



Never Say Yes To Your Brother's Best Friend

Author: *Lindsey Hart*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: I lost my brother.

Then I got a letter from him—his final wish.

Find his best friend... and marry him.

A man I've never met.

A man my brother trusted with his life.

Only problem?

Rick McDonald is a nightmare wrapped in a jawline that could cut steel.

Cold. Distant. Unreadable.

A brooding, scarred billionaire with a permanent scowl and a stare that should be illegal.

And the grumpiest man on planet Earth.

His reaction to me?

A big fat no.

But I don't back down from a challenge.

I make him a deal.

Two weeks.

I stay.

He stops glaring at me like I'm his worst nightmare.

Simple, right?

But somewhere between the fights and the accidental almost-kisses,

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Chapter one

Aspen

I'm one of those people grief should have killed, but I'm still here.

My brother was twelve years older, and the thing about having a sibling so many years apart is that they become an adult before you do. They experience far more life before you even begin to figure out what living is. Jace saw more of life than I'll ever hope to know. He joined the military at seventeen because he graduated early. I was just going into kindergarten then. My dad was so proud. My mom too. She wasn't even Jace's real mom, but she loved him like she was. I remember all of us standing there, seeing him off. My parents. Jace's mom. We all got along well, which wasn't something I really understood to be a thing when I was five, but I know it's a thing now. We all waved Jace off when he joined the military. Everyone put on a brave face, even though the three adults were terrified something would happen to him. I was just proud because they acted like they were proud too. I didn't know that under those forced smiles, their hearts were aching, and there would be so many sleepless nights to come, worrying about him.

Jace trained here first, but I was still just a kid when he went overseas. There were letters and videos, emails and texts. When my parents hung up the phone, there were so many tears in private, even from my dad. I thought it was because they missed my brother, but even when I was young, I started to see what the reality of having someone in the military meant.

Proud or not, we all missed Jace so freaking much.

When he came home, we thought maybe it might be for good.

It wasn't. Over the years, the details became sketchier and sketchier. Jace stopped being able to tell us anything, and my parents stopped asking because they didn't want to put him in that position. All we knew was that he was in Special Forces, and he was doing the kind of stuff we shouldn't know about.

Even at eighteen, I knew Specials Forces wasn't the kind of spy shit you saw in the movies. It was dangerous. I told my brother that if he ever got killed, I'd be so mad at him, and I'd never forgive him, so he had best never do it. He promised me he wouldn't.

For six years, life went on. I went to college, graduated, got my first real job, had my heart broken a few times, and worried constantly. I did life while Jace wasn't here to see it, and I always, always wished he was. Missing him was a perpetual ache.

Last year, he broke that promise.

It was a joke kind of promise. I wasn't serious. He knew I wouldn't hate him. It was just my plea to please, please, please come home safely.

We didn't get his body back. That's the worst part. Because it makes all this feel less than real. Except I know it is real because my parents have aged ten years in the past twelve months. My life has been on a frozen, paused hold where nothing feels real, yet everything is so real all the time that it could freaking crush me.

I'm twenty-five now. But Jace is always going to be thirty-seven. Until the end of time, he'll never grow old in my mind. Until the end of time, I'll do anything and everything I can to keep him alive in my memory, no matter how much it hurts. No matter how, sometimes, I could die or scream with the anguish of it. There are days, even a year later, when I have to lock myself in a bathroom or step into an alley and

give in to the private, heart-wrenching sorrow. Some days, I can smile and laugh, but other days, the grief eats away at me. I want to celebrate Jace. I want to celebrate each and every minute we have spent together, but at the same time, it's so hard knowing there isn't ever going to be another.

No, that's wrong.

A few days ago, my life changed. It was like Jace was speaking to me from the grave. No, more than like. He was. Is. I can imagine him right here with me, on this plane, flying across the country. I can imagine him smiling at me and giving me those dopey thumbs up and telling me I rock like a sock.

There's only one letter. There isn't going to be another. When the lawyer gave it to me the day after the anniversary of Jace's death, he told me there was just one letter. It was left in his care, and Jace gave him instructions.

I have to say, I wouldn't want to carry out final notices like that, but this guy? He was a pro. It was like he'd never had an emotion in his entire life.

The letter is folded safely in my backpack, which is tucked under the seat. I couldn't bring myself to put it in the overhead bin. I got a window seat, and it felt too far away. If I couldn't reach for it at all times, I thought I might go insane, and going insane on a four-hour flight from Atlanta to California just wasn't an option I wanted to consider. If there had been turbulence, I might have turned into a hot mess anyway, but so far, the flight has been totally smooth. Just some ear popping when it took off and some snoring from the extremely old man next to me, but that's it.

I've read and reread the letter enough times in the past twenty-four hours that I know every word by heart, but the letter is precious, just like the few things I have left of Jace.

He wrote those words. He touched that paper. He thought about dying and what would happen after. He thought about me and everything he wanted to do for me and wouldn't be able to do. He wanted me to be safe, happy, loved. He wanted me to be protected, to find adventure, and to live with an open heart. He imagined all this for me—a golden kind of future—all while knowing that if I ever read the letter he was writing, it would mean he was gone and that he had no future, no love, no life, and no family of his own.

My nose starts to burn like I'm going to sneeze, which is always the first sign that I'm going to cry. And not just a regular cry but a massive ultra-ugly cry.

I make myself take shuddering and gasping breaths to try and keep it together.

It's hard to get myself under control.

For one, I miss my brother like crazy. His letter opened up the box I've tried to cram and ram and jam all my grief into for the past year. And two, the letter was pure craziness, but here I am, less than twenty-four hours after getting it.

Let me start by saying I hated my job. So when I called in saying I needed a week for this one last mission and they were less than understanding, I quit on the spot. I would have given two weeks' notice if I could have, but I just couldn't. Jace didn't put a timeline on it, but once I got his letter and read it, I knew I had to do this, and I had to do it now. It wasn't the kind of thing I could just sleep on for two weeks or a month or six months and then decide to do it. I knew I'd talk myself out of it because this was just...just the most insane thing I'd ever done, but it was what my brother wanted.

The little old man next to me suddenly wakes up with a snort and a grunt that also sounds suspiciously like a simultaneous fart. He doesn't seem to mind. He takes off his super huge round glasses and rubs at his soft, dark eyes with two fists. He's thin.

Rail thin. He looks about ninety, and he's rocking a bright pink T-shirt, purple suspenders, and a set of jeans that look to be from the fifties. They probably are. He's also wearing those hiking-style boots that everyone wears now because they're so popular. The ones from Australia. No, I don't have a pair. They might last forever, but they're not in my budget.

He seems like the kind of guy who expresses himself through clothing. I think that's awesome. I've never had the talent for it. I'm a regular button-up blouse and black skirt at work kind of a girl, and when I don't have to adhere to semi-formal attire in the office, I can regularly be found in jeans and nondescript long-sleeved shirts or plain T-shirts. I at least choose the kind that has some shape to them, but as far as designs go, I don't know. I'm just not very inventive. I like to be able to throw on clothes in under a minute, sweep my hair up, and be ready for the day. I hate standing in front of a mirror, trying to decide if something looks good. I'm never going to be one of those people who berate themselves for not being pretty enough, curvy enough, tall enough, or buxom enough. I went there as a teenager, and it sucked. I'm not going back.

"You're heading to San Diego too?" This old guy is absolutely adorable when he grins and beams at me. The smile does wonders for his wrinkles. Old person wrinkly face smiles are the best. I don't really understand people who don't like seniors because I would way rather sit and talk to old people than talk to anyone my own age. It's not an old soul thing. It's more a dislike for pop culture and most things technology-related thing. Okay, maybe it's an old soul thing.

"I am." Shit. My eyes fill up with tears again, and I blink hard.

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“You’ve been missing family, and you’re going home?” he asks kindly. “John, by the way. So you know who you’re talking to.”

“Aspen.” I swipe at my eyes. “Like the tree.” I don’t tell him my last name. But it’s Oak. Yes, truly. Aspen Oak. I’m not messing around here. My parents might have thought it was cute, giving me a double tree name, but people don’t take me seriously, and right now, I’m not up for having a discussion about it.

“I always did like aspens. They’re mighty good trees. But then, I never did meet a tree I didn’t like. They’re good stuff all around, you know?”

He’s right. Trees are good shit. All of nature is good shit. Jace loved being in it more than he loved anything, even his job. If he’d lived long enough to retire, he might have bought a cabin in the middle of nowhere and spent the rest of his years in solitude and peace.

God, maybe he did that, and I didn’t even know about it. I didn’t know where he even was half the time.

I don’t want to think about the reality of him being nowhere now, at least not on this earth where I can find him, so I imagine him teaching bushcraft and doing some survival thing with kids and adults alike. He always had to be doing something.

“Sorry.” I brush at my eyes again. “No, I’m not going to see family. I actually live in Atlanta.”

“Oh? I’m the opposite. I live in San Jose, but I was visiting my son and his sons and

their sons in Atlanta. I'm ninety-four this year. They think I'm too old to fly, too old to drive, too old to do anything. They want me to come back out there, but I always loved San Jose. That's where I wanted to retire, and I've done it and lived there for thirty years now. It's my home, and I probably won't be leaving it even after I shuck off the mortal coil."

"Oh! Don't do that!" I reach for his hand before I can stop myself. He lets me put mine on his and then pats it with one that's gnarled up and full of crepe-thin skin and very blue veins.

"When you get to my age, dear, it's more of a reality than it is anif. I've had a good life. No, I've had a great life! I'm still traveling, still mobile, and I still have my independence." He does a huge wrinkly face grin again and taps his head with his free hand. "And at least most of my faculties."

That makes me smile a watery smile because John isn't forcing it. He's naturally melting my heart. I can tell he's a good man, and I want to sit here all day and hear his stories. I'm sad we're going to be landing in half an hour or less.

Thirty minutes.

I have thirty minutes to get my shit together.

Okay, maybe a little longer because I have to get my bag and a coffee, go get the rental car I booked, and then take a freaking breath before I punch in the address I memorized from the second neatly typed sheet of paper the lawyer gave me.

"I don't doubt it, John. You're sharp as a brand new tack."

His grin deepens, as do his wrinkles. He's mostly bald, except for a few spare hairs behind each ear. It makes his ears look extra huge and a little bit saggy, which just

makes him look infinitely adorable.

“So you’re going to visit friends down here? It’s very nice. All of California is. The beaches are marvelous, dear. You’re in for a great vacation. And you’ve come during the extra hot season. July is sometimes unbearable, but at least the nicest parts of the beach aren’t so crowded. The college kids have long come and gone. Oh, unless it’s debauchery you were hoping for. There’s still plenty to be had, no doubt.”

“No!” I gasp, laughing softly. “Not debauchery.” My hand is still on his. I give it a squeeze. “Well, not—I don’t think so. I’m going to San Jose to meet a man I’ve never met. He was my brother’s best friend. They...uh...workedtogether. My brother died last year.”

“Oh.” John’s face crumples and his eyes mist over. He can’t cry. If he cries, I’m finished. “I’m so sorry, dear.”

“Me too.” I’ll never stop being sorry. I’ll never stop missing Jace. There are a lot of days where it hurts more than I think I have the capacity to bear. “I got a letter from his lawyer yesterday. It was to be given to me the day after the one-year anniversary of his death. My brother wasn’t like that. He wasn’t into easter eggs or playing games or drama like that, so it really shocked me.”

“I see.” John can clearly tell there’s more coming. At his age, he’s learned patience.

“In his letter, he told me about his best friend. I never met him. I never even knew about him. They had a job where...where they couldn’t really talk much about it. Anyway, this friend stopped doing what they were doing—I don’t know if retired is the right word—a few months before my brother wrote the letter. I know I’m not going to make any sense, but basically, he told me he wanted me to find his best friend and look after him.”

“Oh. Oh, I see. That’s quite a thing to ask.”

I haven’t told him the most shocking part. Maybe I don’t want to admit to myself that my brother would ask me to do it.

I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who I thought would be a better match for you in every way. Give happiness a shot because life is far too short, and it runs out on all of us sooner than we’ll ever think.

“His best friend never had anyone, I guess. He had no family, not even when he was young. He’s alone. Without Jace, I’m an only child, but I’ve always had my parents and my friends.”

“He no doubt wanted you both to find happiness and give it a real shot.”

Yes, he said that. Almost word for word. It was a little bit jarring to hear it from the mouth of a stranger.

I know this might be a touch crazy and a whole lot idealistic, but you’re two people I care about very much. I’m worried about you both. If you can find love, give it a shot. With each other. Nothing would make me happier than if you both got married and made a go of it. Have a family. Be each other’s best friend. Be each other’s special person. Learn to love him if you can. He’ll learn to love you the same. I know it.

Something about this sweet old man prompts me to tell the truth. “I think I’m going to San Jose to marry a man I’ve never even met just because my brother thought it would work out. It’s kind of his last wish ever, so how can I not do it?”

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John clears his throat. “Goodness. In my day, a quick courtship wasn’t so unheard of because, you know, the urgency and all that. People burned the same back then, but it was frowned upon to do it before marriage, so marriages happened too soon, and once you got married, you tried your darndest to make it work. It was a different time. The world seemed different. Maybe it was. I married my Maybel three months after we first met. She was beautiful. Just wonderful. She was, and always will be, the best woman I’ve ever known. We had a lot of good years together, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. Sixty-some years of marriage isn’t easy. A single year isn’t easy. A single day, sometimes. You just have to take it as it comes.

“I don’t know about marrying someone just because your brother wants it, but I can say that nowadays, divorce is much easier. You could give it a go, just to say you did. Who knows? Maybe it’ll work out. I’ve heard of worse things. Things like apps that order dates to your door. Maybel would have said that was for hussies—man or woman. She would have said it was hussy-like behavior, and being a hussy was right at the top of her shitlist. She didn’t like fast men or fast women. She slapped me a good one the first time I ever tried to kiss her, and then she told me that I wasn’t getting any of her milk until I bought the cow. It just made me laugh and laugh and laugh while she turned eight shades of red. I never let her forget it. I don’t think she could ever look at milk in any form the same way again.” After saying all that, his face changes. He’s still happy, but the wistfulness and all the love is there. “Goodness, I miss her. It’s been nearly three years, but you never get used to it. I know I shouldn’t talk about dying because it upsets people, but if what comes after is as good as people say it is, I’ll be right glad to see her again—however it comes.”

It’s a nice thought. Not one I really believe in, but I’m not going to tell him that. I’m not going to spoil anything. There’s a huge part of me that wishes it could be

real—seeing people again, knowing them. It’s more than a nice thought. If that could happen, I wish it for everyone, no matter what form it would take.

Whatever it is, I do know John is right about one thing. You never get over a loved one being gone. Never.

Also, he didn’t straight up tell me that I should turn around and get on the next flight back to Atlanta because all of this is, without a doubt, trouble, so that’s a bonus. I think.

“I’ll give you my address, Aspen. In case things don’t work out and you need a place to stay, or in case you need any help at all, you look me up, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I have a landline. Do you know what that is?”

I chuckle. “Yes, John, I know what that is.”

“You can call that.”

“Alright.” Darn it, my tears are going to get the best of me again. This sweet old soul will probably never know what this means to me. But then again, he probably does.

“Thank you.” It’s so inadequate, but it’s the best I can do.

I don’t let go of John’s hand until we’ve landed. He doesn’t let go of mine either.

Chapter two

Aspen

Within the first few seconds of ringing a doorbell on a house that falls under the category of serious freaking real estate, at least in my mind, because it's huge and grand and must have cost a fortune and not at all what I expected, I know I've made a mistake.

As soon as the massive, modern, black-paneled door swings open and I meet with a set of frigid dark eyes, a steel jaw, and the rapid-fire pinging of a vein in a proud forehead, it's obvious I've landed in the grumpiest of grumpy pants patches.

I've bunged this up. No, not bunged. Bungled. I can't even get that right.

I know Patrick McDonald knows.

He must have gotten a letter too. At least it saves me from having to explain myself. Still, I have to be sure this guy is him. Because he looks like he's not. He's not the middle-class, laughing-eyed hero of a gentleman that I expected Jace to be as close as brothers with. He's not the man I would have ever imagined my brother picking out for me. He's too...cold. The burst of air flying past the open door out of the house is more than just good AC. Yeah, that air is not radiating from the house. All that cold is coming straight off of him. He looks like the kind of guy who would wear a severe suit and do up the top button and tie all the way just because it's a stick-in-the-ass thing to do, and he wants everyone to realize his stick in the assness and not be happy in his presence because he finds it irksome.

The glare he's shooting my way is enough to ward off any sort of lightheartedness.

He's not wearing a suit or a shirt with buttons, but he is clad entirely in black. Black Henley. Black jeans. I think it might be the chosen outfit of superspies when they're grumping through their forced downtime.

Not that this guy's downtime or retirement is forced. He left, Jace said. And for the

record, something about him tells me he's never worn a suit in his life.

Also, he's not a spy. Jace wasn't a spy either. They worked together. I got the right house and the right guy. I know I did.

"Patrick McDonald?" Yup, my voice trembles like I'm hoping I didn't.

He gives me a tight nod. "Jace's little sister," he grunts grumpily. "You're here because he wanted you to be here, but you need to turn around and go right back home." He points behind me like that direction is Atlanta. Maybe it is. God, I'm terrible as a human compass.

"I can't go back home. I got a letter. You got a letter too."

Christ. How did Jace think I could marry this guy? There is nothing but more frigid air wafting around between us, and it's going to tornado up because I'm a happy, easy-going, welcoming person who has warm vibes. Warm and cold don't mix well. There is a total lack of chemistry happening right now. No zapping wild energy going through the air, no lab compounds mixing, and no my body liking his body on a primal, animal level.

"You need to forget all of that," Patrick growls. "This is not a thing. Oh, freaking no..." He trails off, whistling low in his throat. "No, this is not a thing. This is never going to be a thing. Do you have any idea the kind of man your brother entrusted you to?" I'm honestly starting to wonder. "If you did, you wouldn't have come."

Well, that certainly sounds ominous. A bit dramatic too. I might not have the best people reading skills, but it seems to me that he's trying too hard. Like he practiced this exact scary speech in case I should ever just show up here with the idea that we make good on my brother's proposition.

“I have a name, you know. I’m not just Jace’s little sister.”

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“Yeah.” Patrick runs a hand through his hair, which is light auburn shot through with gold and copper streaks that make it so much more than just brown. It’s longer than I first thought. He has it combed back without the slicked-back greasy look. It does look thick and kind of nice. I’ll give him that. He has good hair. “Aspen.”

“That’s right.” How much has he heard about me? What did Jace tell him? It would never have been anything bad, but it might as well have been because this guy was definitely not happy to see me. He has got the most resting asshole face I’ve ever seen on anyone before.

“Aspen, you need to go back home. What your brother wrote...it’s just...it’s never going to happen.”

“I’ve just flown across the country to meet you. I think we should at least talk.” I stare pointedly past him. Now, he’s doubly not what I expected. He’s frank to the point of rude, and his face looks like it will crack in half if he ever smiles. He’s not a laugh, not like Jace was. It seems like this man and my brother have zero in common. He’s way more of the scary Special Forces personality that you see on shows and movies. Jace didn’t fit the bill. Physically, yes, but in any other way? No. This guy? He’s about as cheerful as getting smushed by a freefalling pickle launched off a really tall bridge.

I had this picture of Patrick McDonald in my head, and this guy isn’t it. His name is very Irish, but it’s clear by his total lack of an accent of any sort that he was raised here. There’s more, but I’m caught off guard when he rolls his rich brown eyes at me and sighs like I’m the spider he keeps shooing away, but I keep coming back, making webs all over his front door or his favorite car. And spider poo. I think that’s a thing.

I've heard people complaining about that before. I'm basically spider-pooing all over his life.

Well, fuck a deck on that. I'm more than a spider that shits everywhere, and even if this man is glaring at me, I came all this way to accomplish something. It's not for me. It's for Jace, and that matters more than anything.

"I quit my job to come out here."

Patrick blinks. His eyes aren't just dark. They're smoky. Like barbecued pineapple. I shouldn't make myself want to laugh. He'll think I'm laughing at him, and Patrick McDonald doesn't do the smiling or laughing thing, and the last thing he looks like he'll ever do is enjoy being insulted.

"That was rather...silly of you." He says it. Even though he paused like he wanted to not say it.

If Jace could have told me more about his bestie, it would have been nice. I imagine him sitting me down and telling me that Patrick McDonald acts like an asshole, but really, under all of it, he has a ton of redeeming qualities.

Maybe Patrick thinks this is the worst kind of practical joke. Perhaps I'm the wrench gumming up his work. Maybe that's why he's so grouchy. Or it could be he's got a resting asshole face because this is the way he expresses grief. Maybe he misses Jace so much, and the letter picked open a wound that had barely even closed up.

I guess I can see why he's less than thrilled to find me here. I'm the pesty little sister, the one he's just been charged with looking after. As in, getting married to. Or like taking care of. And he very clearly doesn't want the obligation. I'm the promise he never wanted to put his name to. The millstone around his neck.

“The letter we both got...I’m assuming it’s basically the same,” he snaps. His voice is deep, raspy. He doesn’t have an accent, but his words are still somehow musical, in a death metal sort of way.

“I don’t know. Maybe I should come in, and we can discuss it.”

“The idea of marriage seemed optional to me. As in an option that neither of us are going to take. Your brother wants me to look after you? I can do that.” He’s obviously doing okay if the house is anything to go on. “That’s fine. Yeah, I’ve got money now. I’ll give you some. You won’t want for anything again. That’s how I’ll look after you.”

No can do, doodly doo. I raise a brow. “He also wanted me to look after you.”

His jaw ticks. His beard is one of the most epic ones I’ve ever seen in person. It’s auburn, like his hair, and also like his hair, it’s shot through with copper and gold strands. It’s a beautiful beard, if slightly shocking, as it’s so bushy. Maybe he wants to teach bushcraft and live in the wilderness too, and this is just temporary until he can start living his dream, but he wants to look the part.

His beard is so epic that it kind of makes me want to stroke it like one would pet a very bushy cat.

Back to the picture I had in my head of Patrick McDonald...he was kinder, taller, and darker with jet-black hair. Freshly shaven. Kind of like the rugged, handsome men from movies and books. I imagined his eyes would dance. That he’d be funny. I thought he’d be a few years younger than Jace, so the age gap between us wouldn’t be huge. I imagined him slightly serious on the surface, but underneath, he was always ready to burst out with laughter.

My brother also had the best heart.

I thought it should follow that any friend of his would be the same.

I didn't think this man would open the door to find me here and be immediately cold, rude, and dismissive.

His eyes rake over me now, and there's absolutely no emotion in them. He doesn't need emotion. His scowl is more than enough.

"It's not going to be a thing. The marriage bit. I'd very much like it if you'd accept my offer of money and head back home." He's repeating himself now, and he's not happy to have to do it. He passes his hand back and forth between us like he's trying to swat me away, not just indicate me, the letter, the marriage part, and himself all in one sweep. "The letter is pure nonsense."

Oh, really? He's going to gothere?

My eyes fill with hot, angry tears, but I blink them back. I'm too pissed to cry. It's not going to happen, I swear. But no, that's not the thing that's not going to happen. The thing that's not going to happen is this man telling me I'm not going to fulfill my brother's last wishes. He's not going to take a shit all over that. If he was truly his best friend, and I think I might actually be at the wrong house here, he would never say something like that.

Everything about this is all wrong. He's all wrong.

He's not the tall, dark, handsome, gallant, sweet, kind, brave, good man I imagined. He might be tall enough—around six feet—but he's way too broad, too muscular, too powerful. He's menacing, not handsome. With all that coppery hair and huge Viking-style beard, he's not dark either. He's not a beautiful man. He's not classically handsome. He's not ruggedly gorgeous. His face isn't...well, I don't know what it is, but I guess it is interesting. It's the kind of face that maybe won't be attractive until

you look at it a few times and then a few times more. Until you get used to looking for the stuff that no one else will see at first, and then finally, it hits you. Even if you can't fully put your finger on what is actually doing the hitting.

“What the nuts? It's not nonsense, you asshole! The letter was Jace's last wish. He wrote it knowing full well that if we were living it, then he wouldn't be here, yet he still did it anyway. He arranged for us to get it a year later. He thought all of it out, and how painful would that have been, planning for your own death like that?”

There is zero change. Zero sympathy. Zero compassion in this man's eyes. “I burned it.”

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My jaw unhinges, and I feel like the rest of me does too. “You burned my brother’s letter? How could you do that? It was something he wrote to you. Something you had of him, and you just...just wrecked it like it was worth nothing?”

Shit, I’m shouting. I’m standing here on his expensive ass doorstep in his expensive ass neighborhood, getting shrill. And maybe I’d be embarrassed about it if I actually cared, but the only thing I care about is that this asshole has taken the level of asshole up to the level of asshole, and that is not okay.

I might have been persuaded to talk rationally about this and be all calm as we came to some kind of solution, but now? Now I’m freaking digging in. I’m going to be stubborn. Shitting all over this with his asshole ways is not okay.

Whoa, breathe. This man was Jace’s best friend. He’s the man your brother picked out of all the men in the world and planned for you to marry. If that didn’t work, he wanted you to be in each other’s lives. He wanted you to care about him. That has to mean something, even if you can’t see it now. Jace didn’t make mistakes. Not mistakes like this.

I know full well that anger is sometimes a mask for grief, and I have to remind myself of that again. Men deal with it differently. They can’t grieve the same way women do, and the way women have to grieve in this society is bad enough. It’s not healthy. Jace didn’t get a celebration of life. He got the full deal military funeral. I think he would have liked that, but he would have hated it too. He would have wanted a celebration for close friends and family. He would have wanted laughter and jokes and all the good memories. He would have wanted us to take joy in the fact that he lived at all, even if our hearts were torn apart and ripped wide open. He would have—

Funeral.

“Were you there?” I’m all over the place. “Were you at Jace’s funeral? Did you even go?”

“That isn’t fair,” he growls.

“Did you even care? Do you? You burned the letter. Maybe Jace meant nothing to you. Maybe he wasn’t like a brother at all. Maybe he had you all wrong. Maybe—”

“Alright.” Patrick doesn’t move. He doesn’t even raise his voice. It’s still a low growl, but there’s something different about it. Something final. Something that’s the equivalent of a foot stomp and an angry crossing of the arms. “You’ve made your point. Come inside. We’ll talk. I was a jerk. Just...let’s just...we got off to a bad start. That isn’t what he would have wanted.” He lets out a shuddering, ragged sigh like I’ve ripped him apart too. I’m all sick with trembling regret. My stomach feels like a milkshake made of all the nasty things, times a merry-go-round and multiplied by a ship tossing about in bad weather. Those dark eyes of his drop down to the doorstep. It’s not made of regular concrete. It’s something fancier and a little bit sparkly. It seems like it would never chip or flake. Something stronger than concrete? What could be stronger? “He was like a brother to me. I’m sorry. I didn’t burn the letter. I said that to be a jerk. I...just come in. Please. We’ll talk, but we aren’t getting married. Not over a letter. Not for any reason.”

I can be as stubborn as a big old mule. I can make him pay for his surly ass meanness, but I honestly don’t have it in me to make him pay. Even if it’s just regular me without a letter persuading me with all the love in my brother’s heart to take care of this man, I won’t be able to do it.

“Okay.” I don’t agree, but at least this gets my foot in the door, literally. If that’s all I get, then at least I tried my darndest, and it’s important that I feel like I’ve done that.

“Let’s talk.”

Chapter three

Rick

I’ve never felt so wrecked in my life.

I got Jace’s letter and had a good laugh. I thought it was Jace’s way of playing a joke on me, the same way he would have when he was alive. Did it also make me incredibly sad? Of course. Do I wish with every fiber of my being that he was here right now? Absolutely. I do. All the time. Did I take the part where he asked me to look after his sister seriously? I did. I was already starting to make plans to figure out how I could do that, but I never thought she’d take the darn letter literally and show up here.

In lightning-fast time, I might add.

She’s Jace’s half-sister, but she looks so much like him that it’s haunting. She has sandy hair, blue eyes, and a fine bone structure with high cheekbones. It looks different on her than it did on him, obviously. She’s beautiful. He was athletic and rugged. She’s tall and slim. He was tall and jacked. I wonder if they both look like their dad. They must because he’s the parent they share in common.

She lets out a gasp as she steps inside and takes in the place. It’s the gross, ultra-modern design I can’t stand. Then again, if it were any other design, I still wouldn’t be able to stand it because this was his house before it was mine. Glass railings, stairs that appear to float in mid-air, square everything, concrete floors, bare walls with an expensive painting or two here or there, furniture that looks like it’s made out of stone and cardboard and feels about as comfy to sit on. Floor-to-ceiling windows in spots, huge hanging light fixtures, and a metal sculpture in the corner of the huge

living room that stands thirty feet tall, almost all the way to the lowest point of the ceiling.

“It was my grandpa’s.” I don’t have to explain this to her, but even Jace didn’t know this about me. I feel...naked.

No, correction. Jace knew just about all my secrets, and he did know my grandpa had money, but he didn’t know the extent of it. Even I barely knew. This wasn’t the house my grandpa had when I was little, which was when I became a burden that he seemed to regret for the rest of his life. He solved that by packing me up, shipping me off, and making sure I never came back home. And when I was old enough to make the decisions for myself, I never came back either.

This isn’t really a home. It’s just an empty shell that’s worth a couple of million dollars. And by a couple, I mean likely fifteen. Maybe more. The market keeps going up and up and up.

“He left it to me when he passed away.”

“Oh, I see. It’s really quite something to inherit. He was clearly a loaded old baked potato.”

Aspen is completely unapologetic for that, and my lips nearly twitch. I admire brutal honesty. She’s like Jace that way. He always told the truth, but he peppered it with humor whenever he could.

We might as well sit down here. I gesture at the two couches, and Aspen takes one. She plops down, grunts, and rearranges herself. I can tell she didn’t expect the couch to be so hard. I made the same mistake the first time I sat down. It was like falling onto a pile of bricks. Eighteen months later, my tailbone still feels bruised from that monstrosity.

She arranges her legs, one over the other. Her jeans are fancy and bleached out. They have patterns all over them, and the hems go from tight to flared out. Bell bottoms, I guess, but I don't think they're from the right era. They're too modern. Boho, I suppose. Her top is adorable. It's a short-sleeved T-shirt with a giant strawberry on it. Her purse is faux leather, the strap crossing over her torso, but I don't let it draw my eyes there. Her hair, which sweeps down nearly to her waist, is a honeyed, sandy mess. With her matching sandy brows, flecks of ginger freckles dancing over her nose and cheeks, her full pink lips, baby blues, and altogether natural worshipper of great open skies earthiness about her, she looks like she's always lived in California.

She looks young. That's what she looks like.

