't change," Mrs. Patterson says with a knowing look. "He still drives that ridiculous truck."

"The blue Chevy?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

Four pairs of eyes light up at my obvious interest, and I immediately regret it.

"Got it all fixed up," Betty confirms. "Fox says he refuses to get a new one, even though that thing breaks down at least once a month."

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I remember that truck. Stolen kisses in the cab, stargazing in the bed on summer nights, the way Cole would drum his fingers on the steering wheel when his favorite songs came on.

"All done!" Trina announces, mercifully interrupting my thoughts. She spins me around to face the mirror, and I have to admit, she's worked wonders. My hair falls in soft waves, elegant enough for the rehearsal dinner but not too fussy.

"You look beautiful, honey," Mom says, appearing beside me with her own freshly styled hair.

"Cole always did like your hair down," Mrs. Henderson muses, and the other women nod in agreement.

I stand up, desperate to escape. "Well, thank you all for the... updates. It was lovely to see everyone."

As Mom settles the bill, Mrs. Foster catches my arm. "He asks about you, you know. Not directly—men never do—but he always perks up when your name comes up."

I don't know what to say to that, so I smile and gently extract my arm.

Outside, the late afternoon sun bathes Cedar Bay in golden light. Mom links her arm through mine as we walk to her car.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" she asks innocently.

I give her a sideways glance. "You set me up."

"I did no such thing." Her protest lacks conviction. "I just thought you might want to know what's been happening with old friends."

"One old friend in particular, it seems."

Mom squeezes my arm. "Sweetheart, I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy," I insist, even as something hollow echoes in my chest. "I have everything I wanted."

As we drive through town, I can't help but notice the riverside project coming into view—scaffolding, construction equipment, and a familiar blue Chevy parked near the entrance.

"Can we take the long way home?" I ask quietly.

Mom gives me a knowing look but turns at the next intersection without comment.

Some things in Cedar Bay haven't changed. The gossip, the well-meaning but intrusive questions, the way everyone knows everyone's business.

And some things have changed entirely.

Like me. Like Cole.

cole

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I'm not the kind of man who freezes in place, but seeing Mabel Maxwell across the room after thirteen years does exactly that to me. She's laughing at something her date is saying, her head tilted back just enough to show the elegant line of her throat, and suddenly, I'm seventeen again, watching her from across the high school cafeteria.

"Cole? You okay?" Ellie nudges me with her elbow, her bridesmaid dress rustling. My cousin has always been too perceptive for her own good.

"Fine," I lie, downing half my whiskey in one swallow. The burn is welcome—anything to distract from the knife twisting in my gut at the sight of Mabel with another man.

"That's Mabel, isn't it?" Ellie whispers. "The one who broke your heart before college?"

I don't answer, which is answer enough. Ellie pats my arm sympathetically before being whisked away by a mutual friend for photos.

The rehearsal dinner for Cilla and Rowan's wedding is exactly the kind of event I'd usually navigate with easy confidence. Hell, I built the venue with my own hands—the lakeside pavilion that's become Cedar Bay's most sought-after wedding location. But tonight, I'm a stranger in my own creation, awkwardly clutching my whiskey while stealing glances at the woman I've never been able to forget.

Her date's hand rests casually on the small of her back. It shouldn't bother me. It's been thirteen years. We've both lived our entire lives apart from each other.

But it does bother me. It bothers me like a splinter under my skin.

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"You look like you're plotting a murder," Fox says, appearing at my side with a fresh drink for me. "Is it Aiden or Mabel you're planning to kill?"

"Is that his name? I'm not plotting anything," I mutter, accepting the whiskey. "Just surprised to see her, is all."

Fox snorts. "Right. And I'm just mildly interested in Prue Griffin."

I manage to smile at that. My friend's obsession with Cilla's big sister is the town's worst-kept secret.

"Go talk to her," Fox says, nodding toward Mabel. "Before you burn a hole through Aiden with your eyes."

"I can't just?—"

"Sure you can. Watch and learn." He smirks and saunters off toward Prue, who's trying to look invisible by the dessert table.

I drain my second whiskey and set the glass down—Fox's right. I'm Cole Bennett. I run a successful construction company. I've built or renovated a quarter of the homes in this town with my own two hands. I can damn well say hello to an old girlfriend.

As I make my way across the room, the crowd parts like the Red Sea. Or that's just the whiskey talking. Mabel sees me coming, and I catch the slight widening of her eyes, the momentary freeze in her posture before she composes herself.

"Cole," she says when I reach them, my name like honey on her lips. "It's been a long time."

"Too long," I say, surprised by the steadiness in my voice. I extend my hand to Aiden. "Cole Bennett."

"Aiden Whitley," he replies, shaking my hand firmly. "I've heard a lot about you."

"All lies, I'm sure," I joke, though my heart hammers in my chest.

Mabel laughs, and the sound hits me like a physical blow. "Aiden and I work together at the firm. He's my colleague and good friend."

Friend. The word echoes in my head, soothing the jealousy that's been churning in my gut.

"Aiden was kind enough to be my plus-one since I didn't want to face my hometown alone," she adds, and our eyes lock.

There it is—that same electric current that used to run between us when we were teenagers. Thirteen years, law school, my construction company, different cities, different lives—and still, when Mabel Maxwell looks at me, the world narrows to just us.

"I'm going to head for the bar," Aiden says, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "Nice meeting you, Cole."

And then he's gone, leaving me alone with the woman who has haunted my dreams since the summer after high school graduation.

"You look good, Cole," Mabel says softly. "Cedar Bay agrees with you."

"And Portland clearly agrees with you," I reply, taking in her confident posture. "Hotshot attorney now, huh?"

"Something like that." She smiles, a hint of the old Mabel shining through her polished exterior. "And you're building half the town, from what I hear."

"Someone has to," I say with a shrug, and her laugh warms me more than the whiskey ever could.

We stand there, suspended in a moment that feels both fragile and heavy with history. The pavilion bustles around us, but we might as well be alone on the dock where we shared our first kiss.

"So," I say, suddenly aware of how dry my mouth is. "Just friends with Aiden?"

Mabel raises an eyebrow. "Is that what you want to ask me after thirteen years?"

"No," I admit, the whiskey making me braver than I should be. "I want to ask why you disappeared. Why don't you ever come home?"

Her eyes darken, and she glances down at her champagne flute. "It's complicated, Cole."

"It always is with you," I say, not unkindly. The string lights overhead cast a golden glow on Mabel's face, highlighting the delicate curve of her cheekbones that my fingers remember tracing on lazy summer afternoons.

"You built this place?" she asks, clearly changing the subject as she gestures around the pavilion. "It's beautiful."

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"Thanks. It took about eight months. Nearly drove Rowan crazy with the delays, but We had to get it just right.."

She laughs, and I find myself leaning closer, drawn by the familiar sound. "Some things never change. You always did get lost in the details."

"And you always did avoid difficult conversations," I counter, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Her smile falters. "I deserved that."

"No, I'm sorry," I say quickly. "Tonight's about Rowan and Cilla. Not... whatever this is."

Mabel takes a step closer, close enough that I catch the scent of her perfume—different from what she wore as a teenager, more sophisticated, but underneath it, something familiar that makes my heart stutter.

"And what is this, Cole?" she asks, her voice barely audible above the party.

Before I can answer, Ellie appears at my side, slightly breathless. "Cole, sorry to interrupt, but Fox says there's an issue with the lighting on the back deck. Something about a circuit breaker?"

I close my eyes briefly, torn between responsibility and the conversation I've waited thirteen years to have. "I'll be right there."

Ellie nods and disappears back into the crowd. When I look back at Mabel, her expression is unreadable.

"Duty calls," she says.

"Always does." I hesitate, then add, "Save me a dance at the reception tomorrow?"

Something flickers in her eyes—hope, maybe, or regret. "I'd like that."

As I turn to leave, her hand catches my wrist, her touch sending electricity up my arm. "Cole," she says, "for what it's worth, you look great."

The confession hangs between us, and I want nothing more than to pull her into my arms, but Ellie is waiting, and thirteen years of questions can't be answered in a stolen moment at a rehearsal dinner.

"And you look beautiful, Mabel," I say simply, and the smile that breaks across her face is worth every second of heartache.

I walk away, feeling her eyes on my back, knowing that tomorrow everything could change. Again. For better or worse, Mabel Maxwell is back in my life, and I'm not letting her disappear a second time without answers.

The circuit breaker turns out to be a five-minute fix—loose wire that Fox could have handled himself if he wasn't busymaking moon eyes at Prue. But I'm grateful for the distraction, for the chance to get my hands dirty with something tangible instead of drowning in the mess of emotions Mabel's stirred up.

When I return to the party, she's gone.

"She left a few minutes ago," Ellie says, reading my expression as I scan the room.

"Said something about an early morning and needing to prepare for the wedding."

I nod like it doesn't matter like I wasn't counting on stealing another few minutes with her. The rest of the evening passes in a blur of congratulations for Rowan, small talk with relatives, and way too much whiskey.

By the time I get home to my house on the hill overlooking the lake, my head is spinning, and my chest feels too tight. I stand on my back deck, staring down at the pavilion where tomorrow Rowan will marry the love of his life, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm standing at a crossroads.