Even though she's dressed quite plainly for all intents and purposes, and her look is like abohemian princess with zero cares in the world, I can see the dark shadows in the flash of her eyes as they sweep around the room. They finally land on the huge windows facing the street.

"If you don't like the place, why don't you just sell it and move somewhere else?"

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She's blunt. I do appreciate that. "I can't. It was in the will that I can't sell it for five years after inheriting it." I have other money, so I could technically buy something else and rent out this one or let it stand empty. Maybe let it go to pot and show it the same amount of love my grandpa showed me for all I care.

"Hmm, that's interesting. What other asshole clauses did he put in there?"

I sit down on the other couch. It's equally as hard, so I perch with care. "I don't know. Lots. He had investments, corporations, some of this, some of that...he put stipulations on all of it. It has been a lot of lawyer meetings."

"Being rich sounds like a pain in the ass. You should just take it all and donate it."

I've donated rather large chunks of whatever money I have been able to get my hands on because I feel the exact same thing. I refuse to laugh. I refuse to admit she's right. I refuse to acknowledge just how much wealth I was left with. Honestly? It's overwhelming. I find it a little bit obscene, and I'm half embarrassed by it. I'm not the kind of man who was ever cut out to live this way.

"Jace never was able to tell me much of anything about you." Aspen loops a strand of hair around her finger. She plays with it for a few seconds before she lets her hand drop. She looks at me directly. "So? Who are you? I need it in the bullet form cheat study notes style."

Maybe if I give her this, it will be good enough. She'll decide this isn't for her, that I'm not for her, and she'll go back to wherever she can be happy. "I wasn't much of anyone. I'm still not much of anyone. I like to be left alone, for the most part." It's

not like I had a choice for most of my life. “You know what I did for a living. The same thing your brother did. I stopped a year and a half ago. My grandpa pulled strings and influenced some pretty high-up people to get me back here. He was sick, dying. He wanted me to be here for that last little bit.” One final punishment from a prick who never loved me, but I was his last bit of flesh and blood, and I guess that meant more to him than anything as he was getting ready to shuck off the old mortal coil. “So, I suppose I’m retired now.” Was that by choice? Fuck no. Do I miss being out there in the field every single day? Well, not every single day, and not every job. But some of it. Just some days. I’m always going to be that way. There is about four percent of me that is never going to be used to being domesticated.

“So you’re back to living in polite society.” Her brows shoot up. “You don’t strike me as someone who would be very good at it—mixing with other people who have money. I don’t think old money likes new money, but you’re like the worst of new money. You’re awkward at it, and it looks like you’re disdainful of it, which would drive anyone crazy. Plus, your manners are atrocious. You’re no good at faking it, and being rich seems like it’s all stuffy and fake. It’s probably all face injections, BBLs, and purse doggies.”

“Gah. What’s a BBL?” I have to ask. My curiosity gets the better of me before I can stop myself.

“A Brazilian butt lift,” she answers.

“Oh!” Oh, Jesus. “I don’t think I’ll be getting one of those anytime soon.”

She bursts into the softest, sweetest laughter. It’s nothing like Jace’s loud guffaw. I swear, that laugh of his just about got us killed a few times. I also swear I’d take a bullet just about anywhere that’s not fatal right now if I could just hear his laugh again.

“Did Jace know about this?”

“The butt lifts?”

“Yeah.” Her smile is like pure sunshine. The kind you never find in the city. No, it’s better. It’s more like the first breath you take after thinking you won’t be able to take another. My heart starts pounding for no reason I can even name except that all my internal danger tripwires are being stepped on, and alarm bells are pinging through my brain.

“No, he didn’t know anything about those. Or about this. When I left...I didn’t want to leave, but he knew enough. He just didn’t realize the extent of it. Neither did I, to be honest.” I’m being too honest right now. That’s what I’m doing. But then, I’m not talking about my life over there. All the years I spent doing shit that I can’t ever talk about. My life now is pretty much public knowledge. It’s not one big secret, and that has taken some getting used to.

Not having to watch my back every time I step out of the house.

The easy way society just crawls all over the place, invading every single corner and crevice. The laughter, the people, the houses, the traffic, the access to everything, the stores, the crowds, the living.

“If he had known,” Aspen says with a frown, studying me and seeing more than I’d like. “He would have been even more worried. He definitely would have had us both get our letters sooner.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Well, you’re clearly uncomfortable here. You might have all the money in the world, but it doesn’t make up for what a person needs most.”

I'm not going to fall off the couch right now. I'm fucking not. "And what's that?"

"Friends. Love. Family. This house pretty much screams soulless loneliness. I'm sorry to say so because it's super nice and everything, and I'm sure your grandpa was a good man—"

"My grandpa was the meanest son of a b you'd ever meet."

"Oh. Um..." For a second, she doesn't know what to do with that information, but then she nods tightly. "Yeah, well, I'm sorry for it." She pats her purse, and then she flips open the top and takes out a piece of paper. With trembling hands, she unfolds it. "This was the last thing my brother wanted. He wanted us to get married. I don't know why, but I don't think it's a joke. I have every intention of honoring his wish, even if we both think it's the worst of terrible ideas. What's a few weeks? We could get legally married to say we did and then get legally annulled. We could give it a shot for a period of time, and then we could just...I don't know. Be long-distance friends or something. No offense, but you seem about as warm and loving as a cactus, and goodness knows I adore those plants, but they're exceptionally prickly. I know you don't want this, and I don't want it either, but we're both going to have to suck it up and just do it. Otherwise, I think we'll live our whole lives haunted by the fact that we loved Jace, and we didn't do him the honor and respect of following through with this."

"You can't just...will two people to get along, let alone get married."

"I know that," she says exasperatedly.

Does she? Yeah, her eyes are narrowed at me now. And she's clutching the letter like it's a lifeline, holding onto it for dear life.

I know that feeling. I know what she's feeling. What she's wishing.

Neither of us was with Jace when he died. We weren't there. His body came back home, but she wouldn't have gotten to see it. It was no doubt a closed casket, and who knows? They might have lied to his family about there even being a body. The casket could have been empty. Not saying that's a thing, but...yeah. Either way, she didn't get closure. I wasn't with him. I wasn't watching his back. I left. If I had stayed, he might still be alive. Instead, I was here, living this life I never wanted, and he was...he was there. It might have been brutal. They wouldn't tell me.Me.Even after I gave up over a decade of my life for them. I don't know how it happened. I just know it did.

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It's been a year, and I'm every bit as empty as the moment when I first heard those words.

Aspen grips the letter like it's all she has left of her brother, and if she can just do this, then maybe...maybe it won't hurt somuch. Maybe she'll have a part of Jace back. Maybe she can hold onto a part of him and never let go.

"I'm so sorry, Aspen, but whatever we do isn't going to bring him back."

Her eyes flash. Even when I'm trying not to be an asshole, I apparently still suck. "I know that! He's dead. My brother is dead. I'm never going to see him again, and neither are you, which makes this even more important. He wrote this, planned it, wanted it for us. I think that's something. So, real or not, I think we should at least attempt it. You don't have to like me, and I don't have to like you, but we could try for a few weeks, and then that's that. At the very least, we could get to know each other and try to be friends, even if we'd be the least likely of friends that ever existed. Because that's what Jace wanted. He wanted you to look after me. And me to look after you. He wanted neither one of us to be alone. If he thought we needed this, then I'm not going to say he was wrong."

"Even if he was?"

A quick lighting strike in a sea of blue anger. This girl might look sweet and young and innocent, but she's got the same fire driving her that her brother had. I bet she's like an old rusty nail that works its way right through the sole of your boot until it stabs you through the foot. Hella persistent and stubborn. Something you never saw coming and impossible to just pluck out and forget about.

“He wasn’t wrong.” Her fingers clamp down so hard on the paper that it crinkles, and she looks down in surprise and horror and quickly smoothes it out against her chest.

“Are you sure it’s not a joke?”

“It’s not a joke!” She gives me the what in the ever-loving hell is wrong with you look. “He wouldn’t joke about something like this. I don’t care if there aren’t two people in the world less suited for each other. He wasn’t kidding.”

“Less suited.” I can work with that. “You’re right. We’re completely unsuited to each other. From what I know about you, you’re sweet, good, and kind. You’re the kind of sister who drops everything and wrecks her life just to honor her brother. You’re brave. Bold. You’re probably funny like him. You’re beautiful. And then there’s me. We’re just not...trust me. We would be a disaster together. It’ll be much better if we remain distant friends. You can add me to social media. I’ll create a profile just for you.”

“Fuck off,” she snarls, shocking me with her ferocity. “You’re not the only one who has social media. I might be younger than you, and I might be smaller than you, but I’m no less—”

“I’ll take care of you, I promise. That part, I’ll fulfill. I’ll give you some money right now. Then you can go off and live your life however you want. Do anything you want to do. Give some money to your parents and make sure they’re okay too. Jace’s mom as well. I just—”

“Jace’s mom and my parents were the recipients of his life insurance policy. They’re fine. Not rich, but fine. Anyway, what the nuts? He wanted something else for us besides money. If you think I’d accept that, then you’re a real poo pants.”

She tells me to fuck off with enough venom to stop my heart, and then she uses words

like poo pants? God, who is this girl?

“No. I don’t accept,” she adds with finality.

Rusty Nail. That’s who she is.

I have this terrible, sinking feeling that if I don’t agree to this, she’ll never leave me alone. She’ll never stop hounding me and guiltting me. God knows I already have enough guilt. Am I afraid of her? Fucking rights, I’m afraid of her. I’m afraid that even being around her will tarnish her shine. I’m afraid that all the messed up, ugly parts of me will come to the surface, and they’ll coat her like an oil spill. Like stepping into a pit of tar. They’ll go all over her nice, clean, pristine soul, and they’ll wreck her.

I might be this mostly harmless-looking dude who hides out in this house during the day and climbs the walls at night, caged in, but I’m so far from harmless. I’ve done things I can never talk about, but they’ll always be stained on my soul.

What’s worse? Two weeks of a fake marriage to fulfill Jace’s last hopes and wishes and then a very distant friendship, or having to put up with his little sister pestering me, guiltting me, and hounding me until I lose what’s left of my mind?

I have enough guilt already. And enough regrets to fill up this house until the walls expand and burst.

If I could go back and stay instead of coming home, I would.

But I can’t. This is my reality now.

It doesn’t have to be Aspen’s present, and it doesn’t have to be her future. I can do this for Jace. I couldn’t save him, but I can honor this despite what I think about it.

What I think doesn't matter. Jace was the only real family I ever had. If he'd asked me to do this when he was alive, I would have promised him that I would. Never mind me. I'm nothing. I haven't been anything or anyone worthy of much at all in a long time. I was good at one thing, and that's over now.

But this?

I can do this for Aspen. What's two weeks out of my life? Out of my time? I play nice for two weeks and then I never have to see her again. I'll treat it like any other dangerous, fucked up mission I've been on. I have the skills to get through it. To survive it. I'll do it because I have to, and then we'll both be free, but especially her. She'll be free of me, the obligation, the doubt, and the tormenting guilt. She'll be okay. I'll make sure she's okay.

If I say no...well, it's not an option. She won't let me say no. Under all her sweetness, I think she's built of steel defiance and more so honor.

"Two weeks?" She picked that number, not me.

She folds up the letter and places it very neatly back in an envelope that has already been worn all over the creases, down to frayed softness. When did she get the letter? Likely just a few days ago. Probably at the same time as I did. Yet it already looks like it's a hundred years old.

When she looks back up at me, her eyes are shimmering with unshed tears. Please, not tears. I can't deal with tears. They turn my insides into a dumpster fire-style wreck. "Two weeks," she confirms, swallowing thickly, swallowing all of it back. "We get in, we do this, we get out alive. And then I'll create whatever fake social media crap you want, or we can be pen pals." She caresses the envelope in her lap again, touching it with so much love that it makes me feel winded. "If one letter has the power to change a whole life, maybe there's something to that."

Chapter four

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Aspen

I've learned two things since yesterday afternoon when I gave my hand away in a sort of—I'm ashamed to say—unholy matrimony. I know I'm cheating at this. We both are. The fact that we only got married because of the letter, and then we set a deadline to make ourselves feel better. We did it so we can both move on and have peace.

One, I've learned that my new husband—and jeepers, that word is total cringe—is a crabathon, through and through. He's the crabbiest of apples, a total crabfest, crab bag, marathon of crab.

Two, money will get you anything, even a fast wedding in a backyard full of unkempt gardens that were once probably nice, with a stranger marrying you and a stranger as a witness.

We got married right away. Might as well get it done and over with and start the timer on the two-week countdown. We both agreed we would keep this between us and as secret as we possibly could. My parents don't even know I've left Atlanta. They've been kind of distant over this past year. We were so close before, but now, when I text them every other day, they're fine. There have been weeks where I haven't gone over to the house, and they haven't visited me at my apartment. That would have been unheard of before, but now I think we all need our space to process, grieve, and try to get our lives and hearts back. It doesn't mean we don't love each other.

They work. I work. We're all busy being up in our heads. I don't mean to say they aren't involved in my life. Because they are. We still do things together. Things like

family dinners, hanging out, and holidays. I go and help them with yard work, we go for walks, and they come and chill at my apartment. We also still sit and do nothing at all. It's just that if I say I'm busy or preoccupied, they'll think I need space.

I don't want to lie to them, but they aren't ready for this kind of truth yet.

I wore a white sundress I packed, which was the nicest of the few dresses I owned. It was a gauzy number—like it was made for the beach—with a bit of lace. Patrick, on the other hand, wore black jeans and a black Henley. I almost laughed when I saw him dressed that way for the ceremony because I thought about how I first imagined him in a suit. I'm not even sure he owns one. He looked entirely menacing, and I think the JP was glad to get out of the twisted, decaying backyard. We both said the words. And yes, it's official. I'm now a wife. When Patrick recited those vows, he sounded so disconnected. We both probably did.

But.

But it's a brand new morning.

I get out of a king-sized bed that is about as comfortable as the couches downstairs, which is to say, it feels like it's a sheet of super soft fabric over total concrete. Oddly enough, nothing hurts. Not my shoulders, my back, or my neck. That's probably because the feather pillows make up for what the bed is obviously trying to perform in good posture miracles. The sheets were so soft that they felt impossible. Like they came straight from clouds or from a spider's arse. I suppose they aren't silk, but if they were, then they would come from a worm's arse, so it's not as far a stretch as you'd think.

The house is what most people would call minimalist. I call it cold and bare, but hey, it's not mine. I'm just a guest here, and if Patrick likes the rooms spartan to the extreme, then all the power to him. He said he doesn't, but who knows? He could be

saying anything. I wouldn't know. I don't know the first thing about him.

I'm wearing my fluffiest pair of pink pajama bottoms and a black tank top. I brought Hilda One and Hilda Two with me, and now, they flip and snap as I walk to the huge set of windows. Yes, they do happen to be furry slides, and yes, I did name them.

The house is basically a series of cubes and wild slanted rooflines. And from here, I get a good look at the backyard. You can tell it was once glorious, but that was a hot minute ago, and now it's just bleak. The only things living back there are weeds and a few trees that look like they're barely hanging on. There are also no flowers. Just a lot of dead brown grass, dead twisted vines, dead brown branches, and dead brown other things.

Looking at the sad, sad backyard reminds me of how I feel inside right now. Bleak. Not good. There's a decided lack of flowers blooming in my heart.

I fulfilled Jace's last wishes, but no, as I didn't do it the right way or in the right spirit, I was tormented by the dishonesty of it all night. I am not going to get more than this, but it is my choice where I go from here. I can wait out the two weeks like it's the most unbearable time of my life, or I can try to get to know the sour crabapple who is my husband. I can shut myself off, and we can live in a world of silence before we go our separate ways and call it total incompatibility, or I can open myself up and fill these fourteen days with happiness and kindness.

I study Hilda One and Hilda Two. My toes stick out the front, nearly covered by all their fluttery purple furriness. They look like they want me to try.

Sometimes, people act like prickly pears, Aspen, because they've had a shit run of things. Sometimes, they've been seriously wounded on the inside. Sometimes, it's a persona, but other times, it's real because there's been a decided lack of goodness.

“Umm,” I grunt. I know I’m carrying on a conversation with my slides here, but hey. It’s not like I’m going to confess to my parents or any of my friends that I just went across the country and married a total stranger. They’d lose their ever-loving minds and shit total bricks. Shitting bricks cannot be good for bowel health. Just saying. “He seems incredibly rich. He could buy goodness if he wanted it.”

That won’t make up for what he hasn’t had in the past.

“How do we even know that’s true? That’s just a thing I was thinking.”

Money can’t buy happiness.

“It can buy a heck of a lot of things that spark joy. It can take you to places where it’s easier to cultivate peace or whatever.”

Money can’t change the past.

My throat gets thick. “You’re right. Look at you. Smart slides. It can’t.”

I know what I said yesterday. And I know what we decided. But now I’m deciding that even though this marriage might not be real, I’m going to try. I’m not going to try to love Patrick in that way, but I think he does need some kind of loving, even if it’s just friendly. I need to honor the spirit of Jace’s wishes, and I can start there.

So after getting dressed and heading to the bathroom down the hall to brush my teeth and throw my hair into a braid to keep it from turning into a knotted mess throughout the day, I head down a staircase that looks like it’s made of concrete and engineered by the willpower of some very clever architect. Both those things are probably true, but it appears to be floating on air, which is incredibly unnerving.

I head into the kitchen. The house is utterly silent. Like, the appliances aren’t even

buzzing or humming kind of silence. I'm so scared shitless of this first day, this first meeting, the first moment of the next two weeks, that I probably have a constipated look on my face.

The whole place is a work of art, but the kitchen is a masterpiece. It's torn right from a design magazine and brought to life. It's better than state-of-the-art. The cupboards look like they're floating above the lower bank. Half are open, raw wood shelves, and the top? I think it might be concrete. Jesus. I run my fingers along the smooth, hard edge. It's definitely concrete.

Talk about trendsetting.

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It's so nice in here, with the huge windows, the massive stainless fridge, and the gas stove with the big hood overtop to suck up all the cooking vapors. It's all so spotless and unused-looking that I'm almost scared to do just that. Use it.

Well, shit on that. I'm hungry, and the only way food is going to get made is if I rummage around in here to find dishes and a frying pan and invade the fridge.

Ten minutes later, I'm attempting eggs on a gas stove for the first time in my life, and let me tell you, this beast doesn't function like the ancient thing in my apartment. Cooking with gas is a whole different ballgame, and it's all I can do to keep the eggs from burning. I'm using a nonstick pan, but they keep freaking sticking.

"You mothers! Come on!" I slide the flipper under the eggs and try to twist and scoop them up without breaking the yolks. I get them halfway up, and so far, so good, but then...disaster. Yolks pour out of the slightly crispy whites and run all over the place. "Damn it! Curse you foul beasties!"

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," a voice suddenly says.

"Ahh!" I scream, but I don't flip the pan off the stove or send eggs flying across the room. The mess is contained. Go me. However, I do angle around and find Patrick leaning against the fridge. He came in here so silently, and now he's standing only a few feet away. I never even heard a thing.

He's rocking black again. Black jeans, black Henley. He's done the vintage hair-sweep thing again, but he's...oh. His beard. It's not so overgrown and bushy today. He trimmed it down, and with the extra gone, it gives his face an entirely different

look.

He still glowers like a classic grumpy pants, but I can see more of his face now. The trimming changed the shape of it. His face looks harder along the angles of his jaw, where the facial hair is now neatly level. It's still a beard, just trimmed within literally about a quarter inch of its life, but even though his jaw is squared off, angular, and defined, he doesn't look so scary. Maybe I'm just getting used to him.

That glower of his sends a shiver through me that ends right between my legs.

What the nuts? I didn't just think that.

I didn't find this man attractive in the least when I first saw him, but maybe I was just getting over my surprise at him being nothing like I thought he would be and looking nothing like I thought he would. I did say he has an interesting face, and that's still true. I want to keep looking at him. And looking. And—

“I think your eggs are turning to char.”

“Frick!” Yup, he's right. They're burnt. Exceptionally burnt. It only took a few extra seconds of me not paying attention for them to burn. This gas thing is hecking potent.

I turn the burner down. The flames seem to go nowhere and are just as hungry for the pan. Hmphf. Whatever. I'm going to try again. I'm stubborn like that.

“How do you like your eggs?” I ask.

“Just like that,” he replies.

“No.” I was going to locate the trash can and feed it the eggs. I hate wasting, but these aren't edible.

“Yes. Please.”

“You don’t have to take one for the team,” I say firmly.

He lifts a shoulder in a shrug, walks over to the impressive fridge, and finds the hot sauce. The bottle gets a hard shake before he sets it down on the concrete top next to the plates I set out. “Food is food. I don’t care much about what it tastes like. It’s only to fill a void.”

“Oh, you’re one of those. Is that from a long force of habit, your training, or the way you actually feel about eating?”

He looks surprised for all of a nanosecond before the glower returns, obscuring whatever he might be feeling. I’ve already learned that with my husband, the less emotion he feels, the better he thinks it is.

“I’ll eat them,” he says insistently.

“Let me cook you something else too. To make up for that. They’re nasty.”

The fridge doesn’t have much in it. Just a package of steaks, a head of lettuce, a few peppers, a cucumber, and a thing of strawberries in the crisper. Then, a loaf of sliced bread on the top shelf, a gallon of milk near the back, a few sauces in the door, and a thing of orange juice there too. I’ve already pulled out the carton of eggs.

Patrick pulls out the loaf of bread, sniffs it, does that shrugging thing again, and throws two slices into the stainless steel retro toaster on the counter.

I finally scrape the nasty eggs onto a plate since he’s not going to let me waste them—I don’t want to argue over it—and crack two fresh ones in. I have the heat lower this time. If I break the yolks, I’ll eat them scrambled, but I’m not going to

burn them.

Just then, the toaster pops up, and the toast gets tossed onto the plate. It's not even another second before Patrick sets to work on it, shoveling hot-sauce-coated eggs into his mouth like there isn't going to be another chance to eat burned eggs and super dry toast ever again.

There isn't any yolk to sop up, but he cleans the plate of the hot sauce with a piece of crust.

I swear he's done in less than three seconds.

“Whoa. Uh...”

“Flip those. They’re going to burn,” he interrupts.

Damn it, he’s right. I get both eggs turned over without breaking the yolks. They’re perfect. I have to pay attention instead of watching him. But it’s hard. I’m suddenly very interested in everything about this man that I’m now legally wed to, for the better of two weeks or for worse. If that’s the best joke I can make, I’m really losing my touch. I haven’t had a lot to laugh about over the past year, so it makes sense that I’m ultra-rusty.

Before I can offer some decent eggs to Patrick, he’s at the fridge, slamming back half the container of OJ. He lets out the softest ahhhh after, like he’s just quenched a massive thirst, and tucks it back into the door.

“I was thinking about doing some grocery shopping later. Is there anything you’d like me to get?” I ask.

“I have everything I need,” he says.

Okay. The fridge is mostly empty, and the cupboards are probably not much better.

I get the eggs onto a plate. They’re perfection. Absolute perfection. I should have started the toast already, but I’m shit at getting everything done at once. That’s the hardest part about cooking. All the timing.

I take out the loaf Patrick just had, and it smells freaking earthy as soon as I open the

bag. I wrinkle my nose up when I realize it's moldy. And not just a little. There's, like, serious mold on it. Jesus, he really ate that?

He moves around the kitchen like I'm not even there. I close the fridge, grab my eggs, and watch him, though I try to pretend like I'm not. If he cares that I'm not a very good actress, he doesn't let on.

A package of coffee beans comes out of the cupboard. It's not some run-of-the-mill, gut-busting, nasty coffee one buys on a shoestring budget. This stuff looks expensive. A drawing of an orange and white fluffy cat on the bag gives two paws up.

After pouring beans into a grinder that he sets on the counter, he puts the lid on and hits the switch. He gives it just a few seconds to grind, then stops it. Then, a press comes down out of the same cupboard. I'm fascinated as I watch the whole process. Next, he takes a jug of distilled water out of the large pantry cupboard at the end and pours it into a retro-looking kettle that matches the toaster with its sleek stainless look. It kind of looks like an ancient rocket ship to me.

Patrick will devour burned eggs and moldy bread, but he won't drink tap water in his coffee? That's interesting. He appears to be a coffee snob.

I'm done with my eggs—and god lord, they were so much more delicious than they usually are—by the time the kettle clicks off. Observing Patrick using the French press with the boiling water and those grounds is almost like watching a scientist working in a lab.

He takes two mugs out of the cupboard. The dish set is plain matte black, and they're chunky and heavy. The mugs aren't tall. They're just run-of-the-mill. He pours one and then makes a second mug. Without a word, he sets it on the counter in front of me.

I can't drink coffee without cream and sugar, and that stuff smells bold.

It's also ungodly hot, but he picks up the mug and takes a long pull like it's not going to scald his damned face off.

If there's no cream, I can deal with milk. I get the jug out, but as soon as I twist the cap off, I can smell how sour it is. I move to dump it down the sink, but Patrick hurries over to me like a wraith, takes it from me, puts the cap back on, and tucks it back in its place. Then, he produces a pack of something out of the pantry. Powdered milk.

He does all this like it is his regular routine. He has to eat. Is he eating stuff like this all the time? Rotten food? Spoiled milk? Was this the kind of thing he had to do over the past few years? And if it's a yes, then it means Jace had to live the same way. It makes me want to cry.

No shit. It's going to happen. My eyes are burning, and I know the tears are going to become a reality. I can't hug my brother, and this man isn't him, but I have the strongest urge to walk across the kitchen, wrap my arms around his rigid figure as he does the cross-armed—please god, not a hug because I'll melt if you try that on me—thing, and hug the shit out of him anyway. I want to tell him I'm sorry, I'll get groceries, and that he doesn't have to live like this anymore.

I know that sometimes, after a lifetime of living rough, people can't even sleep in a bed anymore. They have to lie on the floor to be able to fall asleep. Whenever Jace came back to visit, he didn't sleep much at all. I'd find him up all the time. Does Patrick even sleep at all? He must. No one can live without sleeping.

I pour a little bit of the powdered milk from the bag into the coffee. It's clumpy, so I stir it with the fork that I just licked clean. My first sip is pretty much like straight-up chewing coffee beans, but aside from it being an exceptionally dark roast, there are

hints of caramel and chocolate in there too. It's bitter enough to pucker a butthole, but really, it's not that bad.

"I need to get groceries for myself, but if you let me know what you like, I can pick it up too."

He grunts. I'm not sure if that means he's annoyed or if it means he doesn't know what he likes. I mean, he has to, right? It's been a year and a half since he got out of doing whatever he was doing. It bothers me to think about anyone subsisting on this kind of diet. Well, maybe he doesn't. Maybe he just doesn't like to waste, but good lord, there should be a line. And I'm drawing it. Those shit from the fridge are getting snuck into the trash can as soon as I get home with replacements, and if there's wrath to be faced, then I'll face it.

"Patrick." I can see the dead gardens through the kitchen window. He starts like I've set off a firecracker right next to him. He ate all that nasty stuff with a straight face, but now it looks like he's tasted something that's an eleven out of ten on the nasty scale.

"Rick please. Not Patrick. I hate that fucking name."

"Rick. Can I ask you something?" His eyes say no. He tenses. "Do you have a hate for flowers, or are you just really bad at keeping things alive?"

"Yes." His face blanks out. It's like watching water go down a drain, and then that drain slams shut.

"Which one?"

"Both." He turns around, coffee in hand. After a few hard swallows, he sets the mug down. It sounds empty.

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“Isn’t letting something that was so incredible go to waste—”

“Incredibly vindictive and absolutely satisfying but ultimately quite juvenile? Yes, probably.” He pivots slowly. I have no idea what my face is doing until he rolls his eyes. “Don’t look so shocked. I’m not above admitting my flaws. And there are many.” His throat bobs as he swallows. “What would a man like me do with flowers?” That’s gentler and so, so raw. I don’t know why it makes my throat feel thick.

“What wouldn’t you do with them? They’re beautiful,” I say.

“What if they remind you of something you want to forget?”

“What do you want to forget?” I know he’s not going to tell me, but we’ve come this far. It’s a tense conversation. The kitchen is suddenly strung tight, and it feels like I left the gas running on the stove. Explosive.

“The things I never had.”

That slipped out. I can tell. His face now looks like the gross scale has rocked up to a twenty out of ten. I drop my eyes away from his because looking a feral beast in the eye isn’t a smart idea. I take in his all-black attire. It fits him well. He’s so freaking broad that it’s almost hard for me to grasp. He does look nice this morning, in that I’m dressed in black, ready to complete the mission and fuck things upway.

I didn’t stand here and demand that he answer me. He volunteered that information, but I know better than to press on it.

“Would you mind if I went out there and spent some time cleaning things up? Sometimes, I need methodical work to take my mind off of other things. The more physically punishing, the better.” I ask his chest that question since I can’t meet his gaze.

“That’s fine.” He sounds dismissive. “Just don’t plant anything new. I’ll only let it die.”

He sets his mug in the sink and walks out of the kitchen. Walks. Not storms. I don’t think he’s angry. Not with me. But I do think he’s hurting.

Don’t get sappy. You’re not here to fix him. Even if you were, what could you accomplish in two weeks?

I hadn’t planned on planting anything. I understood the futility of that before I even tried. I’m no gardener. My parents had a small yard, and my mom did plant flowers in pots, but that was her thing, and I really didn’t help much with it. I just enjoyed all the pretty things she grew. At my apartment, I don’t even have a balcony. I have no houseplants. Maybe I should. Maybe I should get a fish so I wouldn’t have to name my footwear and give them personalities.

Don’t say my life is sad. Because it’s not sad. It’s just something I’ve always done for fun, and no, not that kind of fun. I do know how to have real fun too.

I grasp the coffee mug and head over to the massive patio door at the far side of the kitchen. I’m surprised the backyard doesn’t have a pool or a tennis court since it’s big enough. Sadly, it doesn’t. It’s just an endless garden. Endless ruin and endless brown, twisted deadness.

Anything you plant out here, you can’t take with you anyway.

I know that. I freaking know.

You can't take anything of that man with you either, so don't even bother with that nonsense.

Maybe my footwear is wiser than I ever knew. Kidding. I really am kidding. It's all me, just talking to myself in regular thought speech, however our thoughts sound. I guess it just sounds like my own speaking voice. Anyway, I'm right. I'm the wise one. It's very, very good advice, and I'll be sure to remember it when my chest feels like my ribs are getting smushed and stomped on over moldy bread, sour milk, and dead flowers.

Chapter five

Rick

She's been out there all day.

I should be the kind of man who goes out and helps her. I almost did, a few times, when I heard the cursing and watched Aspen nearly stumble and fall over her feet more than a few times. But I held back. Since then, I've spent the better part of a few hours from the office upstairs watching her kick things around in her flip-flops, curse endlessly, shake her fists at inanimate objects, get into wrestling matches with dried-up old vines, and have a near screaming match with the tree she was trying to prune.

Aspen found the little garden shed with all the tools at the far end of the yard. Rakes, shears, shovels—they're scattered all over back there. I went upstairs to the office as soon as she went outside. Cracking open a window shouldn't have been as delightful as it ended up being, but I haven't been able to concentrate on anything. It's hard when you have someone cursing up such a creative storm outside.

“You farfing meatball brain of a fucksickle! If you don’t come down right now, I’m going to get the chainsaw and finish you off, I swear!”

I lean forward a few inches. She’s trying to prune one of the larger trees. It looks mostly dead, so cutting it down might not be such a bad idea. She’s really struggling since she’s standing on the ground and trying to cut some of the straggly limbs with a tool that looks like it would be better suited to medieval torture.

Do we even have a chainsaw? I don’t think so. And by we, I mean me. It’s just hard for me to think of this place as mine. I never wanted it. I still don’t. I can’t wait until the day I can get rid of it. Some days, I want to trash the whole thing, but that would be counterproductive to the sales aspect.

Aspen is spirited. I’ll give her that.

Alright, she’s beautiful.

And watching her discreetly from up here has made me have to adjust myself in my jeans three times already, and it’s only been a few hours. I’ve cycled between a dick so painfully hard that my jeans are crushing it to giving a stern lecture to myself that makes it go semi-hard, to shifting my gaze back to her lithe, fit little body with all those lovely curves attacking my backyard, which made me hard as steel again.

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“Alright, that’s it. It’s the chainsaw for you, dearie. I’m sorry, but you have to come down.”

My dick doesn’t give a shit. He punches at my fly like he’d welcome a fight with that whirring-chained mothersawer.

I keep telling myself that If I were a gentleman, I’d go out and help her.

But I’m no savior. I’m no gentleman. I don’t even want this. She shouldn’t be here.

“It’s time, sweetheart. It’s time.”

Oh, shit!

There’s Aspen, coming out of the garden shed, which looks more like a second small house in the yard with all weird square angles like the big house, holding an actual freaking chainsaw. A real one, not one of those much lower-powered plug-in things.

She drops it on the ground, tears the cover off the blade, then picks it up again and studies it, her nose crinkled.

I asked you to look after my sister, not let her maim herself cleaning up your mess of a yard, dickweed.

I can practically hear Jace in my head.

I shoot out of my chair and nearly collapse on the floor. It feels like I’ve been dick

punched. What the hell? I fall on my side, gasping. I'm sure my face is ten thousand degrees, redder than red, but all I care about is the violent pain shooting through my groin.

These jeans are normally not so tight.

I'm normally not as hard as a steel pipe in them.

Sex hasn't been a priority for me in years. Too busy staying alive, I guess, to worry about things like that.

But I'm worried about it now.

For the love of mac and cheese, my jeans have trapped my dick. They've eaten my dick, and they're not letting go. I've had a lot of painful things happen to me, but this...this is the worst that I can remember in recent history. Never underestimate the crippling effects of a penile injury. It's a little bit like chopping your own foot off. With a spoon.

Should I try to sack myself?

No. I should undo the zipper and—

No. What the hell am I thinking? It's quite possible that I'm not because my brain has been utterly obliterated.

Am I drooling? Shit, I think I'm drooling. There's wetness on the floor below my mouth. Yup, that's me. Salivating all over the place because I'm going to start gagging right away, and my spit has nowhere to go when it wants to all come up so badly. I barely tasted those eggs earlier, but I don't want them to make a reappearance and give me a chance to appreciate just how blackened they were.

I flop onto my back, and there.

My jeans shift just enough that their toothy maws of eternal sharklike destruction finally release my man meat. It feels like a chewed-up sausage at this point, but when I fumble with the button, tear open the fly, and run my hand down my length overtop my boxers, I find that it's in one piece. There's no blood or anything. Thank god. Because it feels bloody. It feels destroyed.

“Mother of grilled cheese!”

You have got to be kidding me right now.

How? How long has she been standing there?

Not long, I guess, because Aspen whips around while I race to get my jeans done up. My dick still feels bruised, and shoving it back in there feels like stuffing it into the maw of a mulcher. I very nearly make a noise of pain, but I bite it back, even if my stomach spins a circle and I taste bitter bile at the back of my throat.

“This isn't what it looks like.” I force myself to zip up and get into a crouch. I can barely face her.

“Yeah...” She clears her throat. “You weren't just rubbing one out on the floor of your office or anything.” It looks like she just licked a lemon's asshole. “We'll go with that because I can't imagine what you would have been doing otherwise, and I honestly don't want to know.”

“I was having an issue!”

“With your...with your wiener?”

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Jace would kill me for discussing my wiener with his little sister.

Or...would he?

In his letter, he did write that he wanted us to get married. That he couldn't imagine two people better for each other than us. After I left, he must have taken some hard hits to the head.

"It was pinched, okay? My jeans...they trapped it at a bad angle. It felt like it was being amputated. I had to free it and then check for damage."

She quirks a brow. "So you weren't rubbing one out?"

I cannot crouch here and have this conversation without straight-up dying.

Neither of us looks at the other for a long beat of silence. The office is a thousand degrees of magma-hot humiliation.

"Erm, okay, so you were having a medical emergency. Alright, fair enough. Has it been resolved now?" she asks.

My dick is still hard through all of it, so I guess that means it's still functioning. "I'm fine." Other than the pain throbbing through it. Was that happening before the jaws of steel incident?

"Alright. That's...that's good. I just came up here because I need the chainsaw, and it's not working. I swear it's probably the carb. Isn't it always the carb on small

motors?”

My head shoots up. “You know about small motors?” No, that’s not a turn-on. That is not a turn-on in the least. Though my dick says otherwise. It’s now screaming hard, and not just because of its recent brush with denim death.

“It’s just something I’ve heard my dad complain about over the years, although I did take motors in high school in shop class. But that was a hot minute ago, and I don’t think I can take that thing apart on my own.”

Is now the right time to tell her that she’s certainly not going to use that chainsaw? That would be a no. If she’s anything like Jace, telling her she can’t do something is a surefire way for her to lose a limb trying to prove she can.

“Could I take a look at what you’re trying to cut down? Maybe it can be saved. Maybe I should call someone.”

“Someone like a gardener or a team of professional landscapers? That would probably be a good idea. It’s disastrous down there. It’s so, so freaking sad. I think it must have been beautiful. I...oh.” She stops, and when I look at her again, she’s studying me. Hard. She’s remembering what I should never have blurted out earlier, down there in the kitchen. I don’t know what I was thinking. One sniff of compassion, and I lose my freaking mind? Keeping this girl at arm’s length is what I need to do, and I can never forget that. I’m no good for her. No. Good. At. All. “Even if you don’t want gardens, I think someone might have to come and clean it up properly. I put real effort into it, but I barely made a dent, and I don’t want to make things worse. If you don’t want gardens, you could just cultivate, uh...a lawn?”

“Or a pool,” I add.

My grandfather absolutely abhorred pools.

Aspen brightens. She's sweaty, and there are streaks of dirt on her forehead and jawline that I'm just noticing now. I'm also struggling against noticing how her clothes are clinging damply to her body like she just had a humid, hard workout bath out there. The bits of dead leaf matter in her wheat-colored braid do nothing to detract from her hair's shiny, lush allure.

I bet she still smells good.

Maybe even better for being sweaty.

Get it the fuck together right the fuck now.

"I think the pool will add value to the house whenever you decide to sell it," she says cautiously. "Plus, it's California. Doesn't everyone have a pool?"

It's decided then. A pool it is. "I'll call a team to come in and start clearing the place out."

"Alright, well, it's your house and your decision. I'm going to go and take a shower."

I should just let her go, but for some reason, I have to blurt the most embarrassing thing I could ever say at her retreating back. "I really wasn't twizzling my bacon up here."

"Garp." That would be her choking on her own spit. "Yeah," she coughs. "I believe you."

She races away, and goodness help me, I don't know if she really believes me or not, but I've just embarrassed us both thirty-four times more than if I had just let it go.

I jump up, grab my phone, and nearly keel over as I swear my dick gets a cramp from

being cramped in my jeans. They're not even that tight. I don't know what's going on. I think the only medical emergency with erections is when you've had one for longer than a day?

I dial the first landscaping company I find after doing a quick search. I don't care if they have a zero-star review. They can come and get rid of everything out there, and it would be a vast improvement to the place.

After they promise me a crew within a few hours, I fall back onto my chair.

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I take the first deep breath I've taken in years.

Someone is going to come and wreck the place, and then it's going to be transformed. It's going to be changed. It's going to go from something a man—a man who should have wanted me, cared for me, and loved me—loved a thousand times more to something he would have abhorred, and I couldn't be happier.

I don't know why I didn't think of doing it before.

And now that I've started, what else can I tear down, get rid of, and transform in here?

Chapter six

Aspen

“What the nuts is going on down here?”

I woke up to an extraordinary amount of clanging, banging, grunts, and curses. It sounded a lot like me in the backyard yesterday. I threw on my possum T-shirt and a pair of jeans and went flying down the stairs, only to find Rick literally ripping apart the house.

Off to the left in the living room is a giant pile of stuff—statues, artwork, end tables, a couch shoved onto its side. The giant pile of stuff is so big that it looks like a mountain.

Rick drags a huge vase across the room and adds it to the pile. His grin is enough to straight-up give me a whole-body brain freeze. It's so chilling. It's not a nice grin. It's all teeth and feral bite. He looks like a mean old dog who has never been gentled by soft pets or affection of any kind.

He does answer me though. "Remodeling."

"Oh." I suppose I can accept that. And if he didn't look ninety percent feral, I could doubly accept it.

I stand on the far side of the room and watch him as he grabs the loveseat that matches the couch and heaves it up so it doesn't scrape along the floor. I can't imagine how heavy that thing is. It looks like it has some serious weight, and he lifts it like it's nothing.

I can see the dark patches on his shirt after he gets it over to the pile and turns it onto its side like the couch so that it takes up less room. Beads of sweat glisten on his forehead and roll down his temples. The dark smudges under his eyes don't look fresh. They look like they might have been there for a while. As in more than a few sleepless nights.

I'm surly when I don't sleep too.

I get that the backyard is a sore spot, but Rick seems genuinely excited about the pool. It's like a fire was lit under him yesterday. After I showered, I took one of his cars out to get groceries. He insisted that I return the rental and stay with him since wasting money I don't have on both of those things when he has plenty of room and an extra vehicle was silly. He was right. Since I'm technically jobless, I took him up on it. His car probably cost a hundred grand. It was all shiny and black, and it had that ultra-luxury feel to it. It also had almost no miles on the odometer, which made me extra nervous about driving it. When I got back, I found Rick feverishly pacing

the backyard with what appeared to be two different crews. There was a landscaping truck in front of the house, but the van was unmarked, so I figured they were likely the pool people.

I didn't realize my interference in the backyard would wake him up in other ways.

Meaning in a destroying the interior of the house sort of way.

Although cleaning out the stuff he doesn't like isn't destroying anything.

"Rick?"

He acts like he doesn't hear me. A huge painting comes off the wall, and he marches it across to the pile. The room is almost bare now.

"Rick!" His head snaps up, and he looks at me like he forgot I was even here. "You aren't going to throw all that stuff out, are you?"

"No. I phoned a few charities. They're coming to pick it up in an hour, so I want to make sure it's ready to go for them."

"You're just donating it? That painting on top looks like it's worth a lot of money."

"Relax. I know this crap is worth a small fortune. I'm donating it to places that can sell it through auctions or fundraisers and use the money. I did some research last night. Believe me, I want to pitch all of them out, and slamming that chainsaw through the couch and dropping statues down from the top floor is incredibly tempting, but I'm behaving. It would be such a waste, and I can't stand that. I lived through some lean years and it's not right, however satisfying it might be."

"Yes. You said that. Satisfying but childish."

“The level of wrong would haunt me. It wouldn’t make up for the momentary satisfaction.”

“If you want to wreck something, I think there are places you can go where you can throw plates. Or axes. Or drive fast cars that you’ve rented.”

“Hmph.”

The painting on the far wall comes down next. He sets it in the pile and then rolls up the rug that was in the middle of the room.

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“Are you going to order some other furniture?” I ask.

This time, the look he gives me is completely mystified and baffled. Like he hadn’t even considered it.

“The house might sell better if it’s furnished.”

His shrug is followed up with a humorless laugh. “Then I have time.”

“Do you have time to stop and have breakfast?”

“Nope.”

Now, I give him the same snort he gave me a few minutes ago. “I’ll wait until you’re finished then before I make us something.”

“Not hungry,” he grunts.

“Did you eat?”

“Nope.”

Now isn’t the time for a hunger strike. Or being too busy to eat or sleep properly. I’m still not convinced he does. Sleep, I mean.

“Okay, well, I’m going to make us something. You can keep going, and I’ll make sure it’s portable and quick. And I’ll brew coffee.”

“For the love of snake bottoms, do not brew coffee. I’ll do that.”

Is this man a coffee snob? He took his time with it yesterday. But whatever he made was hands down the strongest, darkest, and best coffee I’ve ever had in my life.

Technically, that’s not a hard no on the breakfast, so maybe he’s hungry, and he just forgot. Or he’s used to going without, denying himself, and not attending to his body’s needs. I know what he did for a living. I get how those habits can become so ingrained that they’re hard to break.

It still gives my chest a little pinch that I can’t work out, even in the kitchen.

I bought fresh bread yesterday. I also bought condiments and stuff for the pantry, the fridge, the freezer, and cream for coffee, thank sweet snake butts. Do snakes even have butts? I suppose they must because they need to poop somehow. They don’t just shed it like their skins. Rick gave me his credit card yesterday. I had to ask him for his car keys, and when he found out what I was going to do, he insisted on paying for the stuff, so I wasn’t shy about restocking.

I could make something gourmet, but I promised fast and portable, so I go for peanut butter and banana sandwiches with strawberries on the side. I can eat a whole sandwich, and Rick is a big guy, so I make his sandwich a double-decker with four slices of bread and layers of peanut butter and banana slices in between.

Part of Jace’s letter comes back to me as I layer on the peanut butter goodness.

He’ll act tough. So tough. Sometimes it’s legit, and sometimes it’s not. Don’t believe him when he says he’s okay. Don’t believe him when he pretends to be a jerk. He’s good shit through and through. Salt of the earth, if I’ve ever known salt. And I know salt. It’s the spice of life. Please. I know it might not look like he needs it, but he does. If all else fails, promise me you’ll still look after my best friend because if

you're reading this, then it means I can't. I love you, Ass-pen, more than you could ever know. I'm so proud of you. I know you'll keep me alive in your memory, forever and always, and I'm so sorry you have to do that. That you all have to do that.

Shit, I curse mentally.

I don't want this sandwich to turn into peanut butter, banana, and tears. I don't know about the salt of the earth where I'm concerned, but we're probably salty enough without an extra helping of it.

I got out of bed in a hurry this morning. Today, there was no time for anything, and since I don't normally bother with makeup, it makes it easy to splash water from the tap on my face. I blot it dry with a tea towel.

"Here." I present Rick with a dry face, a shaky smile, and one mother-of-a-beast sandwich. It's almost as big as that pile of furniture.

He freezes and eyes the sandwich like it's a monster he's going to have to slay. I've cut it into four pieces. He takes the first huge piece and opens his mouth.

"No!" I exclaim. He nearly drops it because I've startled him so badly.

"Good...just—what?"

"Don't ram it down your gullet like yesterday. This isn't nasty old bread, and there's no hurry. Take a breath, taste it. It's good. Plus, the peanut butter might stick when you try to force it all down in a single gulp, and if you choke, I don't know how to perform the Heimlich."

I prepare myself for an argument, but he takes the smallest bite right from the middle. There's no crust. It's just all peanut butter and bananas. He makes a sound. A grunt. I

think it's a good sound.

“Right? It's pretty much heaven. My mom used to make this for me. Sometimes, she'd grill it in the frying pan and then give me chocolate sauce to dip it in, but that's not quick or portable, so you get this version.”

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Despite my warning, he takes the plate from me, polishes off the sandwich, and practically inhales the strawberries. Then, when he's done, he doesn't have any qualms about passing the plate back. He never thanks me and doesn't admit it's good or that he did need to eat and he now feels better, thank you. Which is okay with me. I'm not here for thanks. I'm not here for me. I'm here because Jace wanted me to be here.

"So you really don't like all this stuff that much?" I ask as I bite into my sandwich and chew slowly.

Rick grunts. "Not my taste."

"The couches were a little bit hard," I admit.

"They're shite. It's all shite. Expensive, needless, useless shite. Do I like any of it? No, I don't. I hate the inside of this place as much as I hated those gardens out there. I might be an asshole for letting them die, but fuck it. It's done."

I don't think he'll appreciate it if I straight-up ask him if he's okay. Because clearly, he's not. He has some trauma about his grandpa and the house, the gardens, and the things in it. All expensive things.

"What happened to your grandma?"

Rick freezes with a sculpture in his hands. It's abstract, a series of metal twists interlocked through each other. "She died before I was born."

“What about your parents?” I’m pushing too hard and being rude. Yet somehow, I think this is the only approach he’ll tolerate.

“They died too,” he answers.

I swallow hard. The peanut butter is really sticking my mouth together. It makes my throat so damn dry. “How?”

“Boating accident. They were partying on a yacht with some other rich people. They left me at home with a nanny, I guess. I was only a few months old. I don’t hold it against them. They loved me, or so I’ve been told, and it was in that way that someone who has never had a real emotion in his life and who loves things more than people, even his own flesh and blood, blurted it out without any understanding of it, so I knew it was the truth. Whoever was in charge of the thing didn’t put proper lights on. Also, they were drunk and didn’t do half the shit they were supposed to do. They got hit. There were eight people there, and they all died.”

“What? Oh my god! I’m so sorry.” My hands shake, and I’m worried I’m going to drop the plates, mine with his stacked under it.

He lifts a shoulder. “As I said, I was only a few months old.”

“But...who raised you then? Your grandpa? He sounds like a feral old fuck!”

His lips twitch. “Feral old fuck. That’s probably the most accurate description I ever heard. No, he didn’t raise me. He was supposed to, but he had nannies for that, then boarding school, and right after that, I did the last thing he ever wanted me to do. I joined the military. I thought, fuck him. Fuck him and his last hope for a dynasty or legacy or whatever. By the time he pulled me out of it, he was long retired. There’s no company to run now. Just this house and all his investments. He made it about as convoluted for me to get rid of as he could so I wouldn’t just donate it all in a fit of

rage before I came back to myself. I'm never coming back, for the record."

"What are you going to do? Sell all of this and give the money away and just go back to being Special Forces?"

"Nah." There's no emotion on his face. He's so good at hiding it. I know he has to feel something. Jace was never like this when he came home. But maybe Rick always was, even before he joined up. It sounded like his childhood was horrible, and all the years after weren't very good either. He probably never knew any real family or friendships until he found the military. "I'm done with that."

I feel like I've just pressed the softest spot of my chest to the flame on a stove. I can't imagine a man who doesn't care about his family. Not Patrick's parents or a little kid who so badly needed someone to love him. Maybe it was the loss that crippled him. Maybe he just couldn't deal with it. My family is so close, but we've all needed time and space after Jace passed. Regardless, we still care. We still love. We are all just hurting. I feel a tremendous amount of guilt thinking about Jace's mom. I haven't called or texted her in a month, and I used to do it far more regularly. She was a part of my life before. Not the way my parents are, but I would often see her when Jace was home, and even when he wasn't. We'd sometimes have breakfast or lunch together, and she often texted, even if it was just silly photos or a how's your day going message.

I face Rick with as much courage as I can. I don't want to give him pity. Even Jace would have hated that. Grown men don't like being looked at like they're broken, or they need some taking care of. Rick doesn't need to be mended. He needs...he needs what Jace asked me to do. He needs some looking after. Maybe that means being a friend right now. He's telling me this stuff, and I imagine not many people get the insider look at his life.

Even if he is telling me the saddest, most emotional story without so much as

showing a single emotion.

“What are you going to do then? If you don’t go back.”

“I don’t rightly know.”

I can’t help it. I look at the pile. “Maybe you shouldn’t donate all of it. Maybe you should keep a little bit as a contingency until you figure it out.”

“Sweetheart, there’s billions. It’s from shares I was left with.”

I can’t help it. This time, I do drop the plates. My sandwich goes flying, and the plates clatter to the hardwood, though neither of them smash. They’re built thick and heavy. If anything, I probably just damaged the floor.

“O—oh.” I do a mad scramble to scoop up the plates.

I don’t know what to do with myself. I don’t know what to say. I’ve never met anyone who doesn’t give a shit about this kind of thing. I’ve never met a billionaire before. Gah, I’m in a marriage of convenience with one.

Holy ball sacks.

I straighten up slowly, gripping the heavy, indestructible plates. I’m a mess. I want to cry for Rick and then he just dropped that bombshell on me right after the first one. “Can I get you another sandwich?” He’s going to say no. That first one was huge. He obviously wants to get back to purging this house of all the bad memories. Of the things that the man who was supposed to love him chose over opening his heart and doing just that.

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“Sure, yeah. It was good.” He walks over and traces the arm of a statue. It looks like one of those fancy-draped goddesses. It could be old. With money like that, it could be thousands of years old. My hands start shaking. I don’t want to drop the plates again. He doesn’t look at me, but something in the room has changed. There’s a weird new energy in here with us and the mountain of stuff that could be worth millions. “Can you fry it this time?”

“In the deep fryer?”

He nods. “Like a grilled cheese.”

“Oh. Yes. My mom used to do that. I was debating about it. I don’t have any chocolate sauce for dipping, though. I also make an equally good grilled sandwich with jam and cream cheese. Kind of like a bush pie but raunchier. And by raunchier, I mean just a shade not as good, but still amazing. I bought cream cheese and jam. I could make one.”

“Both? If you wouldn’t mind?”

I know what a difference the little things can make. I’m not going to go around the house and pull things off the walls or hurtle them out of corners to make them gone. That’s for Rick to do. It might sound weird, but I think he needs this to make peace and heal. I can’t do that, and I can’t offer words either because that’s not what he needs. But sandwiches? Darn it, I can make a mean sandwich.

Sometimes, showing someone you care is as simple as feeding them. “I don’t mind at all.”

Chapter seven

Rick

Ahhh, night. So peaceful and quiet. Stars and moonlight, romanticism, mystical, lovely dark night.

Yeah fucking right.

Night hasn't been a thing of beauty for me in a long time. Not sure it ever was. I do remember a time as a kid when I was scared of it. Scared of the dark, scared of my own endless thoughts that would never shut off. I guess in that way, I haven't changed much. A lot of tactical shit is carried out at night when you're in the military. Then there was Special Forces, and yeah, not a lot of sleeping happened, especially not in the dark. Dark is a cover. A mask. The dark hides so much.

Peaceful?

No, I don't find it peaceful.

I'm a shit sleeper at best. I only need a few hours here and there, which I usually get in the very early hours of the morning. Mission complete. Mission over. Or in the late hours of the afternoon. Before go time.

Now, there is no go time anymore. No more missions.

However, I still can't sleep.

There aren't any stars in the city. There's too much smog and light pollution. The city isn't quiet or peaceful. There are always cars. Always people up. People like me. People who don't use the cover of dark for rest. They work, they play, and they carry

out their whole lives in the dark.

I boil the kettle, then let the water sit for a few minutes to cool off until it's at the perfect temperature. I can tell just by looking at it. I'm good at counting down the minutes with my internal clock. It used to be used for missions. In places where a mistake could be fatal. And where an extra minute or even a few extra seconds gone wrong could cost a life. No lives tonight, though. Just coffee.

I pour the hot water into the press and let it brew. There's probably only one thing I'm truly addicted to in life, and that's good coffee. I went so many years without it. There were never care packages from home. Never like what the other guys got. Jace, though, he knew. He knew about my coffee snobbery, so he started getting his mom to get me the beans I liked. And she'd send them over. I don't know how he figured it out because, at best, the java we drank was usually about as good as toilet water. I won't ever forget the day he shyly offered me the package of beans.

"Jesus, man. Getting sentimental over coffee here. That's what lack of sleep does for you."

Apparently, it also does for me in the form of talking to myself.

I pour myself a mug and drink it standing. It's bitter as hell and goes down just right. It also burns a little when it hits my stomach because it's been more than a few hours since Aspen made dinner. She made pasta with buttery, garlicky shrimp, some cream sauce she made from scratch, and asparagus that she perfectly charred.

She has spent the past three days feeding me while I've spent it cleaning out this house.

There are a lot of rooms, so it takes some organization and research to find the right places for the stuff to go to. I act like I don't care, but I want someone to make good

use of it, and if the money is going to help other people, then that does matter to me.

Aspen's early misadventure with the burned eggs hasn't been repeated. I'm so used to eating food and not even tasting it, but the things she's made over the past few days have changed all of that. I'm starting to be one of those people who actually feel hunger...and feel it with some anticipation. My training is deserting me, and it's not even happening slowly.

Right now, my mind flashes to a painting at the top of the stairs that's been driving me nuts.

I finish my first cup of coffee and try not to think about it. Then, I finish a second. And a third.

If it's weird to be tanking down the blackest, strongest java at just past two in the morning, I wouldn't know. I'm not going to sleep anyway. I'm not doing this because I don't want to pass out. I'm doing it because I don't want to dream. Because I don't want to go back there. If I dream the right dream, I will like it, but there's plenty of shit I wouldn't like to relive. I'm not afraid of the nightmares because I hardly ever have them, but when I do? The good, the bad...it's just a part of who I am. Of what I've done. I know there's no going back. But what about going forward?

What now?

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The question, asked in Aspen's innocent, sweet voice, haunts me.

That painting. That damn painting.

I tried to reach it with a ladder yesterday, but the ladder wasn't tall enough, and I don't have another one. The stairs going up meet in this weird bend in the middle. The ceilings are so high, and someone mounted that beast of a painting way too far up. It looks awkward. It always has. There were others below it, but I've plucked those off and sent them away as part of yesterday's pile. That one is going to one of the hospitals here that puts on an annual charity auction every winter.

I know it's the middle of the night, but I'm quiet. I find myself standing on the first stair and looking up at the beastly beast. It's even more awkward now, marooned up there on the wall without anything to bracket it. It didn't make sense before and it's a thousand times worse now.

"Ugh. You won't make a mockery of me," I grumble.

I could go out and get a taller ladder. Or order one in. I could also hire someone to get the damn thing off the wall. But that would all have to be done during the daylight hours, and I want it downright now. Maybe I've had too much coffee, and it's late. Or maybe it's the lack of sleep and the past few days rolled into one moment. It could be a lifetime of training, but then I decide right here and now that I will not be defeated. Least of all, by that ugly monolith. It is slashes of black paint on a white background in a black frame. It looks aggressive and mean, and I want it out of this house. I want that wall swept bare.

The ladder is still propped up on the other side of the wall, where I left it after I took the other paintings down. I'm extra quiet retrieving it and setting it up. The stairs might look like they're magically popping out of the wall, but they're the same as any other stairs that jut around at an angle. They have a big landing step, so the ladder fits. Mostly.

I scale it fearlessly, trying not to think about all the other times I've climbed shit. This isn't like those times. I'm just in the house here. No one is going to be shooting at me, and there isn't a big drop at the end. I'm not risking anyone's life if I fuck up.

Well, maybe just mine.

On the top step of the ladder, I pause and look down. Heights don't bother me. I do a quick computation in my coffee-speedy brain. It goes something like the distance from up here down to the ground if I fall to the landing, and then another quick computation of the distance from up here if I fall and miss the landing and go over the side glass railing.

It's still probably not enough to kill me.

I've had worse, honestly.

The top step of a ladder wasn't invented for this kind of use. It's already one of those tall, metal things that unfold like an A. I didn't lean it up against anything, and I don't have anyone holding it, obviously. As I get one combat boot up and then another, it teeters a little. Yes, I still wear them. And yes, I'll probably always wear them. They're not actually military grade. They're just the mean-looking and industrial shit you buy at the shoe store. They wouldn't hold up against much, even if they do have steel toes.

I'm good at breathing, so I use slow in-and-out breathing to steady myself. If I stretch

out from here, I can almost brush my fingers along the bottom edge of the frame. Even if I knock it off the wall, it can probably be repaired. And if not? I'm willing to make that sacrifice. Right now, I am. I need it down.

I nudge the frame with an open hand. I'm not gentle. But it doesn't budge.

With a grunt, I make a closed fist, lean up, and punch the thing.

It doesn't shift up or sway. What the hell is that thing hung with? Concrete anchors?

I give it another good uppercut, yet there's still nothing.

What I do next proves I've had too much coffee and too little sleep because there's no way this is a good idea, but I didn't get into the Special Forces by not taking chances. A regular person wouldn't do this kind of dumb shit, but I'm not a regular person. I'm me, and sometimes, dumb stuff is the only answer. Risks are the only answer.

I crouch down on the ladder, and then I leap.

The ladder kicks out from under me and goes crashing to the side. It hits the wall and not the glass railing, which I figured it would, and then it stops there. It makes a bit of a bang, but it doesn't do much damage. And me? I grab the bottom lip of the frame with both hands and hang.

Yes, I hang off of it.

With all my weight.

The thing still doesn't budge.

It doesn't rip out of the wall. It doesn't even sway.

What the actual fuck?

I swing my legs, kick out, and do all sorts of playground-style maneuvers, but nope. Nothing. The thing has an indomitable spirit, and at this point, I'm sure it will only be removed from the wall by a bulldozer.

The ladder is gone now. It's well below me. It's a pretty drop to the ground, but I can manage it. The problem? The ladder is directly below me. I'll smack straight into it, and that will mess up my landing. Hitting it will hurt, and it will cause some damage to me, the wall, and probably the glass railing.

It's a bit of a pickle, but I'm used to being in pickles of this nature.

Well, not this nature, but worse. Worse nature. I can handle this.

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My adrenaline is flowing pretty well now, and it only takes me a few seconds to compute the angle from here to the stairs beside the ladder. There's a free strip between it and the railing. If I just swing to the side a little and let go, I'll have enough momentum to carry me down. The landing might be awkward. It might sting, and I might lose some skin here and there, but I'll be fine.

I swing. I swing again. Then, I let go.

I don't know what went wrong. Sometimes, shit goes wrong, but this isn't one of those times when it should have or when there's much room for it. And as I'm flying through the air, I realize I've fucked up. Big time.

I catch myself on the top of the railing, just above the glass. It's set into a metal frame, thank freaking goodness, or I'll be fucked to the tune of smashing glass and going straight through. As it is, I almost flip over. Almost. My hand grasps metal. Unfortunately, my body has enough momentum that I'm carried straight over the top, but it's alright because I got myself.