Thirteen years ago, Mabel left for college and never looked back. Never called. Never wrote. She just vanished from my life like we hadn't spent two years planning our future together. I'd waited that whole first semester for some explanation, some sign that what we'd had meant something to her.

It never came.

Now she's back, looking at me like no time has passed, asking what this is between us. Hell, if I know. All I know is that seeing her tonight felt like coming up for air after drowning.

My phone buzzes with a text from Rowan: Thanks for everything, man. Tomorrow's going to be perfect.

I smile despite myself. At least one of us is getting his happy ending.

mabel

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I grip my coffee cup like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to reality, and it might be.

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"You look like you've seen a ghost. Cole's just a man, Mabel." Aiden says, sliding into the booth across from me at this dimly lit coffee shop that smells like burnt espresso and broken dreams. It's the kind of place that stays open until two AM for people like us—the emotionally unhinged who need caffeine and a witness to their mental breakdown.

"Did you see how spooked I looked?" I mutter, staring into the dark liquid. "I saw Cole in a fucking suit, and apparently, my ovaries didn't get the memo that things between us are dead, buried, and thoroughly decomposed."

Aiden snorts, nearly choking on his latte. "Christ, Mabel. Only you would phrase it like that."

"It's not funny." I slump back against the cracked vinyl seat. "Do you know what he said to me? He said I looked beautiful while openly inhaling the scent of my perfume—like a wolf sniffing his prey. It felt like the last thirteen years didn't happen. Like he didn't—" I stop myself before I go down that rabbit hole again.

"Like he didn't what? Break your heart? News flash, sweetheart—yours wasn't the only one that got shattered in that particular explosion." Aiden leans forward, his expression serious now. "I watched him tonight, Mabel. The way he looked at you during the rehearsal? That man is still completely gone for you."

My stomach does this stupid little flip that I refuse to acknowledge. "You're delusional."

"Am I? Because from where I was standing, Cole Bennett looked like a man who'd

just been handed everything he ever wanted and lost all over again when you walked away with me."

"That's unlikely." I set my cup down with more force than necessary, sloshing coffee onto the scratched table. "He made his choice years ago."

Aiden gives me that look—the one he uses in court when he's about to dismantle someone's carefully constructed argument. "Did he, though? Because from what I've gathered from the Cedar Bay gossip mill, the man hasn't had a serious relationship since you left."

"And that's my problem because...?" I reach for a napkin, wiping up my mess with aggressive swipes.

"It's not your problem. It's just information." Aiden shrugs, but his eyes are too wide. "Interesting information about a man who still turns you into a stammering teenager."

"I did not stammer," I protest, though my cheeks flush traitorously. "I was perfectly composed."

"Mabel." Aiden reaches across the table, covering my hand with his. "You backed into a waiter and knocked over a tray of champagne flutes when he smiled at you."

I groan, dropping my forehead to the table. "Do you think Cole noticed?"

"Everyone noticed. Your grandmother started a betting pool on when you two would disappear into a coat closet."

"Oh my God. I'm a respected attorney. I argue before federal judges. I do not get flustered by old flames in tailored suits."

"Just one flame," Aiden corrects. "In one particular suit."

I lift my head, fixing him with what I hope is my intimidating courtroom glare. "I'm over him."

"Sure you are. That's why you're having an existential crisis at midnight in a coffee shop that smells like despair."

"It's the ambiance I'm here for," I mutter, but we both know it's a lie.

Aiden sighs, his expression softening. "Look, I get it. First loves are complicated. But you're going to be sharing the space most of the day tomorrow?"

"Stop, please." I hold up my hand. "I'm aware of my impending doom, thank you."

"All I'm saying is maybe stop running from whatever this is." He gestures vaguely at my general state of distress. "You're Mabel Maxwell. You don't run from anything."

Except I did. I ran to law school, then Portland, building a life that had nothing to do with Cedar Bay or Cole Bennett. And now here I am, undone by a single encounter.

"What if I've misread everything?" I whisper, voicing the fear that's been circling since I saw Cole again. "What if he's just being polite, and I'm the pathetic ex who never moved on?"

Aiden's laugh is gentle but firm. "Trust me, the way that man looked at you wasn't polite. It was hungry."

The word sends an electric current down my spine that I refuse to acknowledge.

"Even if you're right—and I'm not saying you are—what exactly am I supposed to do

about it now? We're different people. I have a life in Portland. He's here. The same geography problem that broke us apart still exists."

"Maybe," Aiden says, stirring his coffee thoughtfully, "the problem was never about geography at all."

My breath catches in my throat because, damn him, he might be right. Geography was always the excuse we used, the safe explanation that made our breakup sound logical and mature instead of the devastating implosion it was.

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"Don't," I warn, but my voice lacks conviction. "Don't make this deeper than it needs to be."

"Too late." Aiden's smile is infuriatingly smug. "You're already there, swimming in the deep end of feelings you've been avoiding for over a decade."

I drain the rest of my coffee, needing something to do with my hands, before I start fidgeting like a nervous teenager. "Even if—and this is a massive if—there's still something between us, what then? I'm not the same girl who used to sneak out to meet him at the pier. I'm not going to throw away everything I've built for some nostalgic fantasy."

"Who says you have to throw anything away?" Aiden challenges. "Maybe the question isn't what you'd have to give up, but what you might gain."

"You're assuming he'd even want—" I stop myself because finishing that sentence means admitting I've been thinking about it. About him. About us.

"Mabel." Aiden's voice is gentle now, the way it gets when he's about to say something I don't want to hear but need to. "I've known you for three years. I've seen you take on impossible cases, work eighteen-hour days, and argue down opposing counsel twice your size. But I've never seen you light up the way you did tonight when you saw him."

My chest tightens. "I didn't light up."

"You did. Before the panic set in, before you remembered all the reasons why it's

complicated—for about thirty seconds, you looked like you'd found something you'd been searching for without realizing it."

I stare at him, hating how perceptive he is, hating how right he might be. "What if I talk to him, and it ruins everything? What if we try and it's a disaster? What if?—"

"What if it's not?" he interrupts. "What if it's exactly what you've been missing?"

The coffee shop suddenly feels too small, too warm. I can't breathe properly, and my heart is doing something erratic that makes me want to flee back to Portland, where everything makes sense, and Cole Bennett doesn't exist in three dimensions.

"I should go back to the house," I say, already reaching for my purse. "Tomorrow's going to be long enough without me staying up all night having an emotional breakdown."

"Running again?" Aiden asks, but there's no judgment in his voice, just understanding.

"Strategic retreat," I correct. "There's a difference."

He laughs, standing to follow me out. "Whatever helps you sleep tonight. But Mabel? Tomorrow, you're going to have to face him again. And something tells me he's not going to make it as easy for you to run."

The cool night air hits my face as we step outside, but it doesn't cool the fire that's been burning in my chest since Cole whispered my name like a prayer he'd been saving for thirteen years.

God help me. I want him to chase me.

cole

. . .

My head feels like someone took a sledgehammer to it and then decided to finish the job with a jackhammer.

I stumble into the wedding venue's back room, squinting against what feels like nuclear-level lighting but is probably just regular fluorescent bulbs. The irony isn't lost on me—I'm about to watch my best friend marry the love of his life while I'm dying from alcohol poisoning, all because I couldn't handle the thought of seeing Mabel Maxwell and being too chicken-shit to keep her from leaving me again.

"Jesus, son, you look like hell warmed over."

I turn toward the gravelly voice and immediately regret the sudden movement. Mr. Malone—Rowan's dad—stands in the doorway holding a steaming mug and shaking his head at me like I'm a lost cause.

"Feel worse than I look," I croak, slumping into a folding chair that creaks ominously under my weight.

"Drink this." He shoves the mug into my hands. The smell hits me first—something that makes my eyes water and my stomach lurch. "Family recipe. Cured many a hangover in the Malone household."

I take a tentative sip and immediately want to die. "What the hell is in this?"

"You don't want to know. Just drink it."

Mr. Malone settles into the chair across from me, his weathered hands clasped

together. He's got that look—the same one he used to give us when we were kids, and he was about to drop some life wisdom whether we wanted it or not.

"So," he says, cutting straight to the chase. "You planning to tell her how you feel, or are you gonna spend the rest of your life wondering what if?"

The question hits harder than the hangover. "I don't know what you're talking about."

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"Like hell, you don't. Mabel Maxwell. That girl's been eating you alive for thirteen years, and today she's gonna be standing twenty feet away looking like a million bucks." He leans forward, his eyes serious. "Question is, what are you gonna do about it?"

I take another sip of his toxic hangover cure and force it down, buying myself time I don't have. The bitter liquid burns my throat, but it's nothing compared to the way his words burn through my chest.

"She made it pretty clear where she stands," I mutter, staring into the murky depths of the mug. "Thirteen years, Mr. Malone. She's had thirteen years to?—"

"To what? Read your mind?" He snorts. "Son, I've known you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, and you've been carrying a torch for that girl so long it's practically welded to your hand. But have you ever—and I mean ever—told her straight out how you feel?"