Well, actually, no, I don't have myself.

My hand slips.

I'm now facing a freefall down a good fifteen feet, headfirst.

I can get my hands up. I can get them up and break my fall. Even if I break my arms, I won't break my neck. I'll survive. I—

Don't fall.

The floor doesn't come rushing up at me. The bones in my hands, wrists, and arms don't meet unforgiving hardwood. There's no blood, no crunch, no pain.

Instead, I'm hanging headfirst over the railing, but I'm also suspended. I curl up just enough to realize my jeans got caught in the metal. I've been saved by my jeans.

I let out a huge breath of relief.

But it's too much for my jeans.

"Fuck!" I yelp as my jeans start to give way to gravity. They slip an inch. And then another. The sound of ripping denim is a horror. I feel the air as they give way. Cool air tickling my overheated skin, my back, and the top of my butt cheeks.

Riiipppppppp.

This is it. I get my hands out fast and square them. I have fast reflexes, and all my self-preservation training roars to life.

My jeans give way another inch.

"I've got you!" a voice says as warm, small hands clasp my bottom. Small fingers get a firm hold on my bare ass and hips.

I've been saved again. Even if it is in the most humiliating way.

"What the hell happened?" Aspen pants. Her fingers are like claws in my flesh. On my butt. And I feel like it's going to tear clean off as she throws her weight backward.

I'm a lot to lift up. I'm at least twice her weight, and I've got gravity on my side.

"You're going to tear my arse clean off my body!" I exclaim.

"That's your main worry right now?" she grunts.

"Can you grab my jeans?"

"Oh! Oh, shit!" She does, but she keeps one hand on my hip and ass—her fingers are like steel grappling hooks in my skin—in case I pop clean out of my pants.

She hauls back with all her weight, and the momentum jerks me up an inch. My pelvis digs into glass and metal, and I grit my teeth against the pain. But pain is all mental. It's easily blocked out.

"Were you trying to kill yourself? Because this is not the way!" she adds.

"No! It was clearly an accident."

"How could something like this be an accident?"

"I was trying to get the painting down," I say.

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“What?” She must turn and look behind her because I slip forward an inch.

“Aspen!” I yell.

“Oh god!” She wrenches back hard. Again. And again. I can feel her throwing herself back over and over. She’s so small, but her momentum pulls me back enough that I can finally get my hands under me.

Between her pulling at my butt and jeans and my own brute strength, I slip myself back on the right side of the railing.

It happens so fast that I practically land on top of her.

“Oomph!” We make the same grunting sound at the same time.

I quickly untangle myself, then run my hands over Aspen’s shoulders and arms, hauling her up the best I can into a sitting position to make sure she’s not hurt. She leans back, breathing hard, and her hands shoot out and frantically touch me the same way. Shoulders, arms. Her warm, soft hands send a spark shower through me. I’m already jacked full of adrenaline and caffeine, but this is something more. Something white-hot that makes the hairs on the backs of my arms and neck stand up.

I’m frozen in place, half sitting, half sprawled out, my jeans torn just about clean off my bottom, such that I feel the cold cement of the step beneath me.

“Rick!” Aspen lunges forward and throws her arms around my neck.

I was infused with heat, but now I'm ice cold as she hugs me. Tight.

I can't remember the last time I was hugged. Jace and the rest of the guys weren't the type to do something like this. We slapped each other on the back, shoved a shoulder, or clapped a hand around the neck or the arm. We breathed together whenever we escaped a risky situation intact with our lives. We didn't hug.

Even if we had, Aspen wasn't one of the guys.

Not with her soft breasts slammed up against my chest, round and pert under her T-shirt. She's warm but not sweaty. Not like me. I realize I've soaked my T-shirt. I feel cold and clammy, and I'm stuck like this. I can't move. My chest won't expand to breathe. She hugs me tight, her face pressed to the side of my neck.

"Oh my god," she whispers. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god."

She starts shaking, but my arms are useless at my sides. I should wrap them around her. I should hold her. She's scared. She smells like sleep, fresh air, and terror. I need to hug her back, hold her, and reassure her that nothing happened. I'm not a squashed melon down there at the bottom of the stairs. It's all good. My training won't let me be a squashed melon, but I'm unhurt because of her. We both are.

My best friend's little sister is tougher than she looks, but at her core, she's still sweet and innocent, and she's always going to be that way. She showed up at my doorstep willing to do what her brother asked, no matter how much of a sacrifice it would be. She married me, even though it wasn't the kind of marriage Jace wanted. I know I'm nothing like she anticipated. I know I frustrate her. I know she doesn't understand me and probably doesn't even like me. I hold her at arm's length to keep her safe, and I always will. Through it all, she's kind. If I had gotten hurt tonight, it would have hurt her even more.

I still have no idea what Jace was thinking, trying to give me a partner in this life when I'm the most solitary creature that was ever put into existence.

"Shh." I pat her back. I've never been more awkward. Even half hanging over the railing and caught by my pants with my arse hanging straight out, I was less maladroit. "It's all good. You saved my ass."

Literally.

I try not to think about the fact that I'll have a few bruises where she grabbed me. It's an unholy mental picture, followed closely by others. There's Aspen—pure, beautiful, and innocent. And then there's me with my bloodstained hands.

I immediately release her and become so tense that she backs up. As soon as her hands aren't doing a death grip on my shoulders and neck any longer, I scoot back and scramble to my feet, tugging my ripped jeans up with me.

"I'll get changed, and we'll go to the kitchen and have a cappuccino."

"What?" She stares up at me, a total are you insane expression taking over her frown. "Coffee won't fix this. And it's the middle of the night. No one has a cappuccino at this hour."

"I have cappuccinos at this hour." A gentleman will offer a hand to help her up, but I can't touch her right now. I shouldn't touch her ever. Not with all the blood on my hands.

She gets up on her own, frowning at me in a pair of fuzzy blue pajama shorts and an old faded T-shirt with a cat butt on the front. Butts seem to be the theme tonight. "Jace wasn't...he...never mind."

“I know,” I choke. I reach for the ladder and get it standing up straight. I’m going to take it down the stairs before anyone else nearly dies falling over it or off of it. “I know he wasn’t like I am.”

Maybe he didn’t think his soul was stained from the shit we did in the name of our jobs and in the name of freedom. I’m not saying all of it was legit because I never just blindly followed orders, and I would have gotten out a long time ago if it was like that. It wasn’t. But I have done things. I’ve done things in order to save my back and the backs of the men at my left and my right. Jace did things too. We all did. It was impossible to be that highly specialized of a soldier and not do things.

“Was your grandpa from Ireland?”

I’m so surprised that I look back at her. “No. His parents were. They made an ass ton of money investing in land and real estate, and my grandpa continued the trend. My dad didn’t do much of anything except go to college, get married, and live off family money, but I bet he would have been roped into it eventually. Why?”

“No reason. I was just wondering. Your last name and all.” She clears her throat. “Anyway, when was the last time you slept?”

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“What do you mean?” I ask.

She crosses her arms and gives me a bossy look. I have to say, I like it on her. The sassy strength. She needs it if she wants to get over what she nearly saw happen just now. “You know, laid down on a bed and spent a good few hours in it.”

I wish to god that I can add the bedroom set I’m using to the pile to donate. All the bedroom sets, actually, especially the one from the master bedroom, which belonged to my grandpa. I don’t go into that farging room if I don’t have to. For now, I might not add it all to the pile. I’ll leave Aspen’s for eleven more days—the amount of time she has left here—and then I’ll clean this place right out and maybe order something I like. Or maybe not. I don’t need much. A big, comfy chair will be about the extent of it.

“I don’t need to sleep much. Once something gets ingrained in you, it’s hard to get it out,” I tell her.

“Not drinking a bunch of coffee really late in the day helps.”

“You’re not going to go back to sleep, are you?” I point out.

Yes, I know. I’m infuriating. I also know I’m right. I just about went nuts over heels over the stair railing. Aspen, on the other hand, is still shaken up. She saw my butt and had to touch it. That had to be traumatizing for her.

“Fine,” she snorts. “Let’s have one of your famous solves-all-problems cappuccinos.”

Chapter eight

Aspen

The cappuccino is good. There's no denying it. I've had some of the best coffee in my life since I arrived here. But no amount of caffeine is going to get Rick to talk about what he was really doing tonight. I want to believe it was just trying to wrangle that painting down, but really? In the middle of the night? In so careless a fashion? He could have been seriously hurt, yet he seems to have no care for his own safety or health. I believe it was an accident, but I don't like it. Not at all.

The caffeine only heightens the buzz that hasn't stopped sweeping through me. I feel like I can pick up some big, huge piece of furniture that Rick doesn't like and heave it onto one of the ever-present piles forming throughout the house.

I feel like I can bounce off the walls.

I feel like I can run a thousand miles.

I need to get out of the house.

"Let's go to the park," I say.

"What?" Rick is wearing a new, unripped set of black jeans along with the same style of black Henley he always goes for. All this time, he's been careful not to meet my gaze directly, and I don't know what it means.

"That coffee was strong. I need to do something, and I want some fresh air, so we should go for a walk."

"I'm not going for a walk," he states.

“Are you too much of a big bad baddy badass to go for a walk?”

He sighs, and when he finally looks at me, I give him one of my most stubborn, annoying looks. I’m clearly not going to let this go. When I can’t take the silence any longer, I leap off the seat on the island.

“I’m going to get dressed. I’ll go for a walk by myself.”

“The hell you will. Not at this hour,” he growls.

“I guess you’re coming then because I’m going. And yes, at this hour.”

He mutters things about stubbornness and damned letters under his breath, but I don’t stick around to hear it. I head upstairs and slide into a pair of jeans and a lightweight hoodie because it might be cold out there, even in the summer in San Jose. Then, I throw on my favorite pair of ankle boots. Nina One and Nina Two. They’re black and chunky, and Jace used to make fun of them when I wore them, saying I looked like I was going to join the military and go on marches.

Looking at them always makes me miss him more, and it somehow also makes my chest swell with happiness for all the good times we had together. I knew what he did was dangerous. Special Forces is no joke. I made sure that I made all our time count, and I never took him for granted. Whenever he left, or after every time we talked, I knew it could be the last. Did I ever truly think it would be? No, not truly. Who could live like that? But I knew it was a possibility. I just always, always tried so hard to deny that it would ever happen. Like my denial would make it more of a truth.

I shudder when I pass the spot on the steps where Rick was hanging over earlier.

Imagine being pulled from a dead sleep by someone cursing and yelling and hanging half over a very high, very scary railing. Also, I touched his butt, and I can’t stop

thinking about it.

I know it's expert-level wrong, but the sight of his tight, muscular ass is going to live rent-free in my head for the rest of my life.

Downstairs, Rick is pacing the empty living room. He's stripped everything out of it, but it's not for me to comment on. This is his house, his life. Tomorrow, when I wake up, I'll have ten days left here. If this helps him, then he should do it. That's what I think about it. I can't ever fully understand the life he's lived or the scarred-up wounds that are probably always going to be fresh and nasty on his insides. Ten or fourteen days or even ten or fourteen years isn't enough time to make that better for him.

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“There’s a park not that far,” he grunts. He opens the front door, and we step out into the night.

It’s not that cold, but I’m glad I wore a sweater. I like this sweater. It’s my furry bunny one where the fur is just this big cluster with ears and a smile and huge eyes. It’s absolutely and ridiculously adorable.

It’s never really dark here. The streets are well-lit with streetlights, and since this is an expensive part of town, all the houses have tasteful security lighting that gives off quite a bit of illumination as well.

We walk silently, Rick a few strides ahead of me, and me totally not letting my gaze stray to his ass every few minutes. I’m not sure what’s going on with me, but every single day, when I wake up and spend time with Rick, I dislike him less and less. It’s not anything he’s done. It’s me. I’m pretty sure it’s that thing where you get to know someone and realize what someone else who knew them better said about them was right. Salt of the earth. Yeah, Jace was right about that, I think.

Also, every day, when I wake up, I’m more aware that Rick is so much more beautiful than I ever gave him credit for. Right now, he’s walking with confidence, with a sway and athletic stride. He looks a little bit dangerous in the dark, dressed all in black.

I tried hard not to think about what Jace really did. I didn’t want to think about my big brother ever having to hurt anyone, but I know he did. And Rick? I could see him transforming in the blink of an eye, turning himself into a human weapon. He’d be lethal if he had to be.

I don't want him to be lethal, but knowing he'd keep me safe if anything ever happened to us out here in this very safe neighborhood where it's gated, and there are security driving by every other hour, makes my body heat up a few degrees while other parts of me feel tingly and cold.

A few minutes later, he stops dead on the sidewalk.

"Oh, this is the park."

It's obviously made for little kids, though there are a few sturdy metal benches at the sides. There's lots of grass and sand surrounding big plastic play structures and a huge bank of swings.

"Ooh! Swings!" I race toward them like I'm five years old again. I plunk down excitedly, my hands looping around the chains, my feet already trying to lift off the sandy pit beneath me. Then, I see Rick, and I freeze. He's just standing there, still in the middle of the sidewalk. I maneuver sideways and grab the swing to my right. Hauling it in with the chain, I pat the plastic seat. "Come on."

"No way," he grunts.

"It's more than strong enough." I think. At least if he ends up head over arse again, he won't be falling to his death.

"Grown men don't swing."

"Oh, I see. You're too bad baddy badass for this," I say loudly.

"Yes, definitely."

It's probably four in the morning, and I'm practically shouting at him. "Unless

you've wrestled a shark underwater, uppercut the beast, put it in a headlock, and tapped it out, you are not too badass for this."

He huffs, but I see the way his shoulders twitch like they want to detach from his body and come and enjoy the swings. Did he ever do this as a kid? I know he didn't have any of the good family stuff, but surely his boarding school had swings? Unless they were the evil kind of boarding school where only strict, nasty teachers ruled, and there were no playgrounds. Where their version of fun was extra math and scrubbing down toilets.

"If you come and swing for two minutes, I might be persuaded to forget this night ever happened." Yeah, right. There is zero chance I will ever forget how perfect an ass the man has. Just saying.

He lets out another huff, but he moves. I let the swing go and watch as he takes it and sits down hard enough to make the whole structure shake. He looks grumpy and surly but also strangely adorable. I would be afraid of this man if I saw him on the street all dressed in black and snarly, but not when I now know how much he loves toasted peanut butter and banana sandwiches, how Jace trusted him with his life, and how Jace trusted him with me when he would literally trust no one with his little sister.

Rick doesn't move. He doesn't even start to swing. Doesn't he know how? Oh, he's just going to sit there for two minutes and call that good enough. Well, that is not swinging.

I leap up and race behind him. Before he can react, I throw my arms around him, capture his shoulders with the chains, and push.

"Aspen!" he hisses, but the swing moves. It bumps into my thighs. He bumps into my thighs. And his broad, muscular back brushes against my chest.

Either my body has enough wild sexual energy with that contact to power this entire street worth of streetlights, or it's the cappuccino hitting hard with a delayed reaction. Either way, my lady bits are buzzing, and I think if it's coffee doing that, more people would invest in home espresso machines.

I wind up for another push, but he makes a sudden sound that stops me dead. I don't know what it is, but it sounds choked and pained, and it tears at me like my chest is made of ancient fabric that can just be ripped in half because it's so tattered and fragile.

Instead of clutching the chains, I sweep my arms around his shoulders and lean in like I did on the stairs. I hug him. Hard. He's not fast enough to get an arm up to stop me. He could pull away, but he lets me. I think it's because I've shocked him in a way that no amount of violence ever could. I breathe in the scent of his hair, and this time, I'm not as frazzled as I was after nearly losing him. This time, I can appreciate how he smells like coffee beans and fresh air and himself, which is dark, earthy, and spicy.

My lady bits stand up and start doing the wiggly, waggling, happy dance of joy that those tube man things do in front of sales tents and car dealerships.

Yes, they do a real happy dance for a man I thought wasn't the least bit attractive when I first saw him.

I thought he was hard and muscular before, but now his body goes rigid, and I can feel the tensing strain in every bit of him that I have my arms around. "You shouldn't do that, Aspen."

"Why not? Everyone should be hugged. You've had a total lack of love and warmth in your life, and you need it just as much as anyone else. I might not be your first choice, but in Jace's letter, we were both asked to look after each other. This marriage might not be real, but the letter is."

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He tenses up even more. “I’m...I don’t know how to explain it to you.”

“You can try.” Goodness, he smells so freaking good, and my nose is having a total noseasm being so close to him.

“I was a soldier. Soldiers do things. I’m not clean anymore,” he mutters.

I sigh. “Jesus, Rick, I know what you’ve done.”

“No, you don’t know. You’re never going to know. No one is. We don’t talk about it.”

“If it’s PTSD, you have money. You can get help. I’m sure there are people you can talk to, even if you can’t really talk about much of anything. It’s the aftershocks that you’re having a hard time dealing with, and you can’t be alone in that.”

“It’s not PTSD,” he grunts, letting out a huff. “Maybe a little. But that’s not what I’m talking about.”

I let him go because he asked me to, even if it was for the wrong reasons. I’m not here to force something on someone if it makes them uncomfortable. I walk around to the front of the swing. He’s so still on it. He looks up at me as I look down at him. I really want him to see that I’m utterly sincere in this.

“I think someone needs to tell you that you’re great, Rick. You’re not dirty, and you’re not a monster. I never thought of my brother that way, and I knew he’d done things. Probably some of the same things you’ve done.” I crouch down and set my

hand on his knee. He jerks back, the swing chains rattling loudly. “Okay.” I put both my hands up where he can see them. “Okay, Rick. I won’t touch you. But seriously, you can’t like osmosis this shit off on me through touch.”

He jerks upright and walks away. I chase after him, feeling very much like an annoying little kid tailing after someone who wants to be left alone. Does he? I don’t think he truly does. Not in the sore spot in his heart that is probably larger than he’d like to admit.

“Rick,” I call out.

He doesn’t turn. He circles past the swings and heads toward the playground equipment. He walks past the monkey bars, the slide, the rope and net contraption for climbing, and a set of plastic tunnels that connects one piece of equipment to another high above the ground.

“Rick!” I call out louder.

“What?” He spins around, his eyes blazing. He’s a little bit scary but a whole lot magnificent, and right now is probably not the best time for my knees to go weak.

It’s not the best time at all for my body to realize it’s very much attracted to this man.

There’s no good time for that.

“You’ve spent a long time being told your body is a weapon, but it’s not. You’re not this thing that causes destruction. It was just your job. It wasn’t you. It’s not who you are anymore. You can let it go now. If you’ve done things that bother you this much, then you absolutely need to talk to someone. It’s not healthy to keep it all locked away. You need to be able to put all that emotion into words and then get it out. And you need to sleep. Staying awake is probably making your brain squirrely.”

“I know what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. I know you want to fulfill the letter and make Jace proud, but you can’t get close to me.”

I hold up my hands and wriggle my fingers, breaking into a goofy grin. “I grabbed your bare bottom earlier and didn’t die. That’s probably as bad as it’s going to get, so I think we’re going to be okay.”

His eyes narrow. He looks badass and dangerous and a little bit lethal, and it takes my breath away. “Let’s never, ever talk about that again.”

“Alright. As long as you promise to never do anything that dumb again.”

“It wasn’t dumb. I had the angle perfectly calculated. I just didn’t think the stupid fucking painting would be stuck into the wall with the same kind of anchors that are used for bridge moorings.”

I walk over to the end of the plastic slide and sit down. Then, I kick off my chunky boots and dig my toes through the sand. Rick stands where he is, preternaturally still, watching me like I’m the one who is doing something risky and dangerous. I weave my fingers together on top of my knees and look at them because I feel like not staring him directly in the eyes takes some of the pressure off.

“If you don’t want to be touched, that’s okay. I respect that. But you have to try to let me help. You have to let me in. I can’t just leave here in ten days knowing you’re not okay.”

“I’m fine,” he says insistently.

“You’re not! You just said you’re dirty. That’s not okay. It hurts me to the bottom of my soul, Patrick McDonald.”

“It’s not your problem, Aspen Oak.”

It’s the first time he’s said my last name, and it doesn’t sound silly like when other people say it. Still, I’m frustrated. He is my problem. He’s so, so, SO my problem.

“Argh!” I yelp as I dig my toes too hard into the sand. Something catches—something sharp and nasty—and I gasp.

Rick is in front of me instantly, and I mean instantly. He’s on his knees in front of me, lifting up my foot and looking for injury. He holds up a small, sharp rock and tosses it aside, then spreads my toes and runs his fingers over each one.

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My big toe feels like someone just rammed a spike up the nail, but other than that, the rest of me is getting mixed as fuck messages. I'm hot and cold and buzzing way too hard from those strong fingers searching me for injury and assessing the situation, ready to fix and save and protect. I want to arch my foot and lean into his touch. I want his hands to continue to my heel, up to my ankle, over my calf, up and up and up, to my knee. And then higher.

For the love of meatballs and cherry pie, I need to stop.

I'm tired, and I'm over-caffeinated. We had an almost life-or-death situation involving a bare bottom that was anything but heinous. My nerves are frayed, and so is my brain. Right now, the air feels alive between us. It feels like it's pulsing. My sore toe is pulsing too, and there's a good chance my clit is also going to get in on the action.

"Are you okay?" His fingers brush my toes again like they're not all sandy and gross and to begin with.

"I'm fine." I lean forward, arching in the middle until our hands meet and brushing mine over his before he jerks back. "You and Jace did the same stuff, right?"

"Yes," he answers reluctantly.

"Do you think my brother was...contaminated? Do you think he was dirty? Do you think that wherever he is, he's beyond redemption?"

The agony on his face is razor-sharp. It's boiling water poured straight onto my

wounds, and salt rubbed into my chest cavity. It's impossible to take a breath. How could I have ever thought, at the first meeting when he talked about burning Jace's letter, that I could legitimately hate this man? "No! Of course not."

"If you both did the same job, side by side, then why should he be good to go and you not? Because he died? Because the job took his life? Purification by death?"

"That's not fair, Aspen."

"I know it's not. It's not fair to you. You're doing yourself an injustice. You can't heal if you keep telling yourself you're all yucky and fucky on the inside. Fuckyucky. It might not be fair, Rick McDonald, but it is logical, and it's good logic."

"You're right." He stands slowly, all the power in his body obvious under his black clothing. "It's late. We should be sleeping."

"You mean I should be sleeping so we don't have to talk about uncomfortable things anymore, and you should be prowling the house, making more piles, and pretending you're sleeping?"

"I'll sleep too. If that's what you want, I'll do it."

Well, if that's what it takes to get this conversation to stop. We've gone from shallow waters to the deepest parts of the ocean really fast, and neither one of us is ready for that. My heart is pounding so hard that I can practically feel it in my ears since they're picking up on the wildness going on in my neck just below them.

I'm running out of time. Two weeks is two weeks not long enough. I know I'll have some line of communication with him after. I don't think he was joking about the pen pal thing, and I could probably push for more, but it doesn't feel like enough. It doesn't change the fact that in ten days, I'm not going to be here anymore. Still, I

can't push this any further tonight. I want to help, not dig deeper gouges into either of us.

"Okay." I reach for my boots and stand on one of the wooden platforms so I can brush my feet off before putting them on. "Let's get some sleep."

I don't know if he actually will, but I hope he tries.

For himself. Not for me.

Chapter nine

Rick

I'm an impossible idiot. Impossible because I didn't think it was a thing for me to break down and say all the shit I said out loud at the park. It was a slip-up, a spill, but then it kept spilling. It was like the crap bottled up inside me could no longer be contained. It just flowed and flowed and flowed, which makes me a royal numbskull. A total toad. A fried-up fart.

I've been thinking about it all night.

After I made sure Aspen got to bed, I listened from my office down the hall. Not in a creepy way, but just to make sure she was okay. The park was heavy. I wanted to make sure what I'd said didn't give her nightmares. I wanted to make sure she didn't cry herself to sleep thinking about her brother. She didn't.

Despite the caffeine, she settled right in, and within moments, she was asleep.

I kept listening. I kept watch. I sat in my office for the remainder of the night and made lists of charities and places where I could donate the remaining artwork and

then the larger furniture pieces. I was serious about that. Everything. I wanted everything out.

I made lists and more lists and researched until my eyes felt like they were going to fall out from staring at a phone screen and my laptop screen in the dark. Then, I sat some more with my head tucked into my hands, staring at the desktop, staring at my knees, seeing nothing at all.

I thought about family.

That word. It always meant less than nothing.

It was something I never had. Something I was never going to have. The only family I had was the one I'd been adopted into when I joined the military and then when I went further. Jace was family because he was like a brother. They were all like my brothers.

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We didn't talk about it much, but Jace knew how broken I was. He knew the basics of me because he pulled it out of me, night after night, week after week, year after year. Maybe it was only a word here or there, a memory shared over cards, or something whispered when we were crouched down in the dark, thinking we might not get out of the shit we were in alive. We shared the good and the bad, and in the end, he knew enough about me to have a timeline and the facts of my life pretty straight in his head. I knew about his life too. That's how he'd get me. By being more open than a body ever possibly could or should be. He wasn't like anyone else, and maybe that's why I felt safe enough to let him coax and extract information from me. He was always gentle. He would have never used it to hurt me.

And now?

He tried to give me the one thing I never had.

Someone.

Someone who cares.

Aspen is trying so hard. She's trying because Jace asked her to. I know even after she leaves, that won't be the end of it. She'll keep trying and trying, and fuck, she shouldn't have to. This isn't fair to her. It's not fair that someone like me got dumped on someone like her. When she saved me, hauling me over the railing with every ounce of brute strength in her body, and in the park, when she refused to let me be, trying to save me all over again, she proved she's more than just pretty and sweet, innocent and young. There's something under all of it that I didn't see at first. She's strong like Jace was strong, even if they were born more than a decade apart and took

totally different paths in life.

I've been all over the place all night, my brain rapid fire firing off endless shit in every which way. It's not cool. It's not fun. If I could shut it down, I would.

Sleep. Yeah, that's not going to happen.

I'm still sitting here as the sky slowly lightened. And then past that. I'm still sitting here when I hear Aspen get up, hear the shower crank on, and hear her soft footsteps going downstairs. I'm still sitting here, listening as she hums downstairs in the kitchen. She's making breakfast, and she's going to try and feed me.

Shower.

I need a shower and a fresh set of clothes. I need to convince her that I'm fine, even if I only look like it, and the rest of me is my usual grumpy grunts.

I do both, and by the time I'm done, I almost look human. I spin around in the mirror and check for bruising on my ass. There aren't any marks. No fingerprints on my butt cheeks and nothing across my stomach, where I slammed against the railing.

I tug my jeans on and pull my shirt down.

On the stairs, I nearly run straight into Aspen. She smiles up at me like she's just swallowed the sun, and it's emitting straight out of her body. I've never seen anyone look that good at anytime of day. Her eyes are so soft and blue. And the rest of her is equally soft. Golden. Shiny. Beautiful. She smells like honey and fried bananas.

"Oh! I was just coming to get you. Breakfast is ready."

In the kitchen, I find that I'm hungry, which is a surprise and a mystery every time it

happens. The past years of my life didn't include regular meals, and they were always very industrial. No, that's not right. We didn't eat nuts and bolts. They were just meant to fill a void and give enough nutrition. Sometimes, they were good, but they never smelled like this.

"I made crepes." There's that glowing sunshine smile again.

She passes me a plate with at least eight rolled-up crepes topped with real whipped cream that she made fresh, fried bananas, a drizzle of melted chocolate sauce, and ribbons of maple syrup. My stomach growls, the acids tingling long after the noise it makes.

We sit down at the table that I can't wait to get rid of. It's modern and angular, and the chairs are made of chrome. They're industrial. I'd rather eat off the floor.

I wolf two crepes down, which I basically inhale without being able to stop myself because they're undeniably a mouth orgasm if I've ever had a mouth orgasm before. And I haven't, at least not until I met Aspen, which sounds straight-up wrong, so I need to think of another word. The word delicious does her food no justice.

"I want you to tell me about Jace," she suddenly says.

I swallow half of the third crepe completely wrong but get it down without choking or coughing. I didn't make coffee, so now I don't have a drink. I force myself to breathe shallowly, sucking in air so I can keep my regular neutral expression in place.

"You know about your brother," I reply.

"I know you can't tell me much, but..." She shifts, crossing her legs.

Today, she has on black leggings and a T-shirt that looks vintage with an old rat rod

car on the front made crinkly by age and washing. I don't notice anything about her clothes, the way they fit, or how she somehow makes wearing a T-shirt look like an art form. I don't notice her curves or anything else. I don't because I force myself not to. It clearly doesn't even register in my brain. Yeah. Clearly.

“Can you tell me the things you are allowed to talk about?” she adds.

Nope. I'm not going to fall into the trap of those blue eyes getting all liquid and huge and imploring me. I'm not going to get sucked in. I'm not.

“Like what?”

Fuck.

“Like what you guys did in your downtime. You had to have fun sometimes when you weren't always working. Or was life just constantly shitty and dangerous? Did you ever go to a place you liked? A country? Did you laugh together?” She smears a chunk of banana in chocolate and puts it in her mouth. Slowly.

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For the love of bananas, I'm rock hard under the table from watching her eat, and then her tongue sweeps out and gathers a smear of chocolate off her bottom lip.

"Yeah, we laughed. Your brother was a good poker player. He always looked so soft and nice, and he never seemed to take it seriously, but then bam! He could bluff the pants off anyone, and when he needed a decent hand, he always got one. We did that sometimes in our downtime." The way her glow gets brighter and her eyes get shinier makes me want to keep going. It makes me want to pull out more. More memories we can share together. Things she doesn't know about.

It's not me. Clearly.

Because I lift up my Henley. My whole closet consists of black jeans and black Henleys, black socks and black boxers, and black boots of different weights and sturdiness. It makes getting dressed easy. Laundry is easy. I'm not the kind of guy who needs a suit. I will never need a suit. I'm already married—ha freaking ha—and they can bury me in this get-up if they have to. Why deviate when black is a great color, one style of jeans is as good as the next, and a Henley is pretty much the softest, most comfortable invention known to shirtkind?

I brush my fingers over the puckered scar on my side. Aspen doesn't gasp, but she does bite down hard on her bottom lip. Her fingers thrum against the table like she wants to reach out and trace the same path my fingers just took. Her cheeks flush, and I quickly lower my shirt. That was not the reaction I expected. She wasn't horrified. Instead, she looks...well, whatever it is, I have to look away because my body is reacting to how she looks.

“I was unlucky one night and caught the business end of a knife.” The use of the word knife would imply something small, but it was more the size of a sword. “We were far from any medical base or anything that passed as a hospital. Jace was the one who sterilized me, stitched me up, and bandaged it all together. Without him, I probably would have bled out. It’s hard to close up a wound like that on your own.” I hadn’t passed out, and I still have very distinct memories of holding my torn flesh together while Jace sewed with steady hands.