My stomach churns, and it's not entirely from the hangover. "It's complicated."

"Bullshit." The word comes out sharp enough to make me wince. "You know what's complicated? Spending the next forty years wondering if she would've said yes. You know what's simple? Walking up to her today and laying your cards on the table."

I drain the rest of his concoction and immediately regret it. My head throbs in protest, but the fog is starting to lift. "And if she shoots me down? If she tells me I'm an idiot for waiting this long?"

"Then at least you'll know." Mr. Malone stands up, brushing imaginary dust off his suit pants. "But I'll tell you something else—that girl didn't come back to Cedar Bay for the wedding cake. She came back because this place still holds meaning for her. And whether you want to admit it or not, you're a big part of what this place means."

He heads toward the door, then pauses. "Pride's a funny thing, Cole. It'll keep you warm at night for about five minutes, but it makes for a lonely life partner."

He disappears through the doorway, leaving me alone with his words echoing in my head louder than the pounding behind my temples. I set the empty mug down on the table and rest my face in my hands, trying to think through the haze of whiskey and whatever the hell Mr. Malone just made me drink.

The truth is, he's right about everything. I've been a coward for thirteen years, hiding behind hurt feelings and wounded pride like some martyr. Every time I've had the chance to tell Mabel how I feel, I've choked. At high school graduation, when she was discussing college. That summer, she came back after her first year. The handful of times our paths might have crossed when she'd visit her parents.

Each time, I told myself it wasn't the right moment. That Mabel was busy, focused on her career, clearly over whatever we had, and that I was protecting myself from another round of rejection.

But maybe I was protecting myself from the possibility that she might say yes.

My phone buzzes against my leg. A text from Rowan:

Ceremony starts in 30. Are you alive?

I type back:

Barely. Your dad's trying to kill me with folk medicine.

Good. It means you deserved it. Get your ass out here.

I push myself up from the chair, testing my balance. The room only spins a little, which I'm taking as a victory. My reflection in the small mirror by the door looks like I've been hit by a truck, but it's an improvement from when I walked in.

Through the window, I can see guests starting to take their seats in the garden. White chairs arranged in perfect rows, flowers everywhere, the whole fairy-tale setup that Rowan and his bride dreamed of.

And somewhere out there, in a dress that probably costs more than my truck, is the woman I've been in love with since I was eighteen years old.

Mr. Malone's words ring in my ears: Pride makes for a lonely life partner.

Time to stop being lonely.

mabel

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The white tullec canopy flutters in the breeze like my heart in my chest as I watch the bride—radiant, beaming Cilla—pledge herself to Rowan. I never thought I'd be back in Cedar Bay for this, of all things.

My champagne flute is slippery against my palm, condensation mingling with the sweat of my hands. I take another sip, letting the bubbles burn my throat, reminding myself that I'm actually here. That this is real. That the man who once poured a jar full of grasshoppers down the back of my blouse is now looking every bit like the

fairy tale groom with his gorgeous bride in her vintage lace gown.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the officiant says, and the small crowd erupts in cheers.

I clap along, muscle memory taking over while my mind wanders down roads not taken. What if I had stayed? What if I hadn't fled to Portland? I could have been standing there under my own canopy of flowers, maybe with a baby on my hip and a small-town law practice with my name on the door. Cedar Bay Law, serving the community I grew up in rather than fighting corporate battles in a high-rise where nobody knows their neighbors.

I feel his gaze before I see it. It's like a physical touch, warm and familiar against my skin. Cole Bennett is watching me from across the room, his dark eyes finding mine through the sea of wedding guests. He looks good—too good—in his black tuxedo, the years having sculpted his jawline even sharper, sprinkled just enough silver at his temples to make my stomach flip.

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When he lifts his glass in my direction, I lift mine back, a silent acknowledgment of everything that passed between us and everything that didn't. For a moment, I let myself imagine walking over to him, allowing our conversation to pick up as if thirteen years hadn't stretched between us. I imagine his laugh, the way his hand would find the small of my back, and how easily we might fall back into our old rhythm.

It would be so simple to try again. To see if what we had was just teenage love or something that could withstand seasons, years, and decades.

I take another sip of champagne and wonder if he's thinking the same thing.

The reception moves into full swing around us, but I remain rooted to my spot by the garden wall, nursing my champagne and stealing glances at Cole. He's talking to Fox now, gesturing with his hands the way he always did when he got animated about something. Some things never change.

"Mabel Maxwell, as I live and breathe."

I turn to find Mrs. Thurmond, my old high school English teacher, beaming at me with the same warm smile that got me through Shakespeare and Steinbeck. "Mrs. T! You look the same."

"Flatterer." She squeezes my arm. "I heard you're some hotshot lawyer up in Portland now. I always knew you'd make something of yourself."

"Thank you. That means a lot coming from you." I glance over her shoulder and

catch Cole watching me again. This time, he doesn't look away when our eyes meet. Instead, he excuses himself from Fox and starts walking in our direction.

My pulse quickens. "Mrs. T, would you excuse me for just a moment?"

But it's too late. Cole is already here, close enough that I can smell his cologne.

"Mabel." His voice is deeper, roughened by years and experience.

"Cole." I'm proud of how steady my voice sounds.

Mrs. Thurmond looks between us with knowing eyes. "Well, I think I'll go find some of that wedding cake before it's all gone." She pats my arm again and disappears into the crowd, leaving us alone.

"You look..." Cole starts, then stops, running a hand through his hair. The gesture is so familiar it makes my chest ache. "You look incredible."

"So do you." The words slip out before I can stop them.

We stand there for a moment, the weight of unspoken history settling between us like dust in the afternoon sunlight. Around us, laughter and music create a bubble of intimacy that feels both dangerous and intoxicating.

"Dance with me?" he asks, extending his hand.

I stare at his palm, remembering how perfectly my hand used to fit there. How many times have we slow danced at school functions, prom, and parties by the bay? One dance couldn't hurt, could it?

"Just one dance," I say, placing my hand in his.

His fingers close around mine, and the familiar warmth shoots up my arm. It's like muscle memory, the way we move to the dance floor, the way his hand finds the small of my back, exactly where it used to rest when we were seventeen and thought we knew everything about love.

The band plays something slow and nostalgic, and we sway together as if we've been practicing for this moment all along. I try not to notice how perfectly we still fit, how my head tucks just under his chin, how his heartbeat feels steady against my cheek.

"How is Portland treating you?" he says, his breath stirring my hair. "How does it feel to be a big city lawyer just like you always wanted?"

"Yeah." I pull back slightly to look at him. "Does Cedar Bay still hold its charm?"

"Someone had to stay and keep the place running." Cole's smile is soft, teasing. "We can't all abandon ship for high-rises and designer coffee."

I roll my eyes, but I'm smiling too. "I'll have you know that I make my coffee now. French press. Very sophisticated."

"Wow, Portland did change you."

We laugh, and it feels so easy, so right, that for a second, I forget why I left in the first place. I forget about the scholarship I couldn't turn down, the opportunities that seemed impossible to find in a town where the most significant legal dispute was usually about property lines or noise complaints. I forget about our final fight, the tears, the ultimatums.

"How's the firm?" he asks, twirling me gently before pulling me back.

"Busy. Competitive. Sometimes soul-crushing." I surprise myself with the honesty.

"But I'm good at it."

"I never doubted that for a second."

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The song shifts, but we keep dancing, neither of us willing to break the spell.

"And you?" I ask. "The hardware store must be thriving under your leadership."

"Cedar Bay Construction has been incredibly lucrative and keeps me busy," he says with a hint of pride. "We expanded five years ago. Added landscaping and took over my dad's lumber business. We're the biggest supplier of lumber between here and Oakridge."

"Cole, that's amazing."

"Yeah, well, it turns out I had some ideas after all."

The reference to our past stings a little. I'd accused Cole of lacking ambition, of being content to inherit his dad's business while I wanted to conquer the world. Now I wonder if I'd been too quick to judge and too eager to leave.

Over his shoulder, I see Cilla throw her bouquet. It arcs through the air and lands squarely in the arms of her surprised sister. Everyone cheers. Cole and I keep dancing.

"Do you ever think about it?" he asks suddenly, his voice dropping lower. "What might have happened if you'd stayed?"

The question hangs between us, a dangerous and tempting one. I could lie and brush it off with a joke, but something about being here, in Cole's arms again, makes me reckless with the truth.

"All the time," I admit. "Especially today. Watching Rowan and Cilla get married, I couldn't help but imagine us."

His hand tightens slightly on my waist. "I bought a ring, you know. Two weeks before you left for Portland."

My step falters. "You never told me that."

"What was the point? You'd made up your mind. Law school was waiting. I wasn't going to be the guy who tried to clip your wings."

The music swells around us, but all I can hear is the thundering of my heart. "I never thought of you that way," I whisper.

"No?" His eyes search mine, blue and clear as the bay on a summer morning. "What about now, Mabel? What do you think of me now?"

His question hangs in the air between us, and I can feel my carefully constructed walls beginning to crumble. The champagne has made me bold, or it's the way the fairy lights cast everything in a golden glow, making this moment feel like something out of a dream.

"I think..." I start, then stop, searching his face. The boy I knew is still there but now layered with the confidence of a man who has built something from nothing. "I think I was an idiot to leave the way I did—so suddenly and without a plan for us."

Something shifts in his expression—hope, maybe, or relief. His thumb traces a small circle on my back, and I feel that familiar flutter low in my stomach.

"We were kids," he says softly. "We thought we had to choose between love and dreams."

"And now?"

"Now I know they don't have to be mutually exclusive."

The song ends, but we don't step apart. If anything, we move closer until I can count the flecks of gold in his blue eyes, until I can feel his breath against my lips.

"Mabel," he whispers.

I should step back. I should make some excuse about needing air or another drink. I should remember all the reasons I built my life in Portland, all the walls I've carefully constructed around my heart.

Instead, I rise on my toes and close the distance between us.

His lips are warm and familiar against mine, tasting faintly of champagne and the intoxicating promise of what could be. The kiss begins softly, a gentle exploration, as though we're both treading carefully, fearful that this delicate moment might fracture like fragile glass. But then, his hand tenderly cradles my face, and I find myself dissolving into him, just as I did when we were seventeen, swept away by the naive belief that forever was our inevitable destiny.

When we finally break apart, I'm breathless and dizzy, and it has nothing to do with the alcohol.

"That was..." I start.

"Long overdue," he finishes, resting his forehead against mine.

Around us, the reception continues, but it feels like we're in our private world. The spark that brought us together all those years ago is still there, burning brighter than

ever.

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"What happens now?" I ask because I'm a lawyer, and I need to know the terms.

He smiles, that crooked grin that used to make me skip chemistry class. "Now we stop letting the past dictate our future."

cole

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I've spent thirteen years trying to forget the taste of Mabel Maxwell's lips, and now I'm drowning in them again.

The truck cab is filled with the scent of her—expensive perfume mixed with something that's just her—as she straddles me in the driver's seat. My hands are everywhere at once, relearning curves I've dreamed about since I was eighteen. Her dress—that damn blue dress that's been torturing me all night—is hiked up around her thighs, revealing a stretch of skin that's driving me insane.

"Cole," she breathes against my mouth, and my name has never sounded so good. Her fingers are in my hair, tugging just hard enough to make me groan.

Ten minutes ago, I parked on the side of some back road between the wedding venue and my place. I don't even remember pulling over. One minute, we were driving, Mabel's hand on my thigh creeping higher with each mile, and the next, I was yanking the wheel, gravel crunching under tires as I brought us to a stop.

"I thought we were going to talk," she says, but her hips roll against mine in a way

that makes it clear talking is the last thing on her mind.

"Is that what we're calling this now?" I manage to get out, my voice rough as I slide my hands up her thighs.

She laughs, the sound hitting me right in the chest. "I've forgotten how much of a smartass you are."

"And I've forgotten nothing about you," I tell her, which is the god's honest truth. Thirteen years, a career built from the ground up, and more first dates than I care to count, and none of them erased a single detail of Mabel Maxwell.

When she grinds down against me again, I nearly lose it like a teenager. My hands find her hips, stilling her. "Wait."

Her eyes, those killer blue eyes, narrow. "Seriously? Now you want to stop?"

I shake my head, fighting for control. "Not stop. Just..." I glance around the cramped cab of my truck, at the steering wheel digging into her back, at the gearshift probably bruising her leg. "Not here. Not like this."

"Since when are you picky about location?" Her eyebrow arches, reminding me of all the places we christened back in high school—the back of this very truck, the boathouse at her parent's lake house, the equipment shed behind the football field.

"Since I've spent thirteen years thinking about getting my hands on you again." I brush my thumb across her bottom lip, swollen from my kisses. "I need room to have my way with you properly, counselor. And as much as I love this truck, it's not going to cut it."

A flush spreads across her cheeks, down her neck. "Your place is still ten minutes

away."

"Then it'll be the longest ten minutes of my life." I lean forward, nipping at her ear.

"But I promise it'll be worth the wait."

She shivers against me, and I can feel her heartbeat racing where her chest presses against mine. "I've never known you to make promises you can't keep, Bennett."

"And I don't plan to start now."

Getting her back into the passenger seat requires more willpower than I've ever had to summon. Her hair is mussed from my hands, her lips swollen, and that dress is still hiked up in a way that makes focusing on the road nearly impossible. I start the engine with unsteady hands.

"Eyes on the road, Cole," she teases, but then her fingers land on my thigh again, tracing idle patterns that inch higher with each sweep.

"You're not making this easy." I grip the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turn white.

"I never have, have I?" There's something vulnerable in her voice beneath the playfulness, a reminder of all the complications between us, all the years and choices that led us away from each other.

But right now, with Cedar Bay's familiar roads stretching before us and Mabel's touch burning through my jeans, the past doesn't seem to matter. Only the present. Only her.

I take a turn faster than I should, and she laughs—that full-throated laugh I've missed so damn much. "Still drive like you've got something to prove?"

"Only when I've got somewhere important to be." I catch her eye, and the heat there nearly makes me drive off the road again.

My house comes into view—nothing fancy, just a renovated craftsman on three acres outside town. I built the wraparound porch myself and installed the picture windows that overlook the bay. It's more home than a house, and as I pull into the gravel driveway, I suddenly see it through her eyes—wonder if she's comparing it to her sleek Portland condo and if she's regretting leaving the reception with the hometown contractor.

But when I kill the engine, she's already unbuckling her seatbelt, eyes fixed on mine with an intensity that burns away any doubt.

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"Are you coming inside, or are we just going to sit in your driveway all night?" she asks, one hand already on the door handle.

I'm around to her side before she can open it, pulling the door wide. "Impatient, counselor?"

"Thirteen years," she reminds me, taking my offered hand and stepping down from the truck. "That's a lot of lost time to make up for."

The porch light casts her in gold as I fumble with my keys, her body pressed against my back, her lips finding the sensitive spot just below my ear that she somehow still remembers. The key finally slides home, and we stumble through the doorway together, her laugh vibrating against my neck.

Inside, I barely have time to kick the door closed before she's on me again, those clever fingers working at my tie and my shirt buttons. But this time, I'm the one who slows things down, catching her wrists gently.

"My turn," I murmur, backing her against the wall of my entryway.

Mabel's mouth crashes into mine the second we're through the door, and I barely manage to kick it shut behind us. Her body is a furnace against mine, all curves and urgency, making my head spin faster than any whiskey ever could.

"Need you," she pants against my lips, her fingers already tugging at my shirt. "Now, Cole."

I've imagined this moment for weeks—hell, months—but the reality of Mabel Roberts in my foyer, desperate for me, eclipses every fantasy. Her cardigan drops to the floor, followed quickly by my work shirt. My hands cup her face, thumbs brushing her flushed cheeks.

"Bedroom's that way," I manage between kisses, nodding toward the hallway. She smiles against my mouth, that wicked smile that's been driving me crazy since she first walked into Cedar Bay Construction looking for Fox.

We stumble down the hall, a tangle of limbs and half-removed clothing. Her bra is lace—deep purple—and I groan when it joins the trail of discarded items marking our path. By the time we reach my bedroom, she's down to just her panties, and I'm still fighting with my belt.

"Let me," she whispers, replacing my fumbling fingers with her own. The belt buckle gives way under her touch, and she sinks to her knees, looking up at me with those blue eyes that see straight through me.

I thread my fingers through her dark hair as she tugs my jeans down. "Mabel, sweetheart, you don't have to?—"

"I want to," she cuts me off, pressing a kiss to my hip bone. "But later. Right now, I need you on that bed."

I don't need to be told twice. I step out of my jeans, lifting her back to her feet and walking her backward until her knees hit the mattress. She falls with a soft laugh that turns into a gasp when I hook my fingers into the hem of her panties and push them down her legs.

"You're so beautiful," I murmur, taking in every inch of her naked body spread across my sheets. "Been dreaming about this."

I start at her ankles, pressing kisses up her calves and her thighs, lingering at the junction where her legs meet. Her scent is intoxicating, and when I finally taste her, she arches off the bed with a cry that makes me harder than I've ever been.

"Cole," she gasps, her hands fisting in my hair as I work her with my tongue, circling and sucking until her thighs begin to tremble against my shoulders. "Oh god, don't stop."

I have no intention of stopping. I slide one finger inside Mabel, then two, curling them forward as I focus my mouth on her clit. Her breathing grows ragged, punctuated by little whimpers that tell me she's close.

"That's it, sweetheart," I encourage against her heated flesh. "Let go for me."

When she comes, it's with my name on her lips, her body clenching around my fingers, back bowed like a perfect arch. I work her through it, gentling my touch as she comes down, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs.

"Inside me," she demands once she catches her breath, reaching for me. "Need to feel you."

Something shifts in her eyes at that confession—something tender and raw. She cradles my face in her hands. "I love you, Cole. I've missed you so much."

My heart hammers against my ribs as I align our bodies, pushing slowly into her heat. "I love you too, Mabel. So damn much."

The first thrust steals both our breaths. Mabel's legs coil around my waist like tendrils, pulling me closer, urging me to delve deeper, and I oblige, establishing a rhythm that leaves us breathless and panting. Her fingernails rake across my back, and I press my face into her neck, overwhelmed by the sensation of finally being

inside her.