“Jace received amazing marks in his home economics class. They had to design their own article of clothing and sew it, but he used his mom’s machine. She still has the dress he made her. She wore it a few times because he always got a kick out of it, but now, I’m sure she doesn’t. It’s too special. She wouldn’t want to wreck it,” Aspen says.

“We were taught more than basic first aid.”

“Right, yeah.”

“Although, he had the steadiest hands I’ve ever seen. Doing everything,” I tell her.

“He was a good cook too. Did you know that?”

“He liked to talk about cooking. Desserts, especially. He’d list off these crazy things I’d never even heard of.” Most nights, he did it when we were hungry and aching and cramped from holding our position. Starving but trying to ignore it. It was torture, the way he’d go into detail about that stuff, but no one ever asked him to stop.

“Did you ever jump out of a plane together?” Aspen asks.

“Aspen!” I pick up my fork again. I never let food go to waste. Not because I starved when I was a kid—the boarding schools I went to were strict and lonely, but they

always fed us and never applied physical punishments or anything like that—but because it’s just not in my nature. Especially not after years of rudimentary, tasteless food.

“Well?” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Did you?”

“You know we did,” I mutter.

“I don’t know. Jace never said. I can only assume. Did you ever have to fly a plane?”

“No.”

“Did he?” she probes.

“No.”

“How close are all those movies and video games to—”

“This conversation has to be over,” I say levelly, without heat or anger. I’m not trying to be mean or to hurt her.

She accepts that by waving around another chunk of banana on her fork. “Okay, Patrick McDonald. Okay.”

I grind my teeth. I’m way too well trained to rise to anything, but I’ve gone a while without sleep, and I’m soexhausted, whether I want to admit it or not. It’s going to have to happen sooner or later, and it’s going to be more than just a quick nap. Sometimes, it’s hard for me to remember that I’m safe here, or at least relatively safe. The house has security. The neighborhooddoes too. No one is going to bust down my door with guns in hand. Nothing is going to land on the house and obliterate it.

“Okay, Mrs. McDonald. Okay.”

Aspen’s eyes burst into wide spheres, and she drops her fork. “Not funny,” she grumbles, picking it up quickly. “I might have married you, but I’m keeping my maiden name. Even if I am double tree named.”

God, she’s a good sport. She’s not afraid to smile at me and really mean it. I’m not entirely convinced she’s afraid of anything except me being too hard on myself. She didn’t like what I said last night. She looked like she wanted to prove to me that my soul wasn’t black and dirty. And if it were damned, she’d swim down into the underworld, fish it out, and give it a good long bubble bath before stitching it back into me and paddling me to get my heart going again.

I shouldn’t picture her that way. I shouldn’t be thinking about her in any way other than shutting her out and counting down the days until she leaves.

“When we divorce, I’ll make sure you get a good chunk of my assets. It’s only fair.”

Her smile fades like she can’t tell if I’m joking or not. “I don’t need that, Rick,” she whispers. “I don’t need your stuff or your money.”

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“I’m going to take care of you,” I insist. “You and your family. I have lots of money. Let me do it.”

“We’ve talked about this. That’s not how I want to be taken care of. Money doesn’t make anyone happy. Obviously. Everyone says so.”

“But it can make a lot of things easier and better.”

“I had a job. And I do have a degree. I mean...well, it might not be what I truly wanted to do, but I had to do something, and business was as good as anything.”

“What did you truly want to do?”

“Play with kittens and puppies all day, write stories, sing songs, open a vintage store, antiquing, paint, travel the world, sell fancy real estate. Have my own vineyard. Garden. Maybe farm a little too. Rescue possums and porcupines because they’re just so darn cute, open a greenhouse that only sells cactuses, crochet super cute and strange little alien creatures and then sell them at craft shows, volunteer with senior citizens, plant trees, build houses, protest, make a difference, and help people.”

“I’m serious.”

She laughs. Her fork gets set down on the side of her plate. “Me too. I don’t really know what I want to do. I want to do everything, but I know I can’t just bounce around from job to job. I’m all over the place pretty often. I like to do lots of things. I like to be busy. I feel a little contained here, and I want to see everything and try everything. I live in reality, but my dreams? That’s different. I’m not like Jace that

way. I know you're thinking that."

"I'm not." I scowl because, honestly, I am, and I don't like how easily she can read me.

"Jace was seriously dedicated. He joined the military when he was still seventeen, as soon as he could. He always knew what he wanted to do. But I'm not that way. I never knew what I wanted. I'll probably still not know when I'm ninety. Is that wrong?"

I don't know what I want either, so thank goodness she doesn't ask me. This morning I'm lacking the usual bracing steel I layer myself in. For the past eighteen months, I've done nothing but ghost around here. I'm a soldier with nothing and no one to fight. Yesterday, Aspen said I wasn't a weapon, but she was wrong. I'm still a weapon. I'm always going to be a weapon. I'm just sitting here, waiting to be used, and if I'm not used, then what am I good for?

I grunt rudely. We need a little distance between us. I need the distance. Aspen was far too close last night. That can't happen again. And I'm still hard under the table, which also can't happen. It shouldn't be happening right now. Fuck.

Aspen snorts, ignoring me. "What does that mean? You'll have to help me. I don't speak fluent caveman."

I'm not going to smile. I'm not. It's not even funny.

"I'm going to clear out the rest of the furniture from the house today." I cram three crepes into my mouth in rapid succession, chew, and then swallow. They're still amazing, even when I'm trying not to taste them.

"Oh. That should help you sleep. Not having a bed."

She knows. Damn it, she knows I didn't go to bed last night. Her eyes blaze with something I can't decode, and she looks at me like worrying about me is more than her job. Like it's more than something that's been forced on her.

"I'll get a new one," I say.

She studies me like she doesn't believe me, but she's more like Jace in just looks than I thought because she grunts right back at me. "Okay, Patrick McDonald. I believe you."

Chapter ten

Aspen

I can't stop thinking about all the things I shouldn't.

Like butt cheeks. Perfectly formed, muscular, amazing butt cheeks. And me, leaving my finger marks in them. In ways other than hanging off the railing.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I fell asleep easily after that visit to the park, but ever since I woke up in the morning, my body was a beastly livewire. And it was like that all day. I watched Rick moving furniture, hauling things out, and taking the house apart like a man possessed. I tried to help, but he really wouldn't let me. Instead, I made breakfast, lunch, and dinner, went for a walk a few times, read some of the books I brought even though I couldn't concentrate, and tried to make plans for a dubious future. Throughout the day, crews came in and out. I think there were three different ones. Two in the morning and one in the late afternoon. Right now, the house is almost totally stripped.

Maybe I can't sleep right now because I didn't do enough to tire myself out.

Maybe I've done nothing to excise the butt images from my mind, and I'm haunted. Or maybe I'm still a broken series of short-circuiting hormones.

It could be that I'm lying here wide awake because I can't turn my mind off either. I saw those dark circles under Rick's eyes. I saw how tired he looked with every fiber of his being. I know he's not going to sleep tonight. Where would he? I doubt he even has a bed left. One of the crews disappeared upstairs with him and came down with a split box spring, a mattress, and a whole bunch of pieces and parts. I don't know if there's another bed in the house. The couch is gone. The chairs too. Other than his office furniture, I'm not sure there's much left. I didn't want to go poking around in rooms that weren't meant for snooping.

I know there's one bed left in the house.

This one.

I've been riding that train of thought for the past few hours as I tossed and turned, and things have gone from being a regular temperature to just about blistering hot in here.

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Cold showers never work for me, even in the summer. I could be boiling yet I still can't bring myself to get under a frigid spray. What I need is a glass of water to try and put out this fire. A glass of what the fuck am I even thinking? I need to stop thinking about it, feeling it, and wanting it.

I can go right from my room to the top of the stairs since it's the first one down a hallway that only goes in one direction. The other direction is the bathroom, but I doubt there's a glass for water in there. I'm going to have to go down to the kitchen, and I can do that without disturbing Rick.

I think he's in his office. I heard the desk chair creak an hour ago. Maybe that's where he sleeps. Or doesn't sleep. He could be one of those people who's been trained to literally sleep with their eyes open. Maybe he just goes into catatonic states, and that's how he's survived without sleeping for days already. I've been here long enough that he should look well-rested, yet he doesn't. I'm not sure if not sleeping can be termed as a pace, but if so, I'm not sure he can keep up the pace. Not even downing copious amounts of coffee will help, and I was serious when I told him it isn't healthy. Just because he doesn't require much sleep doesn't mean he doesn't need any.

I should leave well enough alone. I check the stairs. Rick isn't hanging off of them or over them, so that means he's probably okay. A crew came today—part of the morning move-out people—and wrenched the offensive painting out of the wall using a proper ladder with two guys supporting it at the bottom. I've never seen anchors like that. No wonder Rick couldn't get it out by himself. The house is starting to look less like a home—or less like a super minimalistic home—and more like a shell. It looks like Rick is moving out. I know he'd like to do that. I doubt he'll buy a bunch

of new furniture that's more to his taste and stuff it in here when he doesn't want to be here in the first place. Honestly, I have no idea what he's going to do.

Take care of him. He'll need it. He'll act like he won't, but he does.

My reasons for that aren't purely honorable. I'm still on fire. My ovaries sit up and do a happy dance when I change directions and walk back up those stairs. My nipples join in, tangoing in time to the steps I take back past my room and past a closed door to the one that's only partially shut. Rick's office.

It would be a darned relief if Rick weren't there. Or at least, I tell myself it would be. I would have time to take a breather and talk myself down. Go back to my room, forgo the water, and screw myself. What I need is a good orgasm. The trouble is, I've never been very good at it—at giving them to myself. I know it's mostly mental, but I've always felt so pathetic that I'm just not that into pleasing myself because it's healthy and good, and it's right to be able to know your own body. It's not that I haven't tried. I mean, I haven't invested heavily in toys or tried anything kinky. I don't think it's wrong. I just haven't. I've tried pretty much every trick I can think of with my own hand and once with the detachable showerhead in my apartment back in Atlanta, but nope. Just no. It doesn't work.

For real.

Who can't get off with a detachable showerhead? Those things are pretty much the salt of life when it comes to orgasms.

One time, I confided this shit to a good friend. I don't have any real best friends, but I do have a number of good ones I've kept in contact with since high school and college. Anyway, back when we were supposed to be studying for finals in our last year, we were both a few beers in. While she was supposed to be quizzing me on statistics problems, she decided the night was too dry and served up a few beers from

her fridge. It wasn't anything crazy, but I'm not a drinker, and it was enough to make me say things I wouldn't normally say. It was actually my friend Lisa who started the conversation about how, since she'd broken up with her boyfriend, she'd discovered the joys of pleasing herself.

We quickly forgot all about stats and discussed the merits and drawbacks of masturbation. She got way into it. She talked about technique, gave me pointers, asked questions, and was totally fascinated. Then, she ended the discussion by telling me that some women just need the D, and I appeared to be one of them.

Thankfully, she didn't rattle off a list of plastic toys that serve as what she termed D. She meant the real thing.

I think what she actually meant was that there has to be an emotional investment. Just getting myself off through basic biology and the science of stimulation isn't satisfying. Does it feel good? Yes. Does it feel good all the way to a mind-blowing or even semi-satisfying climax? No.

Good lord.

This isn't about sex. It doesn't matter that my body has done a complete one-eighty about its opinion of Rick's attractiveness, and now, instead of thinking he's not so attractive, I can't stop watching him. I can't stop analyzing the way he moves and the way his muscles look under his clothing. I can't stop noticing how strong and sometimes how lethal he moves, all with a crazy amount of grace.

Also, his butt.

Maybe it would all be okay if it weren't for his butt.

It's burned into my brain the same way my science teacher used to literally shout

about things he was adamant we remember forever. BIB. Burn in brain. Or as my computer teacher from elementary school used to call it. Brain mapping. Memorize the keyboard and imagine yourself hitting that key in your brain. It will make you a better typer.

I've memorized the wrong things and brain-mapped them into all the parts of my brain where they're burned in for life.

Rick's bum + my brain = together forever.

Fuck.

I just want to check on him and give him a hard time about not sleeping. Maybe make sure he does it, even if it's just to take a quick nap on my bed. Without me in it. I'll even take that chair if he can get a good sleep sitting up, and I'm not convinced he can't.

He told me enough stuff last night in the park that it makes me wonder what else is going on. There's probably a lot. I don't know if that's why he can't or won't sleep, but there are a few things he said that we left off, and I want to pick them back up. Mostly because they're like little pins pressing deeper and deeper into parts of my heart that I would do better keeping closed off. I can take care of him without risking my out-of-control hormones masquerading as emotions.

He's in his office, and he's not sleeping. I know that because he's angled in his desk and facing the windows, but also half facing the door like he doesn't want there to be any way anyone can sneak up on him. His head jerks up as soon as my shadow casts into the room. It's the hall light that does it. He's sitting in the dark, the bright light of his laptop screen illuminating his face in a ghostly way that makes it very obvious just how amazing his bone structure is in his fascinating face. Yes, I'm at that point. The point where I've looked at him enough now to have changed the word from

interesting to fascinating.

I'm so full of shit.

He's beautiful.

In a very masculine, rugged, tough guy, still not at all conventionally attractive kind of way.

Also, in the most perfect, lovely, gorgeous, I'm losing myself to whatever this is kind of way.

"Rick?"

He shuts his laptop and leans back in the chair. What was he doing in here and looking at that I couldn't see? Maybe he likes the cover of darkness. Maybe his eyes are bugging out from all that screen time in the dark, and he needs to shut it down. I don't think that's healthy. He could have been doing nothing at all, zombified from a total lack of sleep.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing. I just couldn’t sleep and wanted to check on you.”

He quirks a brow. “On me? Because you couldn’t sleep?”

“I couldn’t sleep because I was thinking about you.” Oh! Oh, shit. That’s the wrong thing to blurt out. I must either be more tired or more sexually charged than I thought. Wound up. That’s the word. I feel like my nipples are little wind up dials, and right now, they’re maxed right out. One more spin and any more tension, and something is going to bust or start smoking.

My clit feels the same.

A smoking vagina. That should not be funny.

“About what you said last night,” I hurry to add. “About being soiled on the inside.” That’s a shit recovery. I watch the shadows move over Rick’s face. I watch him shut down. He closed off this subject last night, and the last thing he wants to do is go there right now.

But I also see the other shadows. The ones that move into his eyes. The ones that haven’t ever really left them. I recognize them now. I see the truth plainly on his face. More than what Jace wanted draws me to him, and I can’t resist whatever tugs me across the room. I walk until I’m standing right in front of him, our knees almost brushing. He leans as far back in his desk chair as he can get, but I lean too. I lean in, getting too close. I need to back off and back away, but I can’t. I can’t just go and get

a drink of water. Not now. Not when he's fire, and I think playing with it might actually be good for us both.

If he shoves me away, I'll go. If he tells me to take a step back, I will. And if he tells me not to touch him, I won't. He groans, the sound doing feral things to my blood, my nipples, and the rest of my south-of-the-border zones. That sound breaks what little reservations I have left. My hands need to find a landing, a safe spot, and what could be safer than this man and his strong shoulders?

He jerks back, scooting the chair rapidly in the other direction before I can touch him. "No." He lets out another groan. "You can't. We can't do this, Aspen. I'm dirty."

"Patrick McDonald, you are not dirty," I say firmly.

"I am. I am, and you're Jace's little sister. You're my best friend's little sister, and you're always going to be his little sister, just like you're always going to be sweet and pure and underserving of this burden that's been placed on you and the cards that life dealt you."

"I'm my own person. I have an identity other than Jace's kid sister. I'm also more than old enough to know what I want, and as for the dirty talk, I never want to hear you say that about yourself again unless you're truly dirty talking."

I think it's prettyyyyyy obvious what I want.

Rick knows. He knew it from the second I appeared in the doorway. I probably looked like a sexed-up wreck. He's older, so he could very likely see it written all over my face—how much I want him.

"You can't ask me that," he mutters weakly. Both his hands rake through his hair. He's clearly so worn out. I don't know why he keeps fighting this. "You can't—"

“Come here.” I wrap my hand around his upper arm and pull. I know defeat when I see it, and I know he’ll probably shake me off and give me a stern set of objections if he weren’t too tired to fight me anymore.

He gets out of the chair. My fingers are on fire, and they tingle all the way downstairs, out the back door, out onto the deck, and then into the wreck of a backyard. Actually, there was another crew here this morning. I forgot about them. There were four crews, not three. They came in the morning and worked until evening, clearing it out. All the dead stuff is now gone. Trees have been uprooted, and vines have been cleared away. Anything still living, Rick wanted them to transplant into pots, take somewhere else, and give them away to people who want them and will care for them. I’m not sure there was much left alive other than what trees could be uprooted and dug out, but others just had to be cut down. It’s a shame. It hurts to see the backyard like this.

There’s dirt back here. So much dirt. The whole backyard is upturned, uprooted, messy dirt.

I point to it. “That is dirt, Patrick McDonald. That. Not you.”

He shakes his head. I have to drop his arm, and I feel the instant loss of our connection as soon as I do. I walk a few steps, bend, and pick up a handful. I let it sift through my fingers. It’s still warm from being baked out in the sun all day. San Jose is ridiculously hot. It’s hot enough right now that my T-shirt and shorts feel like too much clothing.

To be fair, they felt like that all night as well. It’s humid out here, but in my room, I was burning up at the core. Like, literally at the core.

“I know that’s dirt, but there are different kinds of dirt.”

“Oh really?” I rub dirt down my arm. Rick’s eyes widen. I do it to the other arm. The humidity makes my skin sticky and wet, and some of it sticks in blackened smears. The backyard is bright enough for me to watch how Rick’s face pinches and his lips purse.

“That’s too far. I would have understood if Jace just said we should be friends. He went too far. I can’t be close to you. You know that.”

“I don’t know that. And neither do you.”

“Our marriage isn’t real,” he says.

I scoop up a clod of dirt and chuck it lightly at him. It hits his shoulder because he’s shocked and doesn’t spin away. I rub another great big handful over my arm. And then my other arm, my neck, and my face. “If you’re dirty, then I’m dirty too.”

“Aspen! Stop it!”

Exasperation screams in a tone he struggles to keep neutral, but maybe there’s a little bit of playfulness in it too. I get another large handful and throw it up in the air above my head. It falls down around me, landing in my hair and all over my clothes. I let out a whoop as Rick sighs, and then I throw myself to the ground. With a laugh, I spread my arms and legs wide and make a dirt angel.

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I don't know if Rick can't take it or if he's worried that I've lost it, but he walks over. He stands over me, and then, after a momentary pause, he sticks out his hand. I take it but grab a clump of dirt, and when I stand up, I smear it over his jaw and rub it into his beard. My laughter is way too loud in the night. The neighbors are probably going to wake up, and they're probably going to complain.

Rick doesn't react to what I've just done. Instead, he lets go of me and brushes dirt out of my hair. Or tries to, at least. I think the dirt is pretty hard to remove, just like sand. He doesn't look amused. But he doesn't look pissed either. His face is so calm and controlled. I want to break past that reserve. I want honest emotion. I want the parts of him that he won't show the rest of the world because the rest of the world isn't me. I want, even if it's just for a moment, to be special. To share something with him that no one else has ever shared.

"Let's go back inside. This isn't funny." He says that, but he sounds faintly amused anyway.

He's so close that his breath fans out against my cheek when he speaks. I want his hand back on me. I want both his hands all over my body. A shiver of desire ripples through me. I lean into him and reach up, bracketing his face with my hands. He doesn't jerk away, and I can see something break through his impartiality. Finally.

"The only thing that matters is if you want this." If he tells me he doesn't, I'll tuck him into my bed and find a guestroom. Or a couch. Shit, even the floor. Anything.

"I can't." The strain is so evident all the way through him, but especially in his voice. He sounds like he's going to crack. He sounds like he's going to break down. I'm

afraid it's going to happen. However, I'm afraid I'm not ready and that I'm not enough to put him back together.

His eyes get hard again. He won't let it happen. No matter how tired he is, he won't let himself lose control.

"You can," I breathe. "You can. Do you want me or not? That's the only thing that matters. The only thing."

"That's not fair. This isn't a real marriage." He repeats it, which is how I can tell he's close to breaking.

"Last time I checked, wanting someone doesn't have to have anything to do with being married or not. Do. You. Want—"

His hands grasp my waist, and he hauls me up against him. Dirt shower or not, smudges of dirt all over both of us or not, his lips crush mine.

I haven't wanted this man from the moment I saw him. There was no instant, burning attraction. We didn't even like each other at first, but now I know I'm in way too deep. I've been falling this whole time, slowly, but sometimes a slow burn is the most deadly and destructive burn. You don't know it's happening until you're scorched down to the bone, and then there's no putting out the fire because it has already worked its way under your skin. It's inside of you.

I don't even know if falling is the right word, but there's something that's been growing on me, and it's led to this. It's me learning who Rick is. Learning to see past his fake placid surface, the neutrality he puts on for show, the nothingness, and the rest of the time, the gruffness.

It's possible that I've felt this since the first instant we met, and I didn't know it.

Maybe I did think he was beautiful but I didn't understand because I was expecting one thing and I got another. Perhaps I'm seeing the beauty of his spirit and his personality, and despite what anyone says, that alone can make a person so freaking attractive.

It's me learning to see him, to see all his hurts and wonders. The thing that's been growing is this. It's me feeling something for this grumpy man with the huge heart that he's tried to protect so hard all his life. The heart that's been broken over and over by the family that should have wanted and loved him but didn't, as well as by the losses he's suffered and the things he's seen and done. Also, not forgetting the parts he calls dirty and all the parts of him I know that aren't.

I'm kissing the man who still wants to laugh and smile, be playful and goofy, and love life despite all the trauma and neglect, the iron-hard training, and the years of deprivation and rough living. I'm kissing him so fucking furiously with teeth, with my tongue, and with all of me behind it. My hands grasp his shoulders, my fingers curling into the fabric of his Henley. The cotton is so soft. I'm not going to let go. I'm not going to let this stop happening. We both need this. Even if it's only a kiss, we both need it, so I throw my whole being into it, arching against him. His body pulls me to him like a black hole that I'm only too happy to step into and get lost in.

This man has been a weapon for our country. He's done things I know are going to weigh heavily on his soul for the rest of his life. He's seen things that have caused real, lasting damage. But despite all that, buried in the rubble of himself, deep down in there, I know is a good, hopeful, daring, lovely soul.

I want to believe it. I want him to believe it.

I plunge my tongue into his mouth, and he groans. His hands fist my T-shirt to pull me up harder against him, but I'm already there. There isn't even room for air between us. I didn't think it was possible, but it was. And I'm there. I can feel the

hard outline of his erection through his jeans. I squirm, whimpering, kissing him harder, and trying to rub myself up against him.

“I know your past is going to haunt you. I know it’s hurting you. But it doesn’t have to stop you from having a good life. It doesn’t have to stop us from doing this. It won’t stop me from kissing you.”

“I know,” he grunts, licking along my bottom lip.

“I don’t care about your money,” I tell him.

His fingers curl against the waistband of my shorts. “I know.”

“And you can be a real asshole sometimes,” I continue.

“I know.”

I stroke along his jaw, his now neatly trimmed beard bristling under my fingertips. I find the break in it right by his ear, where a small scar starts. I trace the slightly raised outline of it. I don’t ask what happened. He won’t tell me anyway. He doesn’t want to think about it, and I don’t want him to think about it either. There are flames in his dark eyes, but there are dark circles that are very apparent too. Along with lines at the corners of his mouth that I think a few good hours of rest will erase.

I need to put this man to bed and make him sleep.

Alright, I want to put him to bed, fuck us both senseless, and then let him sleep. Everyone sleeps better after a few good orgasms, right? Or so I’ve heard. Because I can’t claim a single fantastic wild night in bed so far in my life. It has all been quite mediocre.

I actually truly don't get what people see in sex.

But now I do. I get it. Just from bumping up against Rick's solid body and from the heated, incredible kiss—an orgasm of a kiss. The rest of it with him...well, it would be fantastic. I know we're combustible.

His hands are frozen on my shorts.

I would like it very much if he tore them off.

Except maybe not outside.

“Will you take me inside?” This time, I’m the one who licks his bottom lip. I’m the one who suckles it into my mouth, who uses the edges of my teeth to make it hurt just a little.

He sweeps me up in his arms and carries me across the backyard, up the deck, and back inside. Right inside the back door that we came out of, he sets me down and tries to pull away like this is the end of whatever moonlit spell happened out there, but I won’t let him.

I drag my T-shirt up and over my head, and I swear his eyes nearly pop out. He looks like he’s going to pass out or have a stroke. The light further down in the hallway does wonders for him. He looks like a bronze statue. So astoundingly beautiful. He’s still frozen, breathing hard. I take his hand and skim his rough fingertips up my belly, up my ribcage, up to my breast. I make him cup it and guide his palm up to my nipple. I arch into his touch, closing my eyes as the raised callouses on his hand scrape against my already hard, oversensitive skin.

“Oh god,” I moan.

“Oh god,” he echoes. He sounds panicked.

I need him to stay with me. He needs to get over the best friend's little sister business. The dirt business. I'm my own person. I'm more than just that label. It's not wrong. Not the years between us, not the life we've lived, nothing. There is nothing wrong with us taking pleasure in each other. There's nothing wrong with making ourselves feel good. No one even knows I'm here. I've struggled with that—how this has an expiration date written all over it—but it doesn't make this wrong either. If we're both consenting and we both want this, then...

Jesus, I want that to be enough.

I don't want to think about how incredible it would be if we could do this more than once. More than just one night and more than the time we have left. I don't want to think about how a real marriage would look between us. This man isn't mine. He's not going to be mine. Not even the last will and testament of my brother or legally binding marriage vows can tie him to me.

I start to feel Rick pull away. Like, mentally. Bodily, he's right here. His hand is still cupping my breast, and his erection is still throbbing against my hip. I need to keep him here with me. I need him out of his head where he keeps counting and cycling through all the reasons this could be wrong.

"I'm—"

"Shh." I take his hand and guide it from my breast to my mouth. I unfold his fingers and suck on the tips of two of them. "What did I say about that nonsense? You aren't allowed to speak those words anymore. Don't even think about them. Don't go back there. You aren't doing that job anymore. You're now here in this beautiful, cold, empty house."

"I'm cold and empty too," he mutters.

“No.” I lick at the underside of his fingers before I kiss his palm over and over again until he makes a noise he can’t control. He sounds like a wild animal.

“Please don’t...don’t touch my hands. They’re not good hands. They’ve done—”

“That’s right. They’ve done things. Things you can’t talk about. But it’s over, Rick. It’s over. You can’t change it. You might regret it for the rest of your life, but you can’t change a single thing. The only thing you can do is move forward now. Start living right here, right now. There can be good things, even if you don’t feel deserving. You’re going to be okay if you want to be. There is forgiveness. There is some amount of absolution.”

“Your brother—”

“My brother would never, ever have sent the letter if he thought you were a bad man. You were his best friend, and he knew you better than anyone. He knew your heart, and he handpicked you for me.”

“We’ve both said it was a mistake.”

“I think it’s definitely possible both of us could have been wrong,” I say.

I kiss his palm again. Then, I bring his other palm up and paint it with kisses too. I feel the way his hands start to shake, but he doesn’t pull them back. He doesn’t try to hide from me. The tremors pass through them and work their way into his whole body.

“You’re tired,” I point out.

“I’m fine.”

“Exhausted.” I let his hands go, but only so I can plant my palms flat on his chest. He’s definitely trembling. So warm. I run my palms down, feeling every hard muscle beneath the thin cotton. I need skin. His shirt has to go. If I can’t feel him, taste him, and make him mine, even if it’s just for tonight or a few nights, then I’m going to die.

I grab the hem of his shirt and work it up over washboard abs that make my mouth go dry, over tight pecs and a broad chest, and over huge, muscled shoulders. By the time I get his shirt over his head, I’m the one who is trembling.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper.

He wants to say something. Probably more protests about how he’s not and how he’s tainted by the past, blah, blah, blah. I know it already, and I don’t agree. He can’t go on thinking like this, or he’s going to waste his whole life, which would be a real fucking shame. He has the potential to do so much good. This man never knew friendship or love until he met my brother. He never knew what it was like to have a family until he joined the military. He wasn’t wanted until he knew them. All the men and women he can’t talk about, at least for the most part.

Rick might have had other women love his body. It’s hard to think about that, but he’s old enough that duh, obviously. But I don’t think he’s ever let anyone inside. I want to do more than just run my fingers over the hard ridges of his abs. I want to do more than brush his nipple or stroke his shoulder. I want to touch all the parts of him that he’s very carefully kept locked away. I want him unleashed. I want the good and the bad. I want his soul and his spirit and his heart, even if it’s only temporary. I want him to know he’s not an orphan and not without family. Even though the man he loved like a brother is gone, I’m here, and right now, he belongs to me.

“I’m—”

I pinch his nipple, and it cuts off what he was going to say. I look up at him and find him frowning at me, but his eyes are shimmering with raw need.

“Aspen—” he groans.

I pinch it again and give it a good twist this time. “Bed. Now.”

“I don’t think you know what—”

“I know if I don’t have you inside me in the next five minutes, I’m probably going to be the one who strokes out.”

“Jesus, god, don’t say that,” he rasps.

“What? That I want you inside me?”

“We’re not doing that.”

Fuck. “Okay, I can work with that.” If I don’t...yeah, the internal combustible death thing. I’ll burn up like the tray of fries I once forgot in the oven for an hour and a half, and I didn’t know anything was wrong until I started smelling the char. They were probably legit about to combust when I finally got the smoking tray out of there, and my god, they were black little strips by that point.

I tangle my fingers in his hair—the length always surprises me—and drag his face

down. I kiss him hard while I bump into him, backing him up.

I don't know what he decides or if it's just that he can't take it anymore, but he finally grasps my waist and spins me around. He lifts me clean off the floor, and I do the first thing I think of, which is to climb him like he's my new favorite tree.

We smack against the wall. I kiss him hard, brutally. Such that we both can't breathe. He spins me and kisses me hard enough to drive my head into the wall. Well, no, not really. There isn't a dent or anything. Just enough that it feels good. It feels like the wars he participated in are behind us, and there's just this war between us.

A perfect war.

We battle it out, kissing and licking and fucking with our mouths all the way through the house. We bump into walls a few times, but he doesn't ever waver. He would never drop me. He makes it to the stairs and climbs them. When he gets to the bend, I tear my mouth from his.

"When I grabbed your ass right here, did it leave marks? Are my fingerprints bruised into your skin?"

"No, they didn't. They aren't."

"I could fix that," I tease.

"Holy cantaloupe."

His lips claim mine again, and he kisses me all the way into my room.