"Missed this," she whispers against my ear, her voice breaking on a moan as I dive deeper. "Missed you so much it hurt."

The confession undoes something in my chest. I pull back to look at Mabel, memorizing the flush across her cheeks and the way her lips part with each breath. "Never again," I promise, my voice rough. "I'm not letting you go again."

Her answer is lost in a gasp as I shift the angle, hitting that spot that makes her see stars. Her inner walls flutter around me, drawing me deeper, and I have to grit my teeth to maintain control. Thirteen years of wanting her, dreaming of her, and now she's here beneath me, saying my name like a prayer.

"Faster," she pleads, her hips rising to meet mine. "Please, Cole."

I give her what she needs, what we both need, my hips snapping forward with increasing urgency. The headboard knocks against the wall with each thrust, and I can feel her building toward another climax, her body tightening around me like a vice.

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I'm not going to last long—not with the way she feels, the way she looks beneath me with her hair spread across my pillow and her lips swollen from my kisses. I reach between us, circling her clit with my thumb.

"Come with me," I urge, feeling my control slipping. "One more time, sweetheart."

Her words cut off in a cry as she shatters beneath me, her orgasm triggering my own. I bury myself deep, her name torn from my throat as I empty myself inside her, thirteen years of longing pouring out in waves.

We collapse together, sweat-slicked and breathing hard. I roll us to our sides, keeping Mabel close, not ready to break the connection between us. Her fingers trace lazy patterns on my chest as our heartbeats slowly return to normal.

"So," she says eventually, a smile in her voice. "Was it worth the wait?"

I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her hair. "Every damn minute."

"I agree," she sighs with a giggle.

"Stay," I murmur against her temple, not just meaning tonight. "Stay with me."

Her answer is a soft kiss pressed to my chest, right over my thundering heart. "Wild horses couldn't drag me away."

mabel

. . .

I wake up tangled in sheets that aren't mine, surrounded by a masculine scent that's becoming dangerously familiar again. For one peaceful moment, I exist in the limbo between dreams and reality—then panic hits me like a freight train when I realize where I am—in Cole Bennett's bed.

His strong arm is draped possessively across my waist, his breathing deep and even against my neck. The warmth of his body against mine feels too good, which is precisely why I need to leave. Now.

I try to slide out from under his arm, but he tightens his grip, pulling me closer against his chest. My treacherous body responds instantly, melting into his embrace despite my brain screaming at me to run.

"Where do you think you're going, Miss Maxwell?" His voice is husky with sleep, his lips brushing against my ear.

"My mother is probably wondering where I am." My voice sounds weak even to my own ears. "I can't just?—"

"Stay." He rolls me toward him, his hazel eyes now fully alert and focused entirely on me. "Just for a little while longer. Your mother saw you leaving with me. I'm sure she has an idea where you are."

Before I can protest, his mouth is on mine, and damn it, the man knows how to kiss. His lips are firm but gentle, coaxing rather than demanding, and I find myself responding despite my better judgment.

When he finally pulls away, I'm breathless and confused. This wasn't supposed to happen. I jumped into his arms then his bed before thinking things through. How

could I be so reckless?

"Mabel." The way he says my name should be illegal. "I know you're freaking out right now."

"I'm not freaking out," I lie, even as I mentally calculate how quickly I can gather my clothes scattered across his bedroom floor.

He chuckles, the sound rumbling through his chest against mine. "Your brain is practically smoking with all those thoughts racing through it."

"That's because I have responsibilities, Cole. Our lives are complicated and falling back in love with my high school sweetheart doesn't exactly fit into the life I've created in Portland." I gesture vaguely between us.

His expression softens. "What if I told you I'd fit myself into this life of yours? If you need to stay in Portland, I'll follow you and make it work. Hell, I'll open a branch of Cedar Bay Construction there. And if you want to stay, I'll build you the fanciest law office you've ever seen and help you snag clients in all four nearby counties."

I stare at him, speechless. "You can't just rearrange your entire life for me."

His thumb traces my lower lip. "That's where you're wrong, baby. I fucked up once and I ain't doing it again. I'll do whatever it takes to be your man again and there's no way in hell I'll let you get away."

My heart hammers against my ribs. This isn't fair. He can't just say things like that, looking at me with those earnest eyes that still see the girl I was at eighteen. The girl who believed in forever before life taught her better.

"Cole..." I whisper, but I can't find the words to follow. My carefully constructed

arguments dissolve under his gaze.

His fingers trace lazy patterns on my bare shoulder. "You don't have to decide anything right now. I just need you to know I'm all in this time."

I sit up, clutching the sheet against my chest, needing physical distance to think clearly. "You make it sound so simple."

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"It is simple." He props himself up on one elbow, and I try not to stare at the way the sheet drapes low across his hips. "The complicated part was living without you all these years."

"That's not fair," I say, my voice catching. "You can't put that on me. We were kids."

"I'm not blaming you, Mabel." His voice is gentle but firm. "I'm saying I know what matters now. I've dated other women?—"

"Really? This is what you want to bring up right now?" I interrupt, raising an eyebrow.

He chuckles, running a hand through his tousled hair. "Let me finish. I've dated, but I've spent thirteen years comparing every woman to you. And they all knew it."

Something warm unfurls in my chest. I fight it, because hope is dangerous.

"I have a life in Portland," I say, but it sounds hollow even to me. "A career I've worked hard on for years."

Cole sits up fully now, the sheet pooling at his waist. "And I would never ask you to give that up. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I'll build my life around yours if that's what you need."

"And what about what you need?" I challenge.

His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining. "I need you. Everything else is negotiable."

I look down at our joined hands, at how right they look together. "I can't make any promises."

"I'm not asking for promises." He lifts my chin with his free hand, forcing me to meet his eyes. "I'm asking for a chance."

The intensity in his gaze makes me tremble. This is Cole—not some smooth-talking city lawyer who knows all the right lines. When he makes a promise, he builds it as solid as the houses he creates.

"What if we try and it doesn't work?" I whisper, voicing my deepest fear.

"What if it does?" he counters, bringing my hand to his lips. "What if this is our second chance at something most people never find once?"

I close my eyes, overwhelmed by the possibility that he might be right. When I open them again, he's watching me with such tenderness that something inside me breaks open.

"I have a meeting with a client on afternoon," I say finally. "I need to drive home by Monday morning."

His brow furrows. "Okay..."

"But maybe I could come back next weekend. If you wanted to... talk more about this."

The smile that spreads across his face is like sunrise breaking over Cedar Bay—warm, familiar, and full of promise.

"I'll be here," he says, pulling me back into his arms. "And maybe by then, I'll have

some blueprints to show you."

"Blueprints?" I ask against his chest.

"For your law office." He kisses the top of my head. "Just in case."

"You're impossible," I laugh, but it comes out breathier than intended.

"Impossible to resist," he corrects, rolling me beneath him in one fluid motion. His weight presses me into the mattress, a delicious reminder of last night's activities.

"Arrogant, too." I try to sound stern, but my hands betray me as they slide up his biceps. God, when did he get so... solid?

"Only because I know what I want." His lips trail down my neck, making coherent thought increasingly difficult. "And I want you, Mabel Maxwell. Always have."

I close my eyes, trying to hold onto my resolve even as it melts under his touch. "Cole, we need to talk about logistics. Portland is three hours away. Your business is here. My firm is there. We can't just?—"

"I meant what I said," he murmurs against my collarbone. "We'll figure it out. Maybe I'll spend half the week in Portland. Maybe you'll work remotely some days. Maybe?—"

"Maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves." I place my hands on his chest, creating a small space between us. "Last night was... incredible. But one night doesn't erase thirteen years."

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His eyes, serious now, search mine. "No, it doesn't. But it's a start."

The sincerity in his voice chips away at my defenses. This is the problem with Cole Bennett—he's never played games. Even as teenagers, he was straightforward, reliable. The guy who showed up early and stayed late. The one who built me a bookshelf when my collection outgrew my room, who learned to dance just so he could take me to prom.

"I've changed," I warn him. "I'm not the girl you knew."

His smile is slow, devastating. "I'm counting on that. I want to know the woman you've become."

My phone buzzes from somewhere on the floor, breaking the moment. Cole sighs, rolling off me but keeping one arm draped across my middle.

"Real life calling?" he asks.

"Probably my mother," I groan, making no move to retrieve it. "She's going to have questions."

"Tell her I said hello." His grin is mischievous. "And that I still make her daughter's favorite french toast."

The domesticity of the comment startles me. "You remember my french toast addiction?"

"Extra cinnamon in the batter, not on top. Warm maple syrup and Nutella on the side." He shrugs as if remembering such details for thirteen years is perfectly normal. "Some things you don't forget and your sweet tooth is one of them."

I swallow hard. "Cole..."

"I know, I know." He raises his hands in surrender. "Too much, too soon. I'll dial it back."

But I'm not sure I want him to. That's what terrifies me. One night, and I'm already imagining weekend mornings with french toast, lazy kisses, and—no. I need to get a grip.

"I should shower." I sit up, clutching the sheet tighter.

"Need help washing your back?" His eyebrows waggle suggestively.

I throw a pillow at him. "I think you've helped enough for one morning."

His laughter follows me as I gather my clothes and retreat to his bathroom. Under the hot spray, I try to sort through the jumble of emotions. Physically, I feel incredible—satisfied in ways I'd forgotten were possible. Emotionally? I'm a wreck.

I've spent years building my career, establishing myself as someone to be taken seriously in Portland's legal community. The idea of complicating that with a long-distance relationship makes my stomach knot. But the alternative—walking away from Cole again—feels equally impossible.

When I emerge, wrapped in his towel, he's made the bed and is standing by the window in just his jeans, phone to his ear. The morning light plays across the planes of his back, highlighting muscles that definitely weren't there in high school.

"Yeah, I'll be there by noon," he's saying. "Just need to check the foundation first." He turns, spots me, and his entire expression softens. "Gotta go, Fox. I'll call you later."

He ends the call, tossing his phone onto the bed. "Work," he explains. "Nothing urgent."

"I should get going anyway." I clutch the towel tighter. "Let you get to your day."

"My day started perfectly." He crosses the room, hands settling on my hips. "But if you need to leave, I understand."

The temptation to stay is overwhelming. To crawl back into bed with him, to pretend the outside world doesn't exist. But that's not who I am anymore.

"I do." I step back, creating necessary distance. "But what about dinner tonight?"

His eyes light up. "Yes?"

"I'll call you in a few hours." I need an extra dose of Cole, before I return to Portland.

He nods, accepting this. "I'll be waiting."

Twenty minutes later, dressed and marginally more composed, I'm gathering my purse when Cole hands me a travel mug of coffee.

"For the road," he says. "Still take it with cream, no sugar?"

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The fact that he remembers this tiny detail undoes me. I accept the mug, our fingers brushing. "Thank you."

At his front door, I hesitate. This is the moment to say something profound, to define whatever this is between us. But words fail me.

Cole seems to understand. He leans down, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "I look forward to seeing you tonight, counselor."

It's not until I'm in my car, halfway down his driveway, that I realize I'm smiling. And that terrifies me more than anything.

cole

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The December air hits differently today as I pull my truck into the Riverside development site. Fox's beat-up Ford is already parked near the half-finished framework of what will soon be someone's vacation home. With Rowan off honeymooning with Cilla, it's just Fox and me holding down the fort at Cedar Bay Construction.

"You took your sweet time," Fox calls out as I slam my door shut. He's standing on the foundation, clipboard in hand, scowl firmly in place. Classic Fox.

"I was busy," I say, which isn't a total lie. I spent the last fifteen minutes staring at my phone, rereading Mabel's texts from thirty minutes ago.

Still thinking about you. If things go well tonight, you could visit Portland next weekend.

Fox's eyebrows lift slightly. "Are you listening to me?"

I climb up beside him, grabbing the clipboard from his hands. "What's the problem here?"

"Contractor delivered the wrong windows. Again." Fox crosses his arms, still studying my face. "You gonna tell me about Mabel, or do I have to beat it out of you?"

My chest tightens at the sound of her name. Even after thirteen years, it still affects me.

"We talked. A lot." I flip through the paperwork, but I don't see it. "She wants me to go to Portland next weekend."

Fox is quiet for a moment. "And?"

"And I'm thinking about more than that." I finally look up at him. "I'm thinking about moving there. For good."

The words hang between us, heavy with implication. Fox's perpetual frown softens just a bit.

"Shit," he says finally. "You're serious."

"Never stopped loving her, Fox, even when I tried. Even when I should have."

He nods slowly, looking out over the construction site. "Cedar Bay's gonna be a hell

of a lot duller without you."

"You'll survive," I say, nudging his shoulder. "You've got Prue now."

At the mention of Cilla's sister, Fox's face does that thing where he tries not to smile but fails miserably. It's still strange seeing him like this—the grumpiest man in three counties, gone soft over a woman.

"Yeah, well." He clears his throat. "If she decides Seattle is where she needs to be, I'd follow her there too."

I raise my eyebrows. "Really? Mr. 'I'll-die-in-Cedar-Bay' would leave?"

"For her? In a heartbeat." The certainty in his voice is something I envy. "So if Portland is where you need to be with Mabel, I get it. I'll miss having you around to fix my screwups, but I get it."

For a moment, we're both quiet, just two guys who've known each other since kindergarten, standing on the bones of a house, contemplating lives that suddenly seem too big for this small coastal town.

"So," Fox finally says, "you gonna call those window people, or should I?"

And just like that, we're back to business. But something has shifted. Something has settled. For the first time since Mabel walked out of my life, the future doesn't feel like a question mark.

It feels like a road map pointing straight to her.

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I work through the afternoon like a man possessed, hammering, measuring, and calculating with laser focus. It's like I'm trying to burn through every last ounce of energy before tonight. Before Mabel.

"Go home already," Fox finally says around four, yanking a nail gun from my hands. "You're making me look bad with all this productivity."

I glance at my watch and feel my stomach flip. Two hours until I'm supposed to pick Mabel up.

"You sure?" I ask, even as I'm already backing toward my truck.

Fox waves me off. "The windows aren't coming till tomorrow anyway. Go make yourself pretty for your lawyer lady."

The drive home is a blur. My bungalow sits on the edge of a cliffside road, nice and spacious but nothing fancy—just a place I built with my own hands after saving for five years. I've always been proud of it, but now I wonder what Mabel thinks of it. Would she be happy here?

The shower runs hot as I scrub away sawdust and sweat. I shave carefully, nicking myself only once, which is practically a miracle, given how my hands won't stop trembling. The cologne I splash on is the same brand I wore in high school. Mabel bought it for my eighteenth birthday.

Standing in front of my closet, I realize I own exactly one button-down shirt that isn't flannel—dark blue. Mabel always said it matched my eyes. I pair it with my least-

worn jeans and boots that I took the time to polish last night after she texted.

"Pull it together, Bennett," I mutter to my reflection, running nervous fingers through my hair.

The five-minute drive to the Maxwell house feels like forever and no time at all. Their two-story Victorian looks the same as it did when I used to pick Mabel up for dates in high school, right down to the porch swing where we'd shared our first kiss.

Before I can even knock, the door swings open. Mrs. Maxwell—Rachel—stands there beaming like I'm the prodigal son returned.

"Cole Bennett!" she exclaims, pulling me into a hug that smells like cinnamon and home. "Look at you, handsome as ever."

"Hi, Mrs. Maxwell," I say, feeling sixteen again.

"Rachel, please. You're making me feel ancient." She ushers me inside. "Robert! Cole's here!"

Mr. Maxwell appears from the living room, newspaper in hand, glasses perched on his nose. His handshake is firm and familiar.

"Good to see you, son," he says, and something in his tone makes my throat tight. "Mabel's just finishing up. Aiden headed back to Portland this morning—his husband had some gallery opening."

We make small talk about the construction business, the town's growth, and everything except what's happening: our daughter and I are trying to figure out if we can build something from the ruins of what we once had.

"She's been different since she's been home," Rachel says quietly when Robert steps away to answer the phone. "Happier. More like the Mabel who left for college all those years ago."

I don't know what to say to that, so I nod.

And then I hear footsteps on the stairs, and everything else fades away.

Mabel stands there in a simple teal dress that makes her eyes look like the ocean after a storm. Her hair falls in soft waves around her shoulders. She's smiling—that small, private smile that used to be just for me.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi," I manage to reply, suddenly understanding every sappy love song I've ever rolled my eyes at.

I don't remember feeling this alive since the summer Mabel left Cedar Bay.

The drive to Rosalita's is quiet but not uncomfortable. Her perfume fills the cab of my truck, something subtle and expensive that somehow still reminds me of wildflowers and summer nights.

"I've been craving their enchiladas for years," she confesses as I hold the door open for her. "Nothing in Portland comes close."

The restaurant is dimly lit and warm, with Christmas lights strung across the ceiling year-round. The hostess, Maria, recognizes me and winks as she leads us to a corner booth.

"Your usual, Cole?" she asks.

"Please," I say, and Mabel raises an eyebrow.

"You have a usual? At our place?"

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Our place. The words hit me like a physical thing.

"Never found anywhere better," I admit, which is both true and not the whole truth. The whole truth is I kept coming here because it reminded me of Mabel.

The margarita I order is strong—I need it to be—and Mabel asks for the same. When they arrive, salt-rimmed and lime-garnished, we clink glasses across the table.

"To second chances," she says, her eyes never leaving mine.

"To second chances," I echo, wondering if she can hear how my heart is hammering against my ribs.

The first sip burns pleasantly, liquid courage warming my veins. Mabel licks salt from her lips, and suddenly, I'm eighteen again, watching her across a bonfire at the beach, wanting nothing more than to kiss her until we both forget how to breathe.

"So," she says, setting her glass down. "Portland next weekend?"

I nod, trying to appear casual when there's nothing casual about any of this. "I was thinking I could drive up Friday after work."

"Or Thursday night," she suggests, a hint of mischief in her smile. "I can work from home Friday."