When we tumble to the bed, it's so expensive that it catches us and somehow lets us sink in without making so much as a ripple or rebound. He's all hardness above me,

and he feels huge, while I feel soft and small.

I'm pretty much pinned down until Rick gets his hands under him, then his elbows. He's got a knee between my legs, and I can't help it. I grind against him, pressing my clit and all the aching, empty parts of me against the hardness of him, any hardness I can get.

The sounds he makes.

Oh my god, the noises.

It's half animal, half man, raw and feral and delicious sounding.

He has his face turned so I can't kiss him. The light from my open door paints him in the most gorgeous golden shadows. I take his earlobe between my teeth, but I'm gentle. I suckle it instead of biting down. This time, there's a surprised gasp. I trail my tongue up, up the shell of his ear, and then down, down until I find his neck before I suckle the sensitive skin there too. He tastes good. He smells good. I love that he's all around me.

I need him inside me, even if that's not an option. I need something of his inside me. His fingers. His tongue. My fingers and his together.

He still has his knee between my legs, which makes it so I can't reach much of him. But I need to. I need to change this position. This is about both of us, not just me. I want to make Rick feel good. I want him beneath me in every way I've imagined. I want to be on my knees in front of him, stripping away his clothing and—

I have to wriggle out from under him before I explode.

He lets me out, rolling away.

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I can tell, as soon as I catch sight of his face as it turns to me, that he thinks I've changed my mind. That this is it. He's too bad, too wrong, too filthy, too much of all the things I could never want. I see the doubt and the instantaneous flash of hurt before he blinks to wipe it away. This is just another rejection for him. Another loss. His jaw is already hard, his face settling into lines of stone. He's already guarding himself against feeling the sting of it.

I won't let him do that. I won't let him hurt like this.

He's on the other side of the bed, so I scramble up and walk around it. He sits up slowly, watching me, confused about what my next move is. What his next move is.

I tug my shorts down. Followed by my panties. I'm completely soaked and hot between my legs.

"Fucking... god..." he gasps out.

"Come here." I take his hands and pull him up.

I need to touch him. All over. So I do, memorizing each plane and angle. I tip my head forward and taste him. I run my tongue over the flat of his nipple. Then down, down until I sink to my knees. I'm lucky enough that his jeans give way under my fingers, and I don't have to work at them. I pull them down. His boxers too. He's too stunned to fight me.

He steps out of them, one leg at a time, and then he lets me push him down to sit at the edge of the bed.

I think he's so tired that his brain isn't processing as fast as it should be. I don't think he'd let me do this if he wasn't freaking exhausted. How many days can a person stay awake before their health is literally at risk?

When I climb on top of him, spreading my legs so freaking wide to fit him between me, he finally starts to fight me. He takes my shoulders when I bend. I wrap my hand around his cock, curling my palm around his shaft. He's ridiculously huge. He tries to get his hand around me, but I knock it away.

"Rick?"

He groans. "Yes, Aspen?"

"I'm sure about this. So fucking sure. Surer than any kind of sure that was ever sure. But I need to know you're okay."

"I'm not okay. I'm not."

God. "Are you okay with this?" I release him and arch back, naked and unashamed. He devours me, his eyes sweeping over me like he needs to memorize every single detail before I vanish. I brush my fingertips over the muscles in his thighs. They start to shake as soon as I touch them. He's still trembling.

"Fuck." He throws both hands up to his face and over his eyes. "I want you. I shouldn't want you, but I do. I want to touch you. I want to worship you. I want you as the goddess you are. I'm going to sully you. I'm going to break you. I'm going to—"

I put my hand over his mouth. Instead of telling him to stop it, to stop saying those things, things that aren't true and that I don't want him to believe because they're hurting him so very badly, I scoot forward and replace my hand with my

mouth.

I kiss him softly for the first time tonight. I try to kiss healing into him. The goodness and light that will come in and soak up all those hard memories and work their way into the cracks in his soul.

His erection is trapped between us, and he throbs against my stomach. I can feel the wetness of him seeping between us. I'm wet too, so wet and so hot, but my heart and chest hurts too.

"Rick." I kiss his lips and then his cheek. His nose. His other cheek. I kiss his forehead and his temples. I taste the salt there and feel the wetness.

He covers his eyes, but he's not crying. They're just...leaking a little. I know he wouldn't want me to think he's capable of it.

I kiss my way back to his cheeks, then his jaw, and down his neck. "No dirt, Rick. Nothing. Only you. It's only you, and you taste wonderful. I love kissing you." He groans like he's in pain. He reaches for me, running his hands down my arms and up again. His body is hot, and he's still shaking slightly. I press my lips to the spot right above his heart. "It's just warm skin here. I can feel your heartbeat." I press my hand there, letting the thumps kick against my palm. "It's a beautiful, regular heartbeat. Nothing black here."

"You know that's just an expression," he mutters.

"I do. But do you?"

The muscles of his stomach clench when I kiss my way down them. "You're beautiful, and I love your body. I love the way you taste. I love your scent."

“I have no one.” The final, broken words, torn from the most wounded part of him. “I...it wouldn’t have mattered if it had been me. No one would have missed me.”

No. My heart breaks wide open. This isn’t what he needs. I thought it was, but it isn’t. He’s not ready. And maybe I’m not ready either. My body is ready, but the rest of me? It’s hurting. Hurting for him.

He’s so much bigger and stronger, but he lets me move to curl up at his side and rest my face against his chest, against his strong, steady heartbeat. I need to hold it together, even when it feels like my chest is going to rip in half. I can spend the next few minutes being strong when this man and men just like him and my brother gave their youth and spent the whole of their adult lives being stronger than anyone could ever imagine. I’m not going to get into the morals of it. I know I won’t agree with everything he’s done or that Jace might have done, but I do know it’s not black and white. I know it was their job, and they were following orders. Sometimes, choice isn’t an option.

Did Jace know he was going to do things he didn’t want to do? Did he know he was going to have regrets? Yes. Yes, he probably did. Was he haunted by some of the things he did and saw? I don’t doubt he was. But he’s still my brother, and if he had made it back home, no matter how much PTSD there was to work through, I would never have abandoned him, and I would never have stopped loving him or looking up to him. I would have hoped he’d be able to get healthy again, that he’d heal and find someone who would love him. I would have wanted him to have a family, to grow old, to be loved by so many people, and also love in return.

Gradually, Rick’s arm slides around my shoulders. He’s trembling less now.

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I reach down, grab the sheet, and wrap it around both of us.

“Even if you were the biggest mud bog this planet has ever known, with slime and quicksand and a prehistoric monster living inside you, you wouldn’t be too dirty for me, Patrick McDonald. You might have had no one, but that’s not true anymore. Don’t you ever say that you wish you could trade yourself for my brother or anyone else. I do not freaking accept that trade, and neither would Jace.”

He’s so quiet. Even his breathing is still. But when I shift to curl my face into his neck and breathe him in again, to feel his pulse there too, and I brush my fingers over his face, they come away wet.

I’m too small to hold him properly, but I get my arm halfway across his chest and slip my leg over one of his. We’re totally naked, and it feels good to be skin-to-skin.

I might be burning and burning, but right now, this is what we need. Just this level of closeness. Neither of us needs to be fucked seven ways to Sunday. We need something so much harder and deeper. A thousand times more intimate. We just need this. Each other. Folded over one another, protecting each other, and keeping each other safe.

“When you first got here, you looked at me like you wanted him instead of me. Like I was the wrong one,” Rick says.

My poor heart is broken glass, but his? It’s been obliterated. It’s been ground to sand. Ashes to ashes. Glass back to sand. Does it work that way?

“No.” I trace a pattern on Rick’s broad chest, rubbing a small circle with my palm after. “No. I’m so sorry if you thought that. I never meant to ever have you feel that way. I never, ever thought that.”

“I wanted out. Before I ever went home. Before my grandpa was ever dying, and pulled all those strings to get me back here. I. Wanted. Out. I used that as an excuse. I abandoned Jace and the others. I made them a promise. They were my brothers, and I left.”

I take small breaths to keep the tears stinging my eyes at bay. “Wanting out isn’t a crime. Feeling trapped isn’t wrong either. It means we need to make changes. It’s your mind’s way of telling you to listen or your body’s way of telling your mind that you’re done. You didn’t abandon anyone. You didn’t choose for anyone to get hurt or die. You had no control over that. If you were there, it still might have happened.”

“Not Jace. It wouldn’t have been Jace. I wouldn’t have let it happen.”

“Sometimes, Rick, things happen whether we want them to or not. You can’t torture yourself thinking you could have saved him. You might have died too,” I say.

“Or it could be him being home safe with you and the rest of your family.”

“Stop it.”

Rick sighs. “I can’t stop. I don’t think I’ll ever stop thinking about it.”

This time, when I stroke his cheek and put a finger to his lips, it’s not to tell him to be quiet. I don’t want him to be quiet. He needs to get it out. I was wrong before not to let him say what he needed to say. I wait, my fingers resting against his bottom lip. Maybe that’s all there was. Maybe there is nothing else.

I look up, even if he wouldn't want me to see him flayed open like this. His cheeks are wet, but his eyes are closed. His breathing is deeper.

"When was the last time you slept?" I whisper, smoothing his hair back. It's damp along the edges of his face. "I mean, really slept?"

He doesn't open his eyes, but he does lean into my touch. "Don't know. A long time."

A few of the wrinkles smoothen out on his forehead. He looks younger, smaller somehow. This hard, highly skilled, deadly man who needs someone to care so badly. Someone to keep watch. Someone to need him and want him, a heart for a heart.

It's been over a year since my brother passed, and while I've been fighting with the grief, he's been fighting too. Fighting the guilt along with the pain.

After I know he's sleeping because his breathing is so even and peaceful, and he's finally, finally not battling it out with me or himself or anything else, I slip out of bed. I pull up the covers, tucking them around him, and then I put on a fresh T-shirt and a pair of shorts. This night is probably going to feel like a fever dream for him. It feels a little bit like that for me too. It feels like I was dismantled and put back together all wrong. Painfully. All of me hurts for all of him.

He's wrecked me and ruined me with his honesty and our shared pain, with his heavy loneliness and the simple human need to connect with another person.

I slip back into bed, on the other side, above the covers, but I rest my hand on Rick's chest. He's still breathing deeply and evenly, the way he should. If he has nightmares, I don't think they're hounding him now. My body is still electric, but I close my eyes. They're heavy and gritty. My brain is exhausted, and I know if I lie here long enough, my body will eventually be as well. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to keep

watch. Even if I do that while I'm sleeping, I won't leave.

This marriage, this agreement, and the letter might all have an expiration date, but I think we're always going to be connected now. As more than just pen pals or text buddies or people who married and got an annulment.

Jace thought we needed each other.

Honestly, I thought he was wrong. But that was before.

Now? I think he might be so, so right.

Chapter eleven

Rick

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I don't know what in the mooney loomy mooing cow I was thinking last night.

I suppose I wasn't. My brain was pretty much cooked from lack of sleep. I can see how it's a thing they use as torture and how it would be mighty effective. Not that I've ever been tortured. I haven't. I'm just saying.

I expect Aspen to be cuddled up to me, soft and warm and full of pity that I know I'm not going to be able to even pretend to stand when I wake up, but the bed is empty.

She's not here.

But I'm here, wrapped up snugly in sheets and a comforter that smells like Aspen. Fresh and airy. All flowers and clouds, honey and citrus.

I find my clothes once I make my way out of my cocoon. They're not scattered on the floor like they should be but folded neatly at the end of the bed. It makes my face burn to think about Aspen tucking me in like a toddler, finding my clothes, and folding them. It makes me mortified beyond anything to think I came close to some kind of breakdown last night. I was just so, so, soooooo tired. Fuck me, I need to start sleeping more often.

When I don't, lapses in judgment happen, apparently.

I don't want her to take care of me. I don't want to be a burden.

I've never had anyone care for me like that. Jace might have been like a brother, but he didn't pick up after me. The closest he ever came to nursing me was stitching up

my various injuries over the years, and I liked to pretend those never happened. I'm not one of the take-a-break or rest-and-recover types. We certainly didn't do the sharing-with-tears thing. Yes, we told each other stuff. But no, it wasn't anything like what happened with Aspen last night.

I'm a red hot mess. I'm heading to my room to shower and get fresh clothes. My dresser is still in there. I figured I needed it until I could get some boxes for my things, and then it could go too. I stop dead at the top of the stairs. I've gone in the wrong direction without even noticing it. I hear humming. It's a pretty sound. A happy sound.

I might as well go and try to salvage some of the disaster of last night. If I get it over with, I won't have to think about it. Then I can shower and freshen my beautiful ass up. Ha freaking ha. Believe me, I know I'm the furthest thing from anything that could be called beautiful.

Except when Aspen looked at me last night, she looked at me like she thought I was.

My chest feels like someone just cut a deep wound through it. As I descend the stairs, it tugs and pulls like there's a tidy line of stitches holding me together. The gaping space in the wall where the huge painting was makes me grin. I can't help it. It's so satisfying that it's gone.

Aspen is at the island, stirring something in a huge stainless steel bowl. Her hips shake with every turn of the spoon. She's wearing the world's cutest dress—white and pink plaid with strawberries and large white buttons. It's all frilly and girly. Her long blonde hair is pulled back in a braid, and she looks like the real, vintage salt of the earth. The truest kind.

Just like her brother was.

Even if he never wore white and pink plaid and strawberries.

Jesus, I know he was only her half-brother, but she looks just like him sometimes. It's more than their shared genetics. It's their expressions.

Like now, when she hears me step in, and she stops stirring. Her eyes sweep over me, and they're immediately hard, as though she has no time for whatever apologies I might have come in here to make. They soften just slightly, the blue thawing out, and I know if I need to collapse into a chair and just talk, she'll listen.

"Patrick McDonald," she says, her voice sharp because it needs to be sharp. I have zero shields or walls or neutrality going for me, and she can tell. "You can always talk to me. It's okay to not be okay. Someone needs to damn well tell you that and mean it and get you to believe it, but it's not okay to say things that are cruel about yourself. I'm not here for that, and I'm not going to let you be either."

She has my number. This woman has had it since the day she showed up on my doorstep, fearless and chasing down her brother's last wishes. It makes my legs weak to hear her say my full name like she always has. Just like Jace used to. I doubt he ever told her he did that.

I scrape a hand over my face and grainy eyes, down past the facial hair that should just come off already. "I'm fucking embarrassed."

She starts stirring again, but her eyes never leave me. I've been in unthinkable dangerous situations before, yet I'm still frozen in place. This feels a hundred times worse than getting chased down or shot at. At least I know what to do in those situations. Right now, I feel completely lost.

"Why should you be embarrassed? Are you not a human being? Shouldn't you have regular emotions, ones you need to have in order to be healthy? Don't you deserve to

be able to grieve?”

“Men don’t...uh...men don’t break down like that.”

“Yeah,” she scoffs. “Yeah, right. That’s the oldest lie I think I’ve ever heard.” She gives whatever she’s mixing another hard stir. “Debunked. That’s straight-up debunked by basic science. Men can cry. They should. They need to. There is zero wrong with it.” She taps the bowl with the side of her free hand, making her fingernails clink against the metal. “And don’t you dare say it’s a weakness because I personally know a ton of strong men who cry. It’s absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I just...lost it. I shouldn’t have fallen asleep like that.”

“If you’re blushing about me tucking you in and making sure you were okay, please don’t. I’m just sorry for all the nights you’ve spent where you didn’t have that. The little kid version of you, the big kid version, and even the teenage version. You’re never too old to need to be taken care of once in a while.”

I feel like I could die, and there she is, just putting it out there so matter-of-factly.

“I know you’re not used to it, and I’m sorry for that too.” She points at the table. “Sit down. I’m going to have blueberry pancakes ready right away.”

Blueberry pancakes. That might as well be a bullet straight to my chest. Jace’s favorite. Not that we ever had them out there, wherever out there might have been. Out there meant a lot of places for us, but he talked about how good they were back home and how his mom used to make them. His stepmom too. He had two moms, and they both loved him. He had two, and I had none. I remember how I used to be so madly jealous of him and would then hate myself for it because a grown man should be over shit like that. It wasn’t the kind of jealousy that made me hate him. Just the

kind that made me wish I knew even a fraction of the love that glowed on his face when he talked about home.

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For me, home was as cold as the ground we often slept on. As strange and foreign as some of the places we first ventured to. It was unforgiving and lean, and the more wits and walls you had about you, the better.

“I should shower,” I tell her.

She looks up at me and never breaks her stirring stride. She doesn’t flinch or smile or give herself away. “I thought we could do that after breakfast.”

I’m floored. What in the ever-loving crispy yam fries? “I—we?”

“Yes. We.” She stops stirring. Finally. But only to take a step back, lean against the island, and look up at me with the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen. Her pupils are fucking huge, and my dick is rock-hard in my jeans. It’s so hard that it almost causes trauma with the seams and zipper again because they can’t get out of the way fast enough. “You were tired last night, and there were things that needed to be said. I appreciate and respect it, and I’m glad it happened. I think you’re feeling better, and your brain is doing better. I’m going to feed you delicious pancakes, and your body will be happy too. I wouldn’t be me if I weren’t honest, though, so I have to say that on a sexy scale of one to ten, I’m about a solid seven, which means I’m still hot and super bothered. I was thinking a lot about it before last night, and well, basically all night too.”

“What? You were thinking about—”

“Not about that.” She finally goes scarlet. Now. She blushes now. “About the marriage. I don’t care if it has an expiration date. My body needs you. I think I might

need you too. Maybe it's just until two weeks are up, and maybe it's after. I don't know how it's going to go. I got a letter, quit my job, upended my whole life, and stumbled into you. I was completely unprepared. I'm basically just winging it, and I know that's a great recipe for ultra-disaster, but I've lived a very careful life up until now, and it was incredibly dissatisfying. So, even if you wreck me, and it hurts my heart a little, I'm a big girl, and I'll get over it. We can still have sex and be friends. We can look out for each other, even if we're in separate places. I'm sorry that I found every reason on earth not to like you when we first met. I'm incredibly sorry if you ever felt like what you said last night was true. That I wanted Jace instead of you. I definitely don't wish I could replace you. Do I want my brother here? Yes. I'll always want him here. But I don't want that to be at any cost to you or anyone else."

Fuck me with the chainsaw we never had to use. I have zero clue what I'm supposed to say to all that.

Zero. Clue.

But my dick knows. He's all yes please, yes, dear lord, yessssss in my jeans. She's already picked him for her team. He wants to hear her say dirty things like the word horny again, which sounds so incredibly old school that it's just so much more taboo and so much hotter. And yes, I know she didn't actually say it, but hot and bothered is pretty much the same.

I'm so fucking turned on that I feel like a livewire about to burn the place down. At the same time, I can feel my eyes burning again. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm normally all about careful observation and strategic planning. That's how I stay alive. By being careful, not taking unnecessary risks, and not putting myself headlong into bodily harm. But Aspen is different. This double-tree-named woman...she's different from anyone I've ever met. She's so present and so here in my life that I can't uproot her. Haha. Tree joke. I've never felt this out of control. I'm rushing, alright. Straight into it. Heading for the danger.

So I do the only thing I can do at the moment and sit my ass down at the table. I put distance between us and act broody, so I'm less approachable. I wait, I try to process, and I watch Aspen make magic happen in this kitchen that I normally just ghost through. Food is for sustenance. It's for staying alive. It's never tasted...

The first bite I take of the pancakes she sets in front of me when they're done makes me want to embarrass myself all over again because it fucks with my emotions. Emotions. Yes, good lord, I have them. I admit it. I do. And this? These pancakes don't taste like sawdust and grit. They taste like heaven. They taste like fluffy, buttery goodness. Like tart and sweet berries. Like a whole lot of the tangy syrup that she's made by boiling down other berries.

She sits down across from me and smiles at me like she knows. Like she just gets it.

Everything she's made since she's been here has been good, but these? I think she just broke me with these.

I think last night broke me too. It broke my brain and wrecked me. The me I thought I knew my entire life. That person is just...he just evaporated. I'm broken up, and there's this being at the center of me that feels new and innocent and hopeful, and I know how to deal with all that even less than whatever happened last night or this morning so far.

What did she say about being wrecked? Because I think I'm going to be. I think I am. And maybe it's not horrible.

Aspen takes far longer to eat than I do since I basically scarf everything down at a record pace. And when she's finished, we both sit there in silence. It feels a little bit strained but not as awkward as it should be. She finally looks up at me, and the intensity of her gaze is like a one-two knockout.

“If you legitimately don’t want this, then please say so. I don’t want to hurt you,” she says.

I want to tell her that the idea of her hurting me is ludicrous, but I can’t say it. I might be a surly asshole at times, but I’ve never been known to lie. If I can’t say something, I just straight up say so or avoid the topic altogether. The fact is, it’s not that ludicrous. I’ve shown her the tiniest of cracks in my armor, and I know she could very well pierce through them if she desired. I know it would be painful in ways my previous injuries have done nothing to prepare me for.

It would hurt a lot, like how it used to hurt when everyone went home for Christmas or Easter or other holidays when I was at boarding school, but not me. It would hurt like being shuffled from one summer camp to another, so I was never around my grandfather either. It was agonizing before I finally learned to stop expecting it to be anything less and then desensitized myself to it. Before I got myself under control and shut myself down. I was doing that long before I ever made it to the military. My childhood was basically a battleground, and sometimes I was just fighting myself, but the shit that went on inside me made the real battles I endured later in life feel like a playground.

At least that enemy could be systematically overcome. Problems could be solved with tangible strategies. But the shit that was going on inside me? That was basically a war with hope, and you can never win one of those. Hope is the deadliest enemy of all.

“It’s not that I don’t want it.” She has no idea how hard it is for me to say those words.

She lets me off easy, smiling at me with real happiness. “Good. Because I’m a grown woman. I’m my own person. I told you that last night, but I want it to sink in. I also want you to know that if I want to please you, or at least try to please you, then it’s our business, and it’s going to be good for both of us if we want it to be good.”

“Aspen...”

“Patrick.”

She looks like a bulldog right now. The cutest, most lovely bulldog. What can I do to fight against her and win? Do I even want to fight against her? Do I want to win? Do I want to keep pushing and shoving and fighting my way away from everything and everyone? She’s in my life for good now. That’s already been established. I do think she means what she says. That if we do this, it doesn’t mean we have to stay married for real. It doesn’t mean we’re dating. It might change things, but she’s mature and emotionally stable enough to handle that.

I’m the unstable one. I’m the one who might not be able to handle it when she leaves. That’s the cold. Hard. Fecking. Truth.

“With those kinds of arguing skills, you should have been a lawyer,” I say with a sigh.

“If by arguing skills you mean, dang it, Aspen, put your mouth to better use, then yes. Yes, I’ll accept that.” If I thought her eyes were wide and lit up before, I was wrong. “If by skills you mean that you would like to take me to the shower now and have me give it my all, then yes. I’ll accept that too. And if you—”

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I'm out of my chair and scooping her out of hers before she can say anything else. I'm too ferocious. I want her too badly. I need to tone it down, or I'm going to scare her.

She grabs my shoulders and wraps her legs around my waist like she's not afraid at all. She also claims my mouth like she's not afraid of this kind of battle either. She's okay with my level of intensity.

By the time we get to the bathroom upstairs, her dress is puddled at her waist, and my shirt is gone. Her bra has been yanked down, exposing her beautiful breasts, and her legs are locked so tightly around my waist that I'm not even sure I can feel my dick anymore. I'm kidding. He's too painfully hard not to feel. He wants to be freed. He doesn't want to be trapped between us with all these clothes on. He wants to be slippery and wet, with her hand wrapped around him. He wants to be inside her, with her walls clenching around him.

Jesus, if I keep thinking this way, I'm not going to last any decent amount of time. If I thought last night was embarrassing, this would be a new level. It's been a long time for me. Definitely not since I got back to the States this time. I've been motivated enough to use my hand in the shower a few times over the past year and a half, but not really. It's kind of been like sleeping. I do it only when it feels atrociously necessary.

I set her down and start the shower. By the time I turn around, her dress is fully off. She's stripping out of her bra and panties, and heaven help anyone who gets in her way. She looks like a furious goddess who has one objective in mind. And that one objective is me.

Technically, I've always had a home. I've always had family, or at least I did until my grandpa died. But I know there are others out there. His brothers and his sister. Two of them are still alive. His sister is still alive. They're all over the world. My dad was an only child, and my mom's parents are dead now, but I have an aunt, though she's never reached out. However, I don't know that for sure. She might have at first, but if my grandpa continuously rebuffed her, and she didn't know where I was, then maybe she just gave up. It has been a long time since I was a kid. More than thirty years.

I've traveled extensively, but I felt like I half belonged where I was at the time, with the people who surrounded me. A team. My brothers.

I do know this place has never felt like home. My grandfather never felt like any family I could know or love. And even if I had brothers, I didn't belong to them the way Aspen has claimed me. Right now, even before this moment, ever since she first showed up on my doorstep, she was determined I shouldn't have to face the rest of this life alone.

She didn't have to do this.

She didn't have to know me, want me, or upend and reorganize her life for me. She didn't have to care about me or befriend me.

She didn't have to show me how to belong to someone.

But she did.

Chapter twelve

Aspen

Rick's eyes on me light up my body. I feel like I'm a thousand degrees, boiling in a cauldron of my own skin. I feel like those charred fries—already quite overdone. Something wild and untamable twists inside me, and I feel feral. Like a wild beast. Watch out; the double tree girl is going to turn into this monstrously awesome thing with the strength of a bear and the speed of a cheetah. It's not funny imagining myself as this sexed-up mix-and-match beast, but I smile.

Rick doesn't smile, but his eyes never leave me, and that's more than enough. I've never been so aware of anyone in my life. He's the only thing I can focus on. He's been the only one I could focus on for a while now.

He watches me intently while I slip my hands into my panties and pull them down my legs. I'm wet there. Totally soaked. My bra is already half off, but I unclasp it and let it go. It can run wild and free. I don't need it anymore. I'd much rather have Rick's hands on my breasts. I want his mouth. I want him touching me everywhere my clothes just grazed.

He's always in control. He's so in control of himself and every situation. He's learned and been trained that to be out of control means death. It means danger. It could cost other people their lives. He doesn't know how to surrender, and I'm not sure how far he'll let me go before he needs me to stop. I'm not going to push him. This isn't about me taking the lead or needing it. It's about our combined pleasure, and I need to find and learn what makes this man feel good. I'm not going to push him and make him retreat.

I don't feel like he's in control now, but that's far from surrendering. I just feel like...like we're something special. Like we're more than fire and gasoline around each other. This is us wanting each other, but it's a choice. It's not something we can't help.

I think.

Maybe I'm thinking too much.

I kiss Rick while the shower runs in the background. I pull him to me, and god, his lips are so freaking delicious. He's so hard, but his skin is soft under my fingertips. Softer than I expected a man so muscular and so battle-trained to be. When his shirt was on, I thought he'd be stone under it, but of course he's not. He's warm with smooth skin and some puckered scars. Like the huge one on his side where that blade entered or grazed him. Either way, it caused damage. We're standing in the light in here, and I trace my fingers over it. He doesn't flinch or pull away.

He opens his mouth to me, and I slip my tongue in. I guide his hand up to my breast and curl his fingers against it. My knees go weak, so I wrap an arm around his neck and pull him to me as I back up against the wall. I love the press of his body against mine. His skin might be silky, but he's so hard and so hot. Maybe we are combustible after all. I feel like one of us might go up in flames at any second.

I lose myself in kissing him. I've never had a kiss like this. I've never felt like every single second was a dance and a masterpiece. I love the way he groans when I scrape my teeth over his bottom lip. I'm the one who feels like I'm going to fall over when I run kisses over his short beard, down his neck, to his chest. I keep going. We're not even in the shower yet, but I don't need it. I want the taste of him too badly. I don't want the water washing it all away. I like that he's sharp and masculine and somehow soft under his sharpness. He tastes so good that it makes my head swim.

I slither down to my knees, and they give out like melted goo. I'm doing a very good impression of a jellyfish down here.

But I don't want to be a jellyfish. I want to have bones. I need bones. I finally get my hands in working condition, and I move to tackle his jeans. I want them off.

"Aspen," he groans. "Maybe it's best to—"

“You can’t shower with your jeans on,” I interrupt.

I wait for him to undo them. Letting out a soft groan, he steps back and pulls them down. His boxers too. He’s as naked as I am after he steps out of them. Naked and magnificent. He’s chiseled from his hard, square jaw all the way down to his freaking ankles. Chiseled ankles? Yeah, they’re apparently a thing.

His cock is so hard that it looks like it might be an issue. I mean, an issue as in painful, which I sort of get. I’m so hot between my legs, so empty, pulsing, and aching that it’s not comfortable. It’s physical discomfort I’ve never known. I want his hands all over my body, but I reach for him instead. I want to make him feel good. Right here in the bathroom, beside the running shower that neither of us is in any hurry to get into. It will probably be cold by the time we do. Then again, this is a rich person’s house, and I doubt rich people ever run out of hotwater. There’s probably a backup tank for a backup tank for a backup tank.

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I close my hand around Rick's shaft, and he literally gasps. Yes, this man who looks like he can kick all the ass, who has never been surprised about anything in his life, draws in a surprised gulp of air.

"Jesus, Aspen, no, I—"

I lean forward and guide him to my lips. He's salty and soaked like I'm soaked. He's the hardest thing I've ever felt and held, and he's like velvet. Cocks look kind of weird, I guess, but they're actually very ingeniously constructed.

If I'm being honest, this kind of thing has always seemed a little bit demeaning. It's a position that I couldn't understand why anyone would like to be in. The guy has all the power. It's lowering to be on your knees like this. It takes a lot of trust. I guess there are so many images out there where this is exactly that, but what's happening right now is nothing like that. I do not feel demeaned in the least.

I want this. I want this so fucking badly that it seems like the most beautiful, natural thing in the world. Taking Rick into my mouth is what I want. I want to make him feel good, but it makes me feel good too. I'm basically going into full-on detonation mode between my legs. I like everything about this. The taste of him, the way he feels when I stroke him with my hand, the sounds he makes, and how his body moves against me as I swirl my tongue over the head of his cock. I love that when I look up, his head is angled sideways, and his eyes are closed. He looks like he's focused and concentrating. Actually, he looks like he's meditating, but I can see beneath the outer calm. I feel the tremble that races through his whole body as he holds himself back. He's still, and he doesn't work my mouth. Instead, he lets me taste him the way I want to. He lets me be in charge of his pleasure.

I like that he doesn't make a noise, but his breathing becomes raw. It sounds like his lungs are being scraped against a cheese grater, minus how much that would hurt. He has to throw a hand up against the wall as though he would stumble if he didn't.

His fingers flex and uncurl and flex up again. I watch everything before I close my eyes and take him deeper. I still work him with my hand, but I want more of him. I don't want him to pull back or pull away, even if he's going to lose control. The tremor is now trembling. His hips slowly move, just a bare minimum, but it feels like everything.

It feels so right when his fingers find a handhold in my hair. I steady him in return with a hand on his hip. I curl my fingers into his perfect, rock-hard butt cheek the same way I did a few nights ago on the stairs. It was life or death then. It was him going into a head-on freefall, and I was the only one holding him back. But this is a different freefall. This one is safe. I'm not here to hold him back. I'm here to help him lose control.

I should probably go slow because I'm not very experienced with this, but I don't want to go slow. I want his whole dick in my mouth, as far as it will go, and I want it now. I want his saltiness on my tongue. I want him losing control, fucking my mouth, grabbing my hair. I want the kinds of sounds torn from his throat that tell me he's going to lose it.

"Holy dick, Aspen," Rick hisses.

Yeah, holy dick. That's about right. But I don't want that to be it. I use my other hand to stroke his balls before I cup them. He jerks, nearly bending in half, and I feel the wild shudder that rips through him.

"Holy blinking balls," he rasps.

Blinking balls? Is that what they feel like for him? Like they're doing Christmas light things, flashing on and off? That must hurt. I should make it better.

I don't want to stop. I don't want to ever stop. I want to keep pleasing him like this for...for a good amount of time.

I keep up with caressing his balls and doing whatever I can with my mouth. I take him as deep as possible and then pull back, using my tongue in tandem to lick around him. I don't think I'm very good at this, but the way his hips start to thrust into my face says otherwise. He starts making noises like a cow stuck in the muck would make, and oh my holypackage, I like it.

I'm down here, enjoying this more than if it were me being touched and teased and tasted.

When Rick gets a little wilder, I open my eyes and tilt my head up to watch him. I don't know if I've ever seen anything more beautiful than he is right now. His head is bent forward, and his long hair, which is normally neatly combed back, is flipped over his forehead and in his eyes. They're closed, and his lips are moving, but he's not saying anything. Maybe he's just sucking in the air really quietly. I can't hear him, especially considering that the running shower sounds like a roar next to us.

This is unbearably intimate, but he's here with me, and we're doing this. I'm honored it's me. That I'm the one who gets to see him in this private moment of unguarded passion.

I watch him, touch him, and use my mouth on him until he tries to jerk my head up. He winces, and his jaw grinds hard, his teeth clashing together. "Aspen." My name barely sounds human. In fact, it barely sounds like my name at all. I think this is the best way anyone has ever said it. "Aspen, I'm going to..."

“Yes,” I murmur.

“I seriously can’t...you’re going to have to...”

I make it pretty obvious that I’m not going to stop. I’m half terrified, but I want this with him. I want to give him something I’ve never given to anyone else.

The way he shakes is a moment I’ll never forget. I close my eyes and savor it. He’s gentle, even if I don’t need him to be. His hands cup my face, and he arches over me, shaking brutally before he comes in my mouth. His cock kicks on my tongue, and I swallow. Honestly, I thought it would be pretty gross, but it’s not gross. It’s different. I’ll say that. I should have known nothing about this man is anything less than beautiful.

It’s adorable how worried he is about me. After he’s spent and done shaking, he lifts me up and kisses my forehead, my nose, and my cheeks, and then full-on kisses me on the mouth. My whole body sparks up into a red-hot flame shower of burning incendiary delight. I would say it’s a pretty dangerous thing to do, but Rick is pretty used to living on the perilous edge of things.

He takes me into the shower while kissing me until I’m weak all over. The way his mouth guides mine, dancing with me and leading me into him—it’s an intimacy I haven’t experienced before either. His hands twine into my hair when we’re both in the shower. It’s as modern as you’d expect, with a glass door, an immaculate tile job, and a huge square showerhead that has the world’s most gentle and even spray. It looks like it’s never been used before.

Not that I notice it. I barely notice anything except Rick.

But I do notice that, of course, the water is still hot.

I'm definitely not a virgin, but I'm not the most experienced person in the world when it comes to sex either. However, I've never felt anything like this before. I expect to be hoisted up onto Rick's hips and trapped between him and the glass while he fucks the ever-loving daylights out of me, but he kisses down my jaw, my neck, and my shoulders and then slowly spins me around. He takes my wrists and guides my hands over my head. My palms flatten on the glass. It's been warmed up by the temperature of the water, even though it's barely wet. It appeared clear before, but now that my palms are on it, I can feel the steam. I curl my fingers as though I can hold on.

Rick knocks my legs apart, not meanly, but not with the gentlest touch either. I don't want gentle. I don't want him to treat me like I'm made of glass because I'm definitely not. I arch my back and let my legs fall open. He makes a barely human noise, and then, thank everything in the universe, his fingers land on me.

I'm slippery and soaked. I'm probably so wet that my thighs are smeared with wetness. I don't know. Now that we're in the shower, I can't tell. All I can concentrate on is the feel of his fingers gliding over my folds. He goes straight to my entrance and doesn't stop. He pushes two fingers in, just a little bit. It stretches me, and it burns so fucking good.

“More,” I groan.

“Like this?” Rick apparently likes to be mean sometimes because the heel of his palm comes down on my clit. Well, no, that’s not mean. He’s not rough. But he knows exactly how to make me wild and not give me everything I need all at once.

I can imagine him entering me in twenty different ways, which is shocking as I’ve never had such vivid, shocking images go through my brain. But right now, I’d like every single one of them if Rick is going to do them. I’m so far gone that I’m panting. I’m going to thrust myself back and make him put his fingers inside me, or I’m going to thrust myself forward onto his hand and make him please me that way.

Except I seem to be frozen.

It’s damn inconvenient when I’m already this ridiculously needy for it.

I still want to make him feel good. I want him to be able to show me and teach me what he likes, so I let him touch me like this instead of begging him. He knows what I want. I’m pretty sure he knows since I’m panting like a steamboat and moaning like there’s a rabid rabbit chasing after me.

He strokes his fingers over my folds again, playing with me before he takes the pressure away from my clit. I don’t know if reverse touch is a thing, but the ghost of that touch does things to me that have their way with the bones in my legs.

“Bend over, sweetheart,” Rick instructs. He doesn’t stop touching me.

Is he freaking serious? Bend over? I don't know how flexible I am, so I'm not sure how far I can go. I'm not going to just grab my ankles or anything.

He guides my hands for me, the hardness of his body brushing up against my bare skin. He positions me where he wants me, and I'm happy to go along. I'm not embarrassed or self-conscious about the position. I just want more. More of him, more of his hard, muscular body pressed up against me, more of him surrounding me, and more skin to skin contact.

His teeth graze over the back of my neck before he straightens up. As for me, I still have my hands on the shower glass. I trust him. I trust him so fully that when he guides himself to me, all I do is arch back and try to take him immediately. I should be intimately acquainted with the size of him, but when he lines his crown up with my entrance and pushes in slowly, he feels seriously large.

Oh god, oh shit, holy dick. Holy blinking Christmas balls.

"Are you okay?" Rick's hands caress my hips. His fingers are the ones that are going to be digging into my butt this time.

"I'm good," I rasp.

"Are you?" He sounds amused. He pushes into me another inch and then another. He goes slow, and I don't know if I want it slow or I want it to hurt, but he's going to set the pace. I'm just going to be a wild sex goddess in my head, and that's okay. I don't need to break myself over here.

"Oh yes. Yes, yes, yes, I'm good," I reply.

"Okay. That's good."

Jesus, feeling him all the way inside me until his legs are pressed up against mine blows my mind. My body wants to come right freaking now. I can feel my orgasm barreling full steam my way, but not yet. Not yet.

I have my eyes tightly closed. Because if I open them, I'm finished. If anything gets near my clit, I'm finished. If I start thinking about what we look like in this position, I'm finished.

When I first arrived at Rick's doorstep, having left everything in Atlanta on pause, I didn't see us ending up here, bumping in the shower.

That day feels like seven million lifetimes ago.

I'm glad we're here now.

"I don't want to hurt you," Rick says, but he doesn't stop. He slowly thrusts into me. My brain is pretty much peanut butter and jelly in a skull sandwich, but I don't think he's talking about what we're doing.

"I don't want to hurt you either," I tell him.

"You won't, Aspen. You couldn't."

"I could, Patrick McDonald. I very well could."

He doesn't say anything to that. He doesn't have to. We both know it's true. I said this didn't have to change our fake marriage into something real, but I wasn't prepared for how I'd lose my sense of reality whenever I was with him. I wasn't prepared for how I'd lose my sense of self and become something else, someone else. Someone more than just me.

I thought sex could be a singular act, just about pleasure. I wasn't expecting to be blown away by how connected we are to each other. Emotionally.

“You're going to come, Aspen. You're going to come so hard that I'm going to have to hold you up.”

I imagine him doing that the way he's doing it now. Without his hands. I almost laugh and come at the same time. I'm so close. I should tell him that he's okay. That I'm okay with all this and more. I should tell him that I'm on birth control, but I can't find the words. All I can do is pant one small word of agreement.

“Okay.” Yes, yes, yes. Okay, okay, okay. Please, please, please.

Rick grasps my hips again and does more than thrust slowly. He finds a rhythm where he can probably feel all of me, and I know for sure that I can feel all of him. He’s beyond hard, long, and thick inside me. I’m going to die, and it’s going to be amazing. In the next minute, he sets a pace that turns me into a roasted marshmallow over a campfire. He’s the campfire. And he’s right. I do need him to hold me up. One more stroke and I burst into flames, shattering into pieces. The world is fire and marshmallows and more marshmallows and then more. My bones turn into sugar, and my skin is white light.

I don’t expect Rick to be able to come again so quickly, but he pulls out, makes the smallest choked noise, and comes against my back.

We’re so quiet, but our bodies are screaming loudly. The world is covered in crystalized water droplets, and everything sounds so loud. The shower spray, our breathing, our frenzied hearts.

I turn around slowly and set my hands on Rick’s heaving shoulders. Then, I look up into his face and see that he’s already closing himself off. He’s going to retreat and hide behind that blank slate.

I kiss him softly. “You know what we need?” More of this. That’s what we need. But no, not right away. Not right now. I don’t want to literally kill us. “We need something mundane. Something normal. We need to get out of the house. Let’s go for a walk.” I run my thumb over his bottom lip. I wish he’d suck my finger into his mouth and bite it, but he shakes his head.

“No,” he says.

“Let’s go to the park again.”

“Not in the daylight. There are children there, and we don’t have any children with us. We’d be creepy.”

Right. Yeah, that’s probably not a good thing. “A different park then.”

“No.”

“Let’s just go for a walk then,” I say.

“No,” he repeats.

“We could go to a movie.”

“No.”

“The beach?”

He shakes his head again. “Especially not the beach.”

I’m not going to let him frustrate me, and I’m not going to let him win. Except in the shower. Or in bed. Or anywhere else in the house. And only in that way.

We could go to the one remaining bed in the house, and I could sit on your face. My nipples become another ten percent harder than they already are, which puts them somewhere around one hundred and eighty percent hard.

“We can go for groceries,” I suggest.

“We have—”

“Okay, well, you have to pick one of those options! It’s healthy to get out of the house. You need to do that more. You don’t even like this place.”

He opens his mouth to give me more no’s and protests, but the words dry up, and he sighs with a hint of a caveman grunt at the end. It rolls on, that caveman sound. It’s so hot, and his frown is so smoldering and delicious that I want to jump into his arms and have him drive me up against the glass the way I first imagined.

“We’ll get chicken,” I say, trying to coax him into it. I want to be playful. I’m not very good at it, but I darned well want to try.

“Fine,” he huffs. “Fine.”

“Because you know I won’t stop bugging you about it until you go with me?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

I grab the bottle of manly body wash off the ledge that’s hollowed out in the tile. Then, I pop the cap and squirt a stream onto his chest. We both freeze. His lips part, and his left eye twitches. I grin, put the bottle back, and rub until suds appear all over his chest. I thought our fun in the shower was done, but I was wrong. This is fun. Touching him, cleaning him, learning his body, and memorizing him is fun.

“Holy balls,” he grinds out. He’s already hard again. His dick must be one of those super dicks from another dimension.

“Yeah,” I breathe. “Holy balls.”

Chapter thirteen

Rick

Holy dick.

I think that might be my new favorite holy anything to use. It's pretty good. Holy balls, amazeballs, cheeseballs, all the balls are pretty good too. Anyway, holy all the balls, I'm here at the grocery store. It might be against my will, but I'm here, and that says something. It doesn't mean I'm going soft.

I chose to wait in the car while Aspen went in. She's still in there getting some kind of chicken or other. Maybe she sensed she could ask me for anything after the amazing sex, but it wasn't that. Truthfully, if she needed me to do something for her, I'd do it. I just don't want her to know that. I don't want to admit it to myself. I don't like feeling this way. I don't even know what it is I'm feeling, and not being able to name it rankles. I shouldn't be feeling anything at all. Isn't life so much easier when you do it sans emotions?

I people-watch in order to stop thinking about all of that.

However, I still know the exact second Aspen emerges from the store, looking like a golden angel, literally, since she has a flowy white dress on, and her hair is pulled back at the temples while the rest is down.

I pop the trunk, and she puts the paper bag in.

She's quiet when she slips into the passenger seat.

"Did you get what you needed?" I ask.

The faint hint of a smile on her lips makes my dick replay the shower scene and the not-shower scene, and I'm in danger of having a trapped dick again. I don't want to replay that. Rolling on the ground and feeling like I'd been gut-punched and scrotum-punched at the same time wasn't fun at all.

"Yeah, I did."

"So we can go home now?" I don't know why she's so amused and why her eyes are sparkling like wildflowers after a fresh rain. I don't know why that makes my chest pinch as badly as it does.

"We can go home now."

I crank the car into reverse and peel out of the parking lot like it's the grocery store's fault that I'm going all haywire on the inside. I manage to get a few miles down the road, heading back home—I apply that term to the house lightly, as it's never been a true home to me—before the smell hits.

"What the good heavens is that ungodly smell?" I jerk the car down a side road and park in front of a row of houses. Aspen is very, very quiet, but she's doing that thing where she's trying not to laugh.

I get out, race around to the back of the car, and jerk open the trunk.

The smell is strong here, and it hits me all at once. It's ungodly, but it's not ungodly bad. It's ungodlygood. Nothing should smell that good. Nothing. She's clearly bought something unnatural.

I rummage through the paper bag until I find the offending offender.

It comes in a plastic container—black on the bottom, with a clear dome overtop.

I rip the dome off and cast it aside. Now, the smell is real, and it makes my mouth water. I can't remember ever feeling this hungry. This thing is a witch in disguise.

Rotisserie chicken.

I can't help myself. Right there in the middle of suburbia land, I tear off a drumstick. The skin is crispy and perfectly seasoned, a light golden brown. I tear it straight off the meat. It's still so hot, so good, and I can't eat it fast enough. When I'm done, the bone gets tossed back into the container before I attack the other drumstick. It doesn't come off cleanly, but that's not a problem. I just toss the bone away, pull the meat off the bird, and stuff big chunks in my mouth.

This might be the best thing I've ever tasted. Ever.

I can only say that because I haven't tasted Aspen. Not there. Not yet.

Wow, look at me. Ravaging a rotisserie chicken straight out of the car's trunk, thinking thoughts I can't control, having a good night's sleep, and coming at least three times this morning. Who the hell am I right now?

A door shuts, and Aspen appears in my peripheral. She looks absolutely delighted by this development.

Though I'm not sure which one. The chicken or the sex.

I might not be sure about that, but I am sure this is a good day. It's a day I want to do again and again. With her. Is that on the table? I have no idea. I've never felt so out of

control.

“Darn rotisserie chickens.” She grins at me as I remove half the breast and start munching on it. “They’re pretty much impossible to resist, aren’t they? I’m sure they’re enough to drive anyone mad. No one can wait. They’re that fragrant. They’re torturous beasts all the way home. Plus, they’re great. They’re so versatile. You can make them into anything and eat them on anything. They drive pets mad too. Dogs and cats alike. Believe me, I know. I’ve been over at friends’ houses, and I’ve seen how their pets react.” Her eyes sweep over me. “Pretty much like that.” My face heats up. What am I even doing? I could say the sex worked up a real appetite, but really? Am I really going to go there? Me, who is known for my uncompromising self-control? “Don’t worry.” She pats my arm. “I think you’re adorable.” She pauses. Her smile gets a tad bit evil, and my cock leaps at the sight of it. It knows what she’s thinking. “And about as delicious as that chicken.”

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Adorable? Delicious? I'm a soldier. I've spent what feels like a lifetime fighting other people's wars. I've used weapons, and I've been used as a weapon. I know more about violence than I'll ever know about love and tenderness. No, I'm certainly not adorable. Deadly, maybe.

I lick my fingers, suddenly not feeling very hungry anymore.

"Hey." Aspen grazes my arm lightly. I have everything covered up by my usual black outfit. My Henley takes her touch, but it's like I've been burned straight down to my bones. "Rick, it's okay. You can eat the chicken out of the car trunk if you want. I didn't realize you were that hungry, but of course you are. We worked up an appetite having crazy, wild, steamy sex."

"Shh!" I exclaim. She practically just shouted that out.

I glance around without really looking, scanning for signs of danger and people with their eyes popping out of their heads because they just saw a guy pull over and start cramming chicken in his face and then overheard his sort of wife talking about all the wild banging that happened earlier.

I tuck the lid back on the chicken container and make sure it's firmly in the bag. There are super soft-looking buns in there, a head of lettuce, and tomatoes. Everything to make a good chicken sandwich and more.

I shut the trunk and quickly get back in the car, but Aspen takes her time as though she's trying to draw it out. When she slides into the front passenger seat, she's smiling. I don't see any reason for there to be smiles, but it's like nothing can remove

the sunshine from her.

Is now the right time to tell her that this isn't going to work? That she needs to remove those stars in her eyes and the sunlight in her smile? Is now the right time to tell her that she doesn't fit in my life? To tell her that what we did this morning might have been good, but it can't mean anything? She still has to leave, and life has to go on the way it was before. I'll still give her money and make sure she doesn't want for anything. We'll get an annulment, and she can start over and not think about me ever again. I'll wait it out, then I'll get rid of the godforsaken house and go and do something with my life too. I'll have it figured out by then. It doesn't matter that I don't know right now. I just know Aspen and her happiness don't fit. They don't fit with me because I'll crush them. I'll make her unhappy. I'll break her and wreck her, and then she'll wish she never met me. She'll tell me I'm not capable of kindness or goodness or love. She'll know it for a fact. I'll hurt her, even though it's the last thing I ever want to do.

Yes, Operation Detachment needs to happen right now.

All it would take is one biting word to wipe that smile from her face. A chain of words that would hurt her enough to make her withdraw from me.

She's just sitting there with huge, glistening blue eyes, open and kind. Her damn heart is in those eyes.

I can't do it.

I don't know anyone who can.

I've been on the toughest missions anyone could imagine. More than one of them was a life-or-death kind of deal. But this? I can't do it. This is one mission I can't complete.

“I can still make us chicken sandwiches when we get home,” Aspen says softly, but there’s no tremor in her voice. It’s surprisingly strong and steady, just like she is.

I punch the start button on the dash. “Yeah,” I mutter, keeping my gaze forward. I can’t look at her again. The emotions I need to tone the heck down, or better yet, not have at all, are slightly haywire. “Sure. That sounds good.”

Chapter fourteen

Aspen

The next morning, I could tell that even though the pool crew had arrived to map out the backyard and get it ready for the new swimming center of watery glory, Rick was still smarting about what I said. I’m pretty sure it was because I called him adorable.

Right now, I’m taking a tray of freshly baked sausage rolls out of the oven, even though it’s just after eight. There’s never a time too early for this level of deliciousness. I bought everything I needed yesterday in order to make them, mostly because I’ve had the worst craving.

Rick enters the kitchen freshly showered, looking far better and also smelling far better than anyone on earth could ever cook or bake. I’m instantly as hot as the oven I just switched off. He was quiet yesterday after we got back home. He ghosted around the house, making piles and moving stuff around in the last few remaining rooms. I don’t know what he’s going to do when he empties the whole house completely. I don’t know what this mission will be then. I’m worried he’ll realize this wasn’t what he needed and that he’ll feel even more lost after.

I went to bed alone last night. And I woke up alone. I wasn’t expecting anything different, but I was disappointed. I know mind-blowing sex isn’t a stepping stone or a tool, and it’s not going to undo years of training. It’s not a weapon in itself or a

bargaining chip.

Would I have just liked to have more orgasms with a man my body can't stop wanting and craving and needing? Yes. Yes, I would have. I'm pretty sure he'd like it just fine himself, and by just fine, I mean immensely fine. Would I have just liked to spend a night curled up beside him in bed, even if he tossed and turned, hogged the blankets, and snored like he was felling an entire forest? I'm not going to lie. It would have been nice. More importantly, it would have been good for him. He needs to sleep more.

"Good morning." I try not to be too chipper, and at the same time, I angle to the side so he hopefully can't see that my nipples are poking straight through my bra and shirt. It's a long-sleeved, cropped shirt, and I'm wearing high-waisted jeans, but they're both on the thin side. Unfortunately, so is my bra. "Fancy a sausage roll?"

His eyes widen before they scan the cooling rack on the counter. I see him visibly relax. Sausage roll isn't a code word for sex.

I wish it were a code word for sex. Right now, I wish he'd sweep me up, put me on the counter, literally tear my clothes off my body with his bare hands, and devour my pussy.

Instead, I get salty Rick, who pours himself a glass of water and shakes his head. "I'm good. The pool crew is here. I want to go out and supervise."

"I'm pretty sure they're going to discuss any and all plans with you. If you watch them, it might make them nervous."

"I'm going to watch," he says anyway.

"Alright. Sounds good." Maybe it is a good thing for him to be involved with this. I

think the pool might be a spite thing, but if it's not, then I'm happy he's found something he can be happy about. "I'll come with you. I'd love to see how it works."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

“You’re probably right. Maybe it’s not a good thing to be constantly looking over their shoulder.”

I’m confused by the rebuff. Why are things between us suddenly colder than a penguin chilling on an iceberg? Was it the sex? Was it because I’ve been too frank and open? Is he withdrawing because it’s safer to go and hide in order to prepare for another attack and onslaught? Is he feeling confused? Is he hurting? Is he angry? I can’t freaking tell. I don’t want to be clingy, but I’m the kind of person who doesn’t like not knowing. It makes me feel nasty and bad inside.

Rick walks out of the kitchen, and I hear him going upstairs. I want to give him space, but a few minutes later, I find myself tracing the same path to his office.

The door is open, and he’s leaning back in his chair with it facing the window and watching the crew moving around the backyard. They look like they’re just mapping things out right now. Planning. I can see them gesturing and pointing things out to one another.

I lean against the doorframe. My arms are crossed but still casual. Oh, by the way, I followed your salty self in here, and we’re going to talk even if you don’t want to. But don’t worry, I’m going to try and make it as pain free as I possibly can.

“I know you think you’re a lean, mean killing machine, but you truly are adorable too.” There. If this is what’s bothering him, then we’re having it out. It’s not going to linger in silence between us anymore. I’m not the kind to drag out fights that aren’t even fights. Things don’t fester with me because I don’t give them a chance. I’m not above giving someone time. Time is a great thing. But not too much time.

He leans back in his chair, but his body goes on high alert. All his muscles tense even though he's giving off those I'm totally casual over here, I don't care about anything, I'm all goodvibes. "I certainly am not."

"You certainly are. Haven't you heard the expression 'get you a man who can do both'? You can do and be both."

"I disagree," he grunts.

"Well, I can find you adorable."

"Don't forget that finding me adorable has an expiration date."

There it is. We haven't talked about that since before the sex. I know I said it wouldn't change anything. Last night, Rick stalked the house and probably sat up all night in his office the same way he usually does, keeping guard when it's not necessary or avoiding the things from his past. Things he doesn't want creeping up on him in his unguarded, defenseless moments.

I hold fast to what I said. I'm not someone who says one thing and then hopes it means another. I'm not into playing games. My family taught me to be a pretty straight shooter. In our house, you could always talk about how you were doing, what you were feeling, and what you had going on, and it was more than okay to ask for support.

So I'm not going back on it, and I'm not pulling a sticky, tricky, fast one, but I'd be okay if there were a new development too. I think. Ugh, for the love of chicken drumsticks, I'm not sure what I think. I'm kind of an internal mess right now. If my life is a recipe, I think that with all the recent ingredients, I can't hope to turn out a masterpiece that's well put together. I should expect a goulash. Or maybe I'm a pan scramble. Maybe I can be okay with that. Maybe I am okay with that. But I'm not okay

with Rick being a jerk about it though. He can be nice if he wants to be. He doesn't have to be so direct and poke a finger straight into the bruise.

"Technically, it doesn't," I counter. His eyes flash. We're fighting the same fight here, but he's looking at me right now like I might be a potential adversary, and he's very wary about this. "I'm not playing games, Patrick McDonald. That's not my style. The marriage has an expiration date. We both agreed to it. And if we're not in agreement about extending it, then that's fair. But me finding you adorable? We agreed to be a part of each other's lives after this, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"Baby goats are adorable," he huffs. He spins his chair around and gives me his back, which literally hits me straight in the chest as a bombardment of emotion. Rick will never show someone his back—his most vulnerable spot—unless he trusts them. "I'm more like a snake."

"I'm sure baby snakes are adorable."

"Baby snakes grow up to be big enough to swallow a crocodile."

"Those are adorable too. Big snakes, small snakes. Small crocodiles, big crocodiles."

The chair whips around. I've clearly pissed him off with my obstinacy, but you know what? I'm not sorry. If he's looking for a worthy opponent, then I'm going to be one, but only because we truly are fighting for the same thing in the end. I hope it's his happiness. And I hope it's my happiness too. I hope we might somehow find that together, even if it's just as pen pals.

Oh, for the love of big snakes, we can't be just pen pals.

Fuck it, I'm moving here.

I'm going to make good on my threats. Rick needs someone close to him. Or I'm going to ask him to come to Atlanta. Maybe he's only being so edgy right now because he's started to open up, and it's painful, and he thinks he's going to be hurt. He thinks I'm just going to move on and leave him and forget him, except when it comes to dropping him a line every now and then to talk about nothing at all.

Well, he can think again.

Because it's not happening.

"Is this really just about sausage rolls? Fine, I'll have one. I'll even have two. Or three. If you just promise to leave me alone for a few hours to enjoy the creation of my pool."

"You truly can't do that with me? Enjoy something?" I ask.

"I can't enjoy it if you're going on about how adorable lethal creatures are."

"They can be both," I insist.

"You are one of the most maddening people I've ever met. Your brother was decidedly not like that at all. He was one of the least stubborn people I ever met."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

Ouch. I raise my shoulder in a shrug anyway because he's right. I can't get mad over him pointing out a truth, and one I'm often quite proud of. Jace wasn't stubborn, whereas I can be like the good old mule that is the epitome of stubbornness, even though I'm sure mules are freaking awesome creatures in their own right. They can be both too. Stubborn and awesome.

"I'm only maddening because I'm right. And you are, too, by the way. I'm stubborn. Crazy stubborn. I like to think it usually translates more as a good thing. Tenacity can be great. It just means I'm willing to stand firm on what I believe."

"And you believe proving to me that I'm adorable is worth all of this?"

"I believe proving to you that you're great is worth all of this and more. I also believe proving to you that I'm going nowhere is worth all of this. I know you're not trying to hurt me. You're just a prickly pear because life has taught you that it's best served up with thorns on the outside to keep the rest of you safe."

"Ugh, the metaphors. They're so overused," he grumbles.

"I apologize for being a walking stereotype. Do you want sausage rolls? When was the last time you ate?"

"I don't need you to take care of me, Aspen. I thought I'd made that clear."

"Alright. I can shut the blinds, and you can take care of me then. You can eat my pussy and feed me your cock. I'm absolutely starving, and I can openly admit it."

“Oh my...” He looks like he’s going to stroke out.

He doesn’t know what to do with me right now. But he’s not the only one. I don’t go around saying wonderfully nasty things like that. Ever.

I’m the one who walks over and shuts the blinds. Then I walk to the door and close it too. It has a lock, which is a great thing since there are people moving around out in the yard. I’m not taking any chances. Once I’m sure the room is secure from anyone seeing in or walking in, I move back to the desk. I strip off my crop top and shimmy out of my jeans. I leave my bra on. It’s one of the few super nice ones I own. It’s black with little rosebuds all over it, and it’s trimmed out in expensive-feeling lace. I have the matching panties somewhere, but I forgot to pack them, so I settled for plain black because it kind of matches.

I sit down on the edge of the desk and try not to fall over due to my useless legs as Rick’s eyes scald the shit out of me.

He leans back in his chair and feigns disinterest, but I can already read him. I know better. I know that when he starts putting on a show of not wanting me, that’s exactly the time when he does.

I watch the muscles in his jaw jump as he clamps it down. I spread my legs a little further apart, trying to be sexy. I’m probably failing, but as far as seduction goes, I’m pretty inexperienced.

“We shouldn’t do this.” Rick’s voice is iron. His jaw is iron. His eyes are hard but not cold. Rather, they’re ten thousand degrees of molten hot heat. If I was the stove and he was the spaghetti sauce, he’d be burned, burned, burned by now.

That was the last thing I tried to cook at home before I left to come here. And let’s just say the sauce didn’t turn out as expected. I kind of walked away thinking the

burner was on low when it was on high, and things got roasted and blackened like I was using a smoker and a barbeque instead of a regular old stove.

“It’s only going to make things harder,” he adds after a slow inhale. I know he’s doing his measured breathing thing. It’s another trick of his. I like that I can already tell these things about him after just a few days together.

“On who? On me? I don’t think so.”

“I think so. You seem like you value commitment. You seem like once you get attached, that’s it.”

“You’re right.” I widen my legs a little bit more until my thighs start to burn a little, and then I go a little bit further. Rick’s eyes shoot straight down between my legs for just a fraction of a second before he jerks them back up. He quickly looks toward the window, but the blinds are closed, and I know he’s seeing nothing. “I do value commitment. And I do get attached. There’s nothing wrong with that. But sexually? That’s something we can work out later if we want to.”

“But we’re not going to want to. We’re not because it’s not—”

“Allowed? I think it’s perfectly allowed,” I say.

I slide my bra straps down my arms and then roll the cups down and undo it from the back before dropping it on the floor. “I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it as many times as it takes. The only thing that matters is if you want this right here and now.”

“That’s not the only thing that matters.”

“Let’s say it is.”

“You know I want you. I want you, and that’s the problem. I’ve always been someone who can go without. I’ve denied myself everything in the past and also been denied everything.” He’s genuinely and wildly perturbed about this. Uncomfortable, just like before.