The implication hangs between us, electric and thrilling. I take another gulp of my margarita.

"Thursday sounds good," I manage.

When our food arrives, we fall into an easy rhythm of conversation that feels both familiar and brand new. Mabel tells me about her latest case—something involving corporate environmental violations that makes her eyes flash with righteous indignation. I tell her about Fox and Prue's unlikely romance, about Rowan finally making an honest woman of Cilla.

"And what about you?" she asks, twirling her fork in her rice. "Any romances I should know about?"

There's a careful nonchalance in her voice that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Nothing serious," I admit. "Nothing that lasted."

"Why not?"

The question is soft but direct. Classic Mabel. She never shied away from the hard stuff.

I could give her the easy answer—busy with work and a small dating pool in Cedar Bay. But we're past easy answers now.

"Because they weren't you," I say simply.

Her fork pauses halfway to her mouth. For a moment, I worry I've said too much, too soon. But then her free hand reaches across the table, fingers brushing against mine.

"I dated a tax attorney for two years," she says, her thumb tracing circles on my palm. "He proposed last spring."

Something cold slithers through my chest. "Oh?"

"I said no." Her eyes hold mine steadily. "Couldn't figure out why at the time. It made perfect sense on paper. Same career, same city, same friends."

"But?" I prompt, hardly daring to breathe.

"But he wasn't you either," she finishes softly.

The admission hangs between us, fragile and precious. I turn my hand over, lacing our fingers together properly.

"I missed you," I tell her because it's the truest thing I know. "Every day, Mabel. Even when I tried not to."

Her smile is like a sunrise breaking over the ocean. "I missed you too. Even when I told myself I didn't."

We eat the rest of our meal one-handed, neither of us willing to let go. The conversation shifts to lighter territory—Mabel describing the view from her condo, me telling her about the custom furniture I've started building on the side. But underneath it all runs a current of anticipation, of possibility.

When Maria brings the check, Mabel reaches for her purse, but I shake my head.

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"My treat," I insist. "Consider it thirteen years of missed dates I'm making up for."

She laughs a sound that makes the room brighter. "That's a lot of dinners, Bennett."

"I'm good for it," I promise, and we both know I'm talking about more than just food.

Outside, the December air has turned crisp and cold. Mabel shivers slightly, and I drape my jacket over her shoulders without thinking. She burrows into it, looking up at me with a softness that makes my chest ache.

"Want to walk down to the pier?" she asks. "For old time's sake?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. We stroll through town, our shoulders brushing, Mabel's hand occasionally finding mine. Cedar Bay at night has always been beautiful—Christmas lights twinkling in shop windows, the distant sound of waves against the shore—but with Mabel beside me, it's magical.

The pier is deserted this time of year, just the two of us and the vast, dark ocean stretching out before us. We stop at the railing, and Mabel turns to face me, her back against the wooden post.

"I used to come here on the rare occasions I visited my parents," she confesses. "Hoping I might run into you."

"I avoided it," I admit. "Too many memories."

She nods, understanding. "And now?"

"Now I'm wondering why I wasted so much time staying away."

Her hands find the front of my shirt, fingers curling into the fabric. "We were kids, Cole. We needed to grow up, figure out who we were apart from each other."

"And now?" I echo her question, my hands settling on her waist, drawing her closer.

"Now I think we've done enough growing up apart," she whispers.

When I kiss her, it's like coming home after a long, exhausting journey. Her lips are soft and eager against mine, her body fitting perfectly against me as if we were designed as two halves of the same whole. I pour thirteen years of longing into that kiss, and she meets me with equal fervor, her fingers threading through my hair.

We break apart, breathless, foreheads pressed together. The Christmas lights from the pier reflect in her eyes like stars.

"Stay with me tonight," I whisper against her lips.

She nods once. "I told my parents not to expect me home until morning."

I laugh, pressing another kiss to the corner of her mouth. "Always thinking ahead, counselor."

"One of us has to," she teases, taking my hand and leading me back toward the car.

As we walk, I realize I've never felt more certain about anything in my life. Portland, Cedar Bay—it doesn't matter. Home isn't a place. It's the woman beside me, her hand in mine, leading me toward a future that suddenly seems blindingly bright.

mabel

. . .

I never expected to end up in Cole Bennett's bed again, but some homecomings defy all logic.

The drive to his place passes in charged silence, our hands finding each other across the console like magnets. The same calloused fingers that used to trace patterns on my skin in high school now belong to a man—one who builds houses instead of dreams about them.

His cabin sits nestled among cedar trees—exactly where I pictured it would be all these years—simple, sturdy, unmistakably Cole.

"I renovated it myself," he says, watching my face as he unlocks the door. "Took three years."

"Of course you did," I murmur, running my hand along the hand-carved banister. "Some things never change."

Inside, the space feels like him—practical yet surprisingly beautiful in its craftsmanship. Before I can catalog more details, his mouth is on mine, hungry and certain. My body responds instantly, muscle memory kicking in like I never left Cedar Bay.

"Mabel," he breathes against my neck. "I've thought about this for ten years."

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"Show me," I challenge, already pulling at his shirt.

We don't even make it to the bedroom. The living room becomes our initial battlefield, with clothes strewn about like casualties in the aftermath of a heated argument. Cole's tongue carves tantalizing trails down my skin, a blend of the familiar and the electrifyingly new. As he nestles between my thighs, the world beyond melts away, and I am no longer an attorney with a corner office in Portland. I am simply Mabel, arching into his eager mouth, fingers entangled in his soft, fair hair.

"God, you taste exactly how I remembered," he groans, looking up at me with those impossibly blue eyes that seem to pierce right through me.

When his mouth descends upon me once more, it's slow and deliberate, a tantalizing slide that makes me arch against him with a fierce, primal need that surprises us both. This isn't the frantic, heated coupling from earlier—this is worship, reverence, a promise spoken in the language of flesh and breath. His tongue dances over me, exploring every inch with a tenderness that feels like a sacred ritual.

His technique has evolved since high school—he's learned things and discovered ways to make me shatter that his eighteen-year-old self never knew. The flat of his tongue presses against me with perfect pressure before he draws gentle circles that have me gasping his name. My thighs tremble against his shoulders as he works me with devastating precision.

"Cole," I breathe, my voice breaking on his name. "I can't?—"

But he doesn't relent. His hands grip my hips, holding me steady as his mouth becomes more insistent. The boy who used to fumble with my bra strap has become a man who knows precisely how to unravel me completely. He alternates between soft, teasing flicks and deeper, more demanding strokes that make my vision blur.

"I'm going to devour you," he growls into the skin of my inner thigh, his rough stubble igniting a fiery trail of sensation. "Tell me what you want."

"You," I gasp, my hands fisting in his hair. "All of you. Forever."

The word escapes my lips before I can catch it, lingering in the air between us like a whispered secret. Cole's gaze locks with mine, eyes deep and smoldering with desire and an unfathomable depth of emotion.

"Forever sounds perfect to me," he murmurs, just before his tongue finds that elusive spot that draws my voice out in a cry of his name.

I'm coming apart beneath him, every nerve ending alight. The successful attorney who argues cases in front of judges dissolves into a shuddering mess. I shatter beneath him, my body vividly recalling the way he could unravel me with nothing but his mouth. As the tremors gradually fade, I pull him up towards me, craving the taste of him once more, eager to give back what he's given me.

"My turn," I whisper, pushing him onto his back.

I take my time exploring the body that feels both familiar and foreign to me. Cole's broader now, with muscles defined by years spent working with his hands. His skin is rougher, a testament to the hard work and dedication etched into every line and curve. As I take him into my mouth, he lets out a deep, resonant groan, my name spilling from his lips like a fervent prayer filled with reverence and longing.

"Mabel, I'm not going to last if you?—"

"Good," I murmur against him. "I want you to fall apart for me."

I take him deeper, remembering exactly how he likes it—the pressure of my tongue, the rhythm that used to drive him wild in the back of his pickup truck all those years ago. His hips buck involuntarily, and I press them down with my palms, maintaining complete control.

"Jesus, Mabel," he rasps, his voice strained and desperate. "You're going to kill me."

I pull back just enough to meet his gaze, my lips still wrapped around him. The look in his eyes is pure torture—a beautiful agony that makes heat pool between my thighs all over again. I've missed this power, this ability to reduce him to nothing but sensation and need.

My mouth works him with deliberate precision, alternating between gentle suction and firm strokes of my tongue. He's trembling beneath me now, his hands fisted in the throw pillows, fighting for control he's already lost.

"Look at me," I command softly, and his eyes snap open, that familiar blue now dark with desire. "I want to watch you come undone."

His breathing becomes ragged as I take him deeper, hollowing my cheeks and using every technique I've learned in the years we've been apart. But it's the memories of what he loved before that guide me—the gentle scrape of teeth, the swirl of my tongue around his tip, the way I hum softly against him.

"Mabel, I'm—" His warning comes out strangled, desperate.

I don't pull away. Instead, I increase my pace, one hand working what my mouth can't

reach while the fingers on Cole's hip bone. His whole body goes rigid beneath me, muscles coiled tight as a spring.

"God, yes," he groans, his control finally snapping. "Don't stop, I'm going to come. Fuck, I'm going to come."

And he does, beautifully, completely, his hands gentle in my hair as he comes undone. His release hits my tongue in waves, and I swallow everything he gives me, savoring the taste of him and the broken sounds spilling from his lips. His body shudders beneath my hands as I work him through it, gentle now, coaxing out every last tremor until he's completely spent.

When I finally pull away, he's staring at the ceiling with glazed eyes, chest heaving like he's just run a marathon. I crawl up his body, pressing soft kisses to his ribs, his chest, and the hollow of his throat, where his pulse still races wildly.

"Christ," he breathes, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me against him. "I forgot how good you are at that."

"I'm glad you noticed," I murmur against his neck, tasting salt on his skin.

He lets out a low chuckle that vibrates through his chest. "How could I not?"

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"I want you inside me," I whisper, unable to contain my need for him.

Cole's thick, stiff shaft plunges into me, his warmth and girth filling me to the brim, reigniting a fire that has smoldered for too long. My hands grasp at his chiseled back as he drives into me with a primal rhythm, our bodies slapping together in a harmony we thought we'd lost forever.

"Fuck, Mabel," he groans into my ear, his breath hot and ragged against my skin. "Feels so good."

His words fan the flames of my desire, spurring me on as I meet his every thrust with equal fervor. The room is filled with the sultry soundtrack of our mingled breaths and the wet, hungry sounds of our coupling. It's raw, unrefined lust at its finest—the polar opposite of the refined sex I've grown accustomed to in Portland.

"I've missed this," I pant out, digging my nails into his back as he hits that spot deep inside me that sends electricity coursing through my veins. "Missed you."

"Me too," he grunts between clenched teeth. "Fuck, Mabel, I've missed you so much."

His words act like a catalyst, sending me hurtling toward the edge again. Cole senses it, his tempo changing, slowing to deep, deliberate thrusts that make me feel every inch of him.

"I want to feel you come around me," he growls, his voice rough with desire. "Let me feel you, Mabel."

His hand slides between us, finding that sensitive bundle of nerves with practiced precision. The dual sensation of his thick cock stretching me and his fingers working their magic is overwhelming. I'm climbing higher, my body tightening around him.

"That's it," he encourages, his eyes never leaving mine. "Give it to me."

When I shatter this time, it's like a supernova exploding through my body. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me, my inner walls clenching rhythmically around him. I cry out his name—not caring who might hear, not caring about anything but this moment, this man, this connection that never truly broke.

Cole follows me over the edge with a hoarse shout, his hips jerking erratically as he empties himself inside me. The primal satisfaction of feeling his pulse within me sends another aftershock of pleasure through my system.

We collapse together, a tangle of sweaty limbs and racing hearts. Cole's weight on me feels like an anchor, keeping me from floating away on the tide of endorphins flooding my system. For several minutes, neither of us speaks—there's only the sound of our breathing gradually slowing, synchronizing without effort.

"I never stopped loving you," he confesses, each thrust punctuating his heartfelt words. "Not for a single day."

The admission breaks something open inside me. "I tried to," I gasp, my nails marking Cole's back. "God, I really tried."

Later, tangled in his sheets upstairs, I trace the contours of his chest as moonlight spills through windows that face the ocean.

"What happens now?" he asks, voice hesitant for the first time tonight.

The practical part of me—the part that built a life 200 miles away—wants to call this a nostalgic mistake. But looking at him, I can't form the words.

"I have a life in Portland," I say instead.

He props himself up on one elbow, suddenly serious. "Mabel Maxwell, I let you walk away once because we were kids with different dreams. I'm not making that mistake again."

"I can work remotely sometimes," I find myself saying. "Three days a week, maybe."

His arms pull me closer, a comforting embrace that feels like home. "I could expand the business," he murmurs, his voice a soothing rumble in the quiet room. "Portland needs contractors, too."

"We're doing this, aren't we?" I respond softly, my fingers tracing gentle circles on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my touch.

"If you want to," he replies, his eyes sincere and full of warmth. "No pressure, no ultimatums this time. Just possibility."

I lift my head to meet his gaze, taking in the features of the man who has haunted my dreams for over a decade. "I love you, Cole Bennett," I confess, my voice barely above a whisper. "I never stopped either."

His smile blooms, radiant and full of joy, a light so bright it could illuminate the entire Pacific Northwest. "Then we'll figure out the rest," he assures, his words a promise of endless tomorrows.

epilogue: three years later

. . .

Cole

I kneel on the wooden deck I built last summer, hammer in hand, as I secure the final board for our new addition. The extension will provide Mabel with the home office she needs for her remote workdays—a practice she has treasured since our daughter, Lily, made her grand appearance two years ago.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 7:22 am

I wipe sweat from my brow and look up to see Mabel in the front garden, sunlight catching in her brown hair as she tends to her lavender plants. Lily sits nearby on a blanket, her chubby hands gripping a wooden toy train I made for her first birthday. At two years old, she's already got her mother's determined expression and my blue eyes—a combination that melts me every time I see it.

"Dada!" she calls, spotting me watching them. Mabel turns and smiles, that same smile that's been knocking me senseless since high school.

I set down my tools and cross the yard, scooping Lily up and spinning her until she giggles. "How are my favorite girls today?"

"Mommy made dirt castles!" Lily announces, pointing at the newly planted herbs.

"Your girls are just fine." Mabel rises to her feet and brushes soil from her knees. "We're getting some much-needed sun." She leans in to kiss me, tasting like the lemonade she's been sipping all morning.

Even now, after three years of marriage, that simple touch still sends electricity through me. Sometimes, I wake up wondering if this is all a dream. Three years ago, I was convinced I'd lost Mabel forever.

Those three months of long-distance love were harder than we expected. We'd try to make it work—scheduled video dates, constant texting, weekend visits when her caseload allowed. But the silences grew longer, the conversations more strained. I could hear the exhaustion in her voice and see the dark circles under her eyes through pixelated screens.

The night I called to tell her I was packing up my contracting business to move to Portland, she went quiet for so long that I thought the call had dropped.

"Cole, don't." Her voice was barely a whisper. "Don't uproot your entire life for me."

"What are you talking about? Mabel, I love you?—"

"I know. God, I know you do. But I can't watch you sacrifice everything that makes you happy."

I remember staring at the boxes I'd already packed, feeling like the floor had given way beneath me. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying maybe it's time I stopped running from the one place that's ever felt like home."

She showed up on my doorstep a week later with a U-Haul and a job offer from Cedar Bay's only law firm, which she promptly took over. We were married a month after that, in the same church where we'd first kissed after prom fifteen years earlier.

Now she's here, dirt under her fingernails, our daughter babbling, and I finally understand what contentment feels like.

"Want to see what Daddy's been building?" I ask Lily, who nods eagerly. I hoist her onto my shoulders, her tiny hands gripping my hair for balance.

"Not too high," Mabel warns, but she's smiling. She follows us toward the deck extension, her gardening gloves tucked into her back pocket.

"Almost finished," I tell her as we approach. "Just need to stain it and install the railing. Your desk will go right against that window."

Mabel runs her hand along the fresh lumber. "It's perfect, Cole."

There's something in her voice—a catch, a softness—that makes me set Lily down on the grass with her toy train. "Hey, you okay?"

She nods, then shakes her head, then laughs. "I got a call from Jeremy this morning."

Jeremy Palmer, the senior partner at her old Portland firm. My stomach tightens. "And?"

"They want me back. Full partnership, corner office, the works."

The hammer I'd left on the deck suddenly looks very interesting. I pick it up and test its weight in my palm. "That's... quite an offer."

"It is." She watches me thoughtfully, those blue eyes missing nothing.

"When do they need an answer?" I try to keep my voice neutral, but memories of those painful three months flood back—the empty bed, the pixelated smiles that never reached her eyes, the growing silence between calls.

"I already gave them one." Mabel takes the hammer from my hand and sets it down. "I told them I'm exactly where I need to be."

Relief washes through me so strongly that I have to sit on the edge of the deck. "You sure about that? It's the corner office you always wanted."

She sits beside me, our shoulders touching. "Three years ago, I thought success meant a certain address, a certain title. But you know what I realized when I moved back?"

"What's that?"

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"That I was exhausting myself chasing someone else's definition of success." She takes my calloused hand in hers. "My firm here is thriving. I'm making real changes in people's lives. And I come home every day to this—" she gestures to Lily, who's now lying on her back in the grass, holding the train above her head and making engine noises.

I squeeze her hand. "No regrets?"

"Just one," she says, leaning closer.

"What's that?"

"That I wasted so many years being afraid to come home."

I pull her against me, breathing in the scent of lavender and soil and sunshine in her hair. "We're making up for lost time."

"Speaking of which," she whispers, her lips close to my ear. "Lily goes down for her nap in about twenty minutes."

I grin against her hair. "Is that so?"

"Mmhmm. And I have particular plans for my contractor."

"Do these plans involve inspecting my craftsmanship up close?"

Her laugh vibrates against my chest. "Very, very close, Mr. Bennett."

“Then I’ll grab Lily, and you lead the way, Mrs. Bennett. I’m ready when you are.”