Maybe I should be uncomfortable with my own lack of control. I should be afraid of how this man and I seem to be more than fire and gasoline, but I refuse to be. I refuse to let fear and doubt have their way with me. When I was younger and had less life experience, maybe. No, I didn’t say sex experience. I said life experience. And in the past year, I’ve had plenty of that.

“No one is denying you this. No one is denying you a friendship after and maybe more,” I tell him.

He sighs. “But that’s the problem. You want more.”

“I don’t want it, Rick, not the way you mean. I just want us to have a good life. I want us to be friends. I want to care about you, and I’m not going to just leave, and that’s it. See ya later, alligator. This is all over. I don’t care anymore, and I’m switching off everything. I want more than a line of communication. I’m open to so much more. I want to do all that without hurting each other.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

I dip my finger in my mouth and roll it over my nipple, pinching hard at the end, which makes me yelp. I didn't mean to pinch that hard. I'd be embarrassed, except Rick shifts in the chair like his erection needs some room in his jeans. My eyes shoot there, and holy glowing fireflies. Yup, it needs room. That does not even begin to describe the bulge.

I've had him inside my mouth and inside me, yet somehow, I'm still shocked. It's not a memory issue because I have a great memory. I have a torturously good, incredibly vivid, and ultra-detailed memory.

"It's not going to change my mind about the marriage ending." He sounds positively strangled.

"We never should have done it in the first place." This time, I sneak my finger lower. I head toward the waistband of my pants, but I stop and run my finger over the elastic instead of dipping beneath it. Rick's bulge is still just as huge. He might pretend like he's not interested, but his body says he seriously is.

"Maybe we can both agree on that, at least."

"Anyway, we did, and we both agree there's an expiration date, but I really do mean we don't. We don't have an end date. There can be more. There can be less. There can be friendship and family. I'm not going to let you crawl into this lonely little hole or stalk from shell to shell, hermit crabbing your way through life."

"That's what you think I'm doing? Hermiting it up? Crabbing around?"

“I think I’d like you to tear off my underwear right now with your bare hands.”

He groans. “Goodness. How skilled and strong do you think I am?”

I wrap the fabric in my hands and try to pull on it, but it’s cotton, and it isn’t giving way without a tear first. All I get is a comical tug. Rick swallows so hard that it looks like he’s trying to get a watermelon down. I wonder again what it would be like to learn every inch of his naked body and trace all his scars, both tiny and large. I wonder what it would be like to be able to do that anytime I want because he would want me to.

“Rick?”

He moves fast. He always shocks me with his lightning-fast reflexes. He explodes out of the chair and leans over me, caging me in with hands gripping the edge of the desk. He’s lovely like this, teetering on the cliff’s edge of control. I like the way the muscles in his arms strain under his shirt and the way a vein throbs at his temple.

He rakes his eyes over me, and then he fists my panties in both hands and pulls.

Nothing.

We both pause.

“Umm?” I murmur.

“I really thought it would happen.”

“Do you have scissors inside this desk?” I ask.

“I don’t think so, but I know there’s a utility knife somewhere. Or a saw downstairs if

things get desperate. Maybe a steak knife from the kitchen.”

“Gah! Just—” I belatedly realize he’s joking. He might not have scissors, but he solves that problem by slipping my panties down and gliding them off my legs. He’s smooth and effortless, and they remain in one piece. He doesn’t need saws and knives when he’s inventive.

Now, I’m naked before him, and I want to get inventive with that. I throw my hands around his neck and lean forward, leaning straight into him. Then I pull his face down to mine and kiss him. We get about three seconds of sweetness before all the desperation and want come pouring into the kiss. I love that when he leans into me, I feel so freaking small against him. I love that even though I’m the only one who is naked, I don’t feel awkward.

I feel like straight liquid when Rick kisses along my neck. His soft beard scrapes over my shoulder, and then he reaches my breast. It’s all bliss. All swimming in space as his mouth transforms me. His tongue does amazing things to my nipple. He also does amazing things to other spots by knocking my legs open with his hand and brushing his fingers over me. I arch into him, so soaked and eager for this.

It’s in the back of my mind that this might be the last time he ever touches me like this. That this might be the last time I get close to him. It’s been a long, hard series of lessons in learning how to live in the moment, but I want to be in this moment so fully that it will sustain me no matter what happens.

The way he touches me isn’t the way I touch myself. I don’t know how he makes his fingers feel like they’re coated in magic dust, whereas mine have only ever felt so normal.

I close my eyes and let this moment be magic.

“Rick, yes. Yes, please. That’s so good.”

“You want my mouth there?”

It’s not shameful to ask. Not when I want him this badly. Not ever. “Yes,” I moan.

His fingers make it good. My hips roll into his touch, but then he bends, and I part my legs even wider, so wide that I can feel the burn in my thighs as he tests the limits of my flexibility. It’s so hot how far I’m spread open on this desk for him. And it’s even hotter when he kneels between them, takes my legs, and guides them to his shoulders, fitting them there.

I open my eyes and find his head bowed. He’s so beautiful. I want to watch him, but if he looked up and found me doing it, I don’t know if it would make him or me more self-conscious.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

I close my eyes when he licks me. In my head, I imagine being pinned to the desk by his weight while he's inside me. I shouldn't think about things like that because if I do, it's going to make this go way too fast. And I want it slow, drawn out, torturous.

"Draw me a picture," I mutter, threading my fingers through his hair. His head jerks up, and he studies me.

"A what?"

"A picture. Draw me a picture with your tongue. On my clit."

He gasps. "Goodness, Aspen. Just...goodness. Are you serious?"

"Yes, and I'll try and guess what it is."

He finally smiles. It's the slowest, most adorable smile in the world, and I love how it sneaks up on him. "You're joking."

"I am. I'm sorry. Continue doing what you were doing. It was good."

"Was it? Because I'm open to instruction."

"It was, but you have no idea how hot it is that you'd say that," I groan.

When he licks me again, he's not gentle. I think I already had my warmup, and this time, it's business. The business end of Rick's tongue is glorious, just to be clear. I'm not even embarrassed that he eats melodiously. I grip his hair tightly, curl my legs over

his shoulders, and keep him there for more and more and more. He's wild, and I'm every bit as wound up as he is. I imagine him destroying me with his tongue, and then he's doing it for real with his tongue and fingers, and imagination is something I no longer have to rely on.

"You wanted a picture?" he growls. "I'll do one better. I'll spell you a word."

Holy unicorn balls, is this really happening?

His tongue does sensual, amazing things that make my soul want to leave my body. I'm going to go out of my mind. My hands grip his hair like I can make him write something on my clit just by steering him, but his tongue does its own thing.

Am I supposed to guess what word he's spelling?

"Squirrel?" I murmur.

"Ha. Good guess."

"More. Do it again," I plead.

He does. And I'm so close. So close to leaping out of my skin. So close to riding his face and coming until I flip inside out. So close to laughing at how playfully absurd this is.

"Sasquatch?"

"One more time."

I pant my way through it. My hips do ungodly things to his face while his tongue does tongue-godly things to my folds, my clit, and my entrance.

“Salmon! It’s salmon!”

“No. But here’s your consolation prize,” he says.

He attacks my clit, and there’s no more spelling and no more holding back. I’m coming so freaking hard that I see rain showers, lightning, and rainbows before I know what’s happening. He holds me down and makes me come until I can’t come anymore. Until I’m panting and hot and wild with it.

Then he stands up, and his hands tear open his jeans. He leans into me, and I wrap my legs around his hips and draw him into me before I’m even done trembling. My whole body needs this. My body needs it when he sticks his hands under my butt and lifts me up, tilting my hips to the perfect angle. His cock is finally at my entrance, and he’s everything I could ever want. I’m way too far gone to have any control left, so I just throw my head back and hang on to him while he fills me. I’m so wet, and he’s so hot and hard inside me. I arch over and over again.

He’s even wilder than I could have imagined. It hurts, and it’s so good. He drives into me, finding that spot, the spot that makes the whole room fuzz in and out of focus like my world has been painted in purple shag carpet.

“Rick. God. Please come,” I beg.

“Not like this.”

“Yes, like this. I’m on the pill. It’s okay.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

“Jesus god, Aspen.” He barely says my name, and he’s going even deeper. Within moments, my world splinters, and I’m gone, but I can still feel him driving into me and shaking and then coming.

After, he freezes while I can barely get my eyes open. I’m scared to see whether he regretted any of this. I’m scared to see if he looks wrecked. Instead, when I do finally open them, he strokes my cheek.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine.” I’m still seeing unicorns and fuzzy carpets, but I’m good. “Are you?”

“I was scared I hurt you.”

“Hurt me? No. No, not like this. It was really good.”

He slowly withdraws and adjusts his clothes. Then he finds mine and has to help me get dressed because I’m still so far gone. Seeing fuzzy carpets isn’t good for coordination. Who knew? I’m kidding. Obviously.

After, he sits down hard on his desk chair, but he pulls me with him. We sit like that, both of us so quiet. I feel like I should say something. “I think you might need to get a job. Just for the fun of it. For the camaraderie and to get out of the house. Or not. Maybe a hobby? Something to keep busy. Something to keep sane.”

“You’re now implying that I’m crazy? A job makes most people that way, darling.”

I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but hearing even sarcastic endearments does something to me. "Oh, I know full well that most of them are soul-sucking machines, but not all."

"You want me to be a regular mindless one of the masses," he states.

"You're overthinking that a little. I mean a job or a hobby you enjoy. I'm sure there's one out there. It has to be better than just hanging out here all day."

"I do have a job. It's untangling all this money and turning it into something I can actually use."

I lose myself in his lovely, dark eyes. "I think there are lawyers and accountants for that."

"It takes up more of my time than you'd think."

"Alright, a hobby then."

He snorts. "I'd rather lick tarantulas every day than make pottery."

"Tongue bathing. Awesome." I laugh. I want to trace the little scar on his neck right above his shirt collar with my tongue. "So what if you hate pottery? There are other things in the world. If you miss parts of your old life, just go to the gun range or something. You could teach shooting. Or self-defense. I bet you have lots of skills that other people would like to learn."

"Or I could just join a security and bodyguarding firm."

"Well, if that's what you truly want to do. But I think not having to go to work worried about taking a punch or catching a bullet every day would be a good thing." I

can't even think about him doing those things. It makes my stomach lurch and my chest feel heavy and rocky.

"Vigilante justice then?"

"No," I reply.

"You should do what you know."

"Is that what you know? Vigilante justice?"

"I suppose that was a tad sarcastic," he says with a light chuckle.

"You could raise geese," I suggest.

"Gah! I'm in the city. And I know nothing about raising animals."

I can't help it. I have to kiss his jaw. "You don't have to live in the city. And you can do research. Ooh! Maybe you can do research, raise geese, and vlog so other people can raise them too! That's exciting!"

He quirks a brow. "Do I seem like I'm the popular vlogger type?"

I nuzzle my nose right by his ear, inhaling the goodness of him. "You could be anything, I'm sure."

“I’m not five years old. I’ve already lived most of my life.”

“Pshaw to that!” I jerk my head up. He’s got his usual I’m so bored with life, and I find nothing interesting, evermask in place, but it’s starting to get frayed and worn pretty thin. It’s starting to be just a little bit see-through. “You’re probably ten years older than me if that. I’m not even going to tell you not to say it because some people don’t get to live out their lives, and they are actually over. That would sound like guilt, and this isn’t guilt. This is supposed to be finding your stride and learning what it takes to make your soul sing.”

“Some souls don’t sing,” he argues.

“At least you didn’t say some people don’t have souls.”

“Some souls are too dirty to—”

“Dirt! Yes!” If we have to talk about that, then I have a great idea. “You should go to school and study dirt. Apparently, it’s super fascinating. All the stuff that goes on in soil! It’s an entire world and a science in its own right. You’re a little bit obsessed, so it might be just what you’re looking for.”

He rolls his eyes. There’s no undoing it, though. I’m not going to let him undo it. “Perhaps that was a tad bit sarcastic as well.”

“Maybe, but I do think it would be so neat. You could learn how bacteria really work. Worms, ants, and centipedes too.”

“Aspen,” he groans.

“Yes! And trees and plants. Geez, now I kind of want to go back to school and take microbiology or ecology or whatever it would be under.”

“I’m not going to go to school to study soil.”

“You could just join a gardening club then.”

He looks like he’s just seen a ten-foot-tall spider coming toward the house, and no, he doesn’t want to tongue-bath it. “Have you forgotten that I hate gardens enough to let the one outside die out?”

“That’s just because it belonged to a farty old man who chose money and power and position over you. He was clearly wrong in that. Clearly. I don’t agree with taking it out on the garden, but cleaning out the house and starting fresh? It’s probably a good thing not to have so many bad memories picking away at you.”

“Aspen.”

“What?”

“This conversation is over,” he says resolutely.

“Oh, so it’s like that, is it?” I respond.

“Yeah, it’s like that.” He points to the window, and excuse or not, I now remember there’s a world out there. “Those poor pool people out there have probably been done for ages, and they’re just too polite to come banging down the door.”

“Riiiiight. Shit. I kind of forgot about that. Maybe they’ve already left. I’ll go check.”

I scramble off his lap and walk to the window, where I peek through the blinds.
“There’s no one out there.”

“Fuck,” Rick curses.

“I’m sure they’ll call or stop by again to discuss. Or maybe they’ll just email you a number of plans and mockups to choose from. I’m sure most people need a visual, so they probably have tons of renderings. That would make the most sense.”

“Perhaps.”

“If they’re gone, then we don’t need to stop talking. We can discuss so much more about—”

He stalks across the room in a feverish way and kisses me before I can continue. He kisses me until I just about forget everything, which I think is the point. He doesn’t want to keep talking. He clearly had a plan and a strategy coming over here.

“We could go to the library and find some books on dirt. Maybe make out between the shelves,” I say.

“No.” He backs me up to the wall and studies my lips with major heat and want written all over his face. I’m dead here. So dead.

“You know an expiration date is really just a suggestion, right? It’s a best-before kind of deal, not a total termination, except in the case of bread. Don’t eat moldy bread again. In fact, you might need me to move down here just to cook for you.”

Silence. Dead. Hard. Silence. Not even a cricket would dare to break this total void of nothingness. It bogs down around us, and I can feel my heart grinding to slow nothingness as well.

“Rick?” I say his name when he doesn’t reply.

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“No, Aspen. You shouldn’t have to do that. I don’t need you to do that.”

“Needs and wants,” I whisper bravely, turning my chin up. “They’re different.”

“I know what I need,” he mutters, but his nose presses against mine, his lips just a breath away.

“Okay, Patrick McDonald. Okay.”

He’s both for me.

A needanda want.

Chapter fifteen

Rick

I’m jolted out of sleep the next morning, and at first, I don’t know what time it is. The office is closed up, but I can tell there’s enough sunlight coming in for it to be late morning.

I have no idea when I fell asleep other than it was sometime in the very early hours of the morning. Maybe two or three. I never meant for it to happen. My back feels like the unholy death of hell from sleeping at an obviously awkward angle in this chair.

I’m instantly tuned in to the sound of Aspen’s voice coming from down the hall.

“No, Mom, it’s okay. I just texted you yesterday. It’s all good. No, yeah, I’m not at the apartment. Not right now. When will I be home? Well, that might be a little bit complicated.”

I freeze as she’s quiet for a pause, and then she launches into the whole story. I guess she’s been found out. I knew she was doing damage control via text, and I didn’t think it would actually work, but I wasn’t going to tell her how to run her life or handle her family. It’s not like I have one of my own to tell her how it should or shouldn’t go.

From the way Aspen’s voice becomes louder and rises in pitch, I can only surmise that whoever is on the other end is freaking out.

“Mom, no. Put dad on,” she says into her phone.

I guess it’s her mom.

“Whoa, you don’t have to do that. You don’t have to come all this way. I’m fine. Yes, fine.” This pause is the longest yet. “It’s what Jace wanted. I know I should have told you all about it, but you wouldn’t have let me do any of this. I had to come alone.” She snorts. “Work wouldn’t give me time off, so I had to quit. No, Mom. I’m not having a crisis. I told you about the letter. It was more than that. It was more like a will. If Jace asked you to do something, you would have done it without question, just like Dad or his mom would have. It’s the same for me.”

I should go and help her and save her from the verbal chewing out she’s getting and is probably going to get from her dad when he comes on the line.

I can only imagine her parents showing up here and giving me more than a verbal beatdown. They’d ask me what I’d done with their daughter, and I’d have to tell them that I made her my wife. I’m not sure if they know that part yet. Aspen only

mentioned coming here and the letter, or so I've heard. Her parents would probably shit enough bricks to reconstruct half a city if they found out she's married...married to me. I'm a total stranger to them. I'm halfway across the country, and for all they know, I'm holding their daughter hostage, and she's got the worst case of Stockholm Syndrome that ever existed. I can't tell them that I haven't touched their daughter. That I don't crave her, and I don't want to get wildly inventive when it comes to ways I'd like to pleasure her.

Fuck.

If I'm going to have to meet the parents and explain myself, then I'm going to have to do it freshly showered and changed into a good old clean Henley.

Aspen's voice continues as I walk to the bathroom. I feel more than guilty about all this. I never should have let it get this far. I never should have opened my door for her and let her into the house. But I did. And I agreed to the marriage, sham or not. I let Aspen touch me. I let her in, into the cracks that shouldn't exist.

Also, just by existing, I've become the thing in her life that shouldn't exist.

I strip down and get into the shower. I'm so focused on what an asshole two thousand I am that I don't hear the bathroom door open. I'm not the kind of person you can easily sneak up on, so that proves how distracted I am.

I have both hands braced against the tile when Aspen clears her throat.

"Hey." Her eyes are surprisingly dry and clear. She hasn't been crying. She looks focused and determined. She looks like pure sugar and sweetness. She looks like a good wind could blow her right over, but she's so much tougher.

I'm so naked.

She slips out of her T-shirt and shorts and joins me in the shower. This might be the last time. It should be the last time. No, there should never be a last time because there shouldn't have ever been a first time.

“Your parents think you're impulsive. They're worried about you. They probably think I'm a carnivorous monster,” I mutter.

She shakes her head at me, smiling of all things. “Well, you have eaten me before. You could do it again...”

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And that's how the shower goes. It goes and goes because I can't say no. Because I don't know if I even want to say no anymore. I had this life, and I was set in my ways. They might not have been good ways or the right ways, but perhaps I would have figured it out. Now there's Aspen, and when she leaves, there will have been Aspen, and I won't ever be the same.

She dries me off after like I'm a child, and I don't fight her. When she kisses me, I kiss her back because god help me, I want to. I don't want to tell her I'm dirty anymore. I don't want to chase her away. I don't want to protest and come up with a thousand reasons why this is wrong. I don't want to keep trying to put up ineffectual shields to keep her at bay. Because they don't work. She only tears them down.

"I'm staying because I want to stay," she tells me, completely naked and utterly gorgeous. "Needs and wants, Rick."

"Are your parents going to show up here? Is your dad going to break down my door? It won't be the first time I've dodged bullets, but I like to know in advance what kind of battle I'm going to have to face."

"No," she says as she wraps a white towel around her slender body. Her wet hair drips all over her shoulders. She's still coated in water droplets, and I want to lick every single one of them off of her sweet, soft skin. "I mean, they could show up, but they won't be firing at you. I do promise that. They told me they were going to calm down, and we'd talk about it in a few hours when they had time to process, but I can't guarantee they won't get on the first flight here."

"They don't have a tracker on your phone?"

Aspen gasps. “Goodness, no. We don’t have that kind of technology. We’re not spies.”

“It’s an app, Aspen. Parents use them all the time.”

“Oh.” Her chin wobbles, and her eyes nearly pop out. “Oh, shit. Okay, well, they might show up then. I don’t really know. If they do, though, it’s fine. They still won’t come armed.”

“If I have to take a black eye for the team, I’ll do that.”

“My dad doesn’t hit people,” Aspen says.

“What about your mom?” I ask.

“Gah! Definitely not my mom.”

She’s not even dressed, and we’re still in the bathroom, but I feel like it’s only appropriate that I try again to be the asshole that makes her see reality. “I’m afraid you have this starry-eyed wedding bells fantasy, and that’s not how this is going to play out.”

“Don’t worry, Patrick McDonald. I know you’re only in it for the sex.”

My mouth drops. Aspen, on the other hand, throws her head back and laughs. What a wicked, wicked woman she can be. She’s disarmed me and put me in my place with that laughter. I just said I like to know what kind of battle I’m fighting, but nothing on earth could have prepared me for her. She’s the battle I’m not going to win. She might be the one I won’t survive. She’s the one who could truly wreck me, even after everything I’ve lived.

I'm astonished, dumbfounded. I don't know how this happened. It happened so fast. Like getting that knife in my side. In a few seconds, it could have been over. It could have hit something vital. I think she's hit something vital. It hurts in my chest where it never used to hurt at all. No, I'm a liar. It did hurt before, but not in the same way this hurts.

"I'm not...that's not true!" I do feel the need to rise to this, even if it's only in a very poor attempt to defend my honor.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot we're going to be friends after. You did say that was going to be a thing."

"I'm worried you still think I'm going to change my mind. I'm not just in it for the sex, but we can't...we can't stay married. We can't be that kind of friends."

"Goodness. You seem very certain of that."

"I'm serious. Take it seriously, Aspen," I say exasperatedly.

Her eyes dance. Her left hand holds the towel firmly closed between her breasts. "I am taking it seriously."

"I'm going to hurt you. I'm going to hurt your feelings."

"You did say I'm the kind of person who gets attached. You meant that you aren't, but I don't think you really know what you mean. I don't think you know that much about yourself. I think you've been so busy hardening yourself and shutting the world out that you have no idea where you want to go in life, who you want to do it with, or what you would or wouldn't enjoy." She waves a hand at the shower. "You enjoyed that."

“For Christ’s sake.” I wish she would just slap me for being vulgar, for being an asshole, being disappointing, and being the prick who inevitably hurts her when she’s far too wonderful to ever deserve being hurt. “You should go back to San Jose. I can file for the annulment tomorrow.”

“We’ve had sex, though,” she points out.

“They don’t need to know that. We can pretend we didn’t. I’m doing it to protect you. I’m doing it because you need to be far away from here. You have this beautiful life to live and a beautiful family to get back to. They’re worried about you. You don’t need to be here. I’m setting you free.”

Aspen’s nose crinkles up so crinkly that she temporarily looks like a little old woman. “Ewwww, with your money? You think your money is going to make me free? Do you truly think I can just go back to Atlanta with a suitcase of cash and never think about you again?”

“I would just transfer the money electronically. No suitcase needed.”

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“I’m not a bird in a cage. I’m free right now. There’s no setting involved. And anyway, that would be a asshole thing to do.”

I brace my arms on the sink and whirl away from her. “Yes, I’m a asshole. I’m a asshole who’s no good for you. I was a soldier for too long. I can’t stop. I can’t make myself soft. I can’t be what you need. I’m just better off alone. I never had a family, and I don’t need one now. I’ll sell this house and figure out what I want to do. I’ll be fine, and so will you.”

“You don’t know what I’ll be,” Aspen says.

“I do. You’re not a quitter. You’ll keep at it until you’re good.”

“Good? Until I’m good? I’m not good without you. I want to...to be here for you.”

“That’s exactly the one thing you shouldn’t want.”

“But I do want it,” she says stubbornly.

She throws her arms around my waist and presses her cheek to my back. The bathroom is hella humid, and we’re both damp. I can feel her wet hair soaking through my Henley and the damp towel. I can feel the endless heat of her and her curves pressed tightly to me. I want to spin around and devour her. I want to be inside her again. I want to be inside her over and over and over again. I don’t want to stop, and I don’t want it to expire. Maybe I want her inside me too. Like in my soul and shit, for the love of get-your-mind-off-inappropriate-things.

“Don’t,” I choke. Soul shit isn’t stuff I mess around with. Chest shit and heart shit are a definite no either. “Don’t do that. Don’t hope. Hope makes a mess of everything. It’s an illusion, and it’s the disappointing kind. I’m the magic trick after it’s already been figured out. Simple. A letdown. Not magic at all.”

“That’s mean. Don’t say mean things about yourself.”

“I can say them if they’re true. I’m only going to disappoint you. I’m a solitary man. I’ve been solitary for a long time. I never had a family, so I didn’t get taught how to love, and that’s the shite you probably need to learn from a young age.”

Am I afraid? I’m terrified. I’m terrified that all the things I’ve told myself for so many years are true. That I can’t change. And what I just put out there is my fate for the rest of my life. My own flesh and blood didn’t want me. Why should anyone else? I abandoned Jace to come back here. I abandoned the man whose back I should have had. I know he’s not here, and it’s not because of me, but I’ll feel the guilt for the rest of my life. He was more of a family than I ever had, and I just left. I don’t deserve to even lick his sister’s toes. I know how kinky that sounds, and yeah, I totally don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve to even get close enough to lick the ground around her.

“I think you’re a little bit scared.” I knew she’d call me out. I’m not afraid to admit it. Being scared only makes you aware of everything around you. It helps you prepare. Fear is a natural response, and it shouldn’t be ignored. It can be transformed and bent to one’s advantage. It can be changed to adrenaline. But this? I know less than shit about all this. “You’re scared of being free from all the things you never wanted to feel in the first place. You want to hang on to that bitterness instead of forgiving.”

Forgive? We’re going there? Fuck no. I wish I could ask for forgiveness from Jace, but I can’t, and who the fuck else deserves it? Anyone who could have begged me for it is gone. “No one has ever asked me to forgive them. Never once.”

“I know,” she whispers as her arms tighten around my waist. “I’m sorry they didn’t. But you can still forgive them without them asking.”

“They’re dead for the most part, so it would be quite difficult for them to do so.”

“Giving forgiveness is what would make you feel better. It’s not for them.”

“Alright.” My hands flex on the sink. I can’t look at myself in the mirror. I can’t look up and see Aspen holding on to me so tight. I can’t look because I’m afraid I’ll see she’s the one doing all the holding. Keeping me upright, keeping me standing. That she’s the one with all the strength right now. “Alright, you win. I’ll work on the forgiveness part. But the violence? That’s ingrained in me. It’s trained into me. The dirt and the blood and all the sins on my hands and soul...that’s a real thing. You don’t need to get near that. I’m not talking about anyone else. I’m not comparing myself to anyone else. They might not have felt that way, and I’m not saying they lived or died in the same way, and I can’t speak to where they are now, but this is me. I know me, and I can speak for myself.”

“I think you’re more than you can ever imagine. You don’t have to work at it. You already have it. You just have to find it,” she says in response.

“Dig deep into the old, unused, unknown parts of me, is that it?”

“Yes. That’s it exactly.”

“Alright. I’ll do that. I’ll do that, and you’ll leave, and you’ll have a lovely life, and we’ll keep in touch like we planned. You can follow up on my progress. I’ll get some self-help books—”

“Stop it.” She swats at me but grasps my arms and makes me turn to face her. She does the face-cupping thing, so I have to be brave enough to look at her dead-on.

“You don’t have to be sarcastic about it. If you want to do that, then I’m glad. But I’m not going back to Atlanta. I’ll find my own apartment and a job here. I’ll make my parents understand.”

She’s hinted at this before. Throwing her life away for something she thinks she sees in me. “You can’t do that,” I say.

She cocks a brow. “I’m pretty sure I can do whatever I want. It’s my life, or did you not just say that?”

“I think that’s an argument of semantics again,” I say with a sigh.

“And I think you should leave this house and come back to Atlanta with me. Come and let me find you a place to stay. Come and stay with my parents until you’re settled, or rent one of those long-term stay hotel rooms. Come back with me. We’re family, and we want you. You’re more than what other people have spent years turning you into. Jace knew that, and he wanted us to know it too. He wanted us to know you. He wanted you to be a part of us.”

“No. I was his insurance plan. He knew I had too much of a sense of honor to turn him down when he asked me to protect you because he couldn’t do it. Fair or not, I’m roped into it now. I’m going to be connected to you for life.”

If I was going for hurt, it doesn’t register with Aspen. She dodges the blows I try to stick and land. Ones that I need to stick and land. “We tell ourselves stories, Rick. About who we are and where we came from, and then we live that, and it dictates where we’re going.”

“Don’t say we can change the narrative. It’s not that easy.”

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“We can change the narrative. You know we can. Having people worry about you and care about you is not such a terrible thing,” Aspen says softly.

It is a terrible thing. It's a terrible thing because it's the one thing I've wanted my whole life. I did want it, but then I made peace with not having it. If someone is denied something for long enough, they stop missing it. Eventually, that phantom limb pain is going to fuck off, and you're going to be left with a hard deadness in its place. Maybe we all need more of that—that hardness. Not less. Maybe the happy tra-la-la that a large portion of the self-help inspirational world is selling is bullshit.

What?

The world has collectively gotten a lot of shit wrong in the past. They could be wrong on this one too.

“I think you want to stop. You told me you wanted to leave, even before your grandpa got you home. You told me you wanted out. That means you wanted to stop fighting. You wanted to stop being a soldier.”

I can't stop. I got out, but I haven't ever really stopped. I haven't lowered or released the burdens I've been shouldering long before I ever became an adult.

“Rick?” So soft. The way she says my name. God, I love the way she says my name. It makes me warm and unbrushed-teeth-style fuzzy on the inside. Ugh, maybe fuzzy-blanket-style fuzzy. The other one is too gross. “Do you want to stop? If you do, we'll help you. We'll all help you. Even if it's not easy, you can get there. You can just lower all of it down, set it all down, and just be you. You can stop fighting and let

us take care of you. You can let us be your friends, and you can let us love you. You might not think you're capable of love, but you are capable of being loved."

If I stop, will it make every death of every friend I ever had, of every brother and sister who served with me pointless? Does it make it all useless? I can't just set it down. Because where would that leave me? It would leave me open to any kind of attack. Any injury. It would leave me open to complete and total destruction. No one just sets it all down. No one.

"We could go anywhere. If you don't want to be here or in Atlanta, we could travel. We could pick a place. If it's not in the States, that's okay too. We could go off and learn how to live."

"Very new age," I comment.

"Seriously though. Isn't everyone? I hope so."

"Because the second you stop learning, that's where you've really gone wrong?" Does it get any dryer? I don't think so. Does it get any more asshole? Probably not. I'm setting the bar high right now.

Aspen is too good. She keeps insisting she can save me from myself, but what if the whole notion of needing and wanting to be saved is total bullshit? It's just such a gross concept to me. Relying on others, letting down my guard, and letting them or some professional fix the broken parts of me. That's likely not even possible. It's corny. It's terrible. It's so mushy and romantic, and not in the sense of anything that has to do with love but more in the spirit of unrealistic expectations. It means being gentle with myself, but the very idea of that goes against my nature. I don't want to be gentle with myself. Soldiers, even ex-soldiers, are not gentle people.

But in the shower I was just thinking about how Aspen is already under all those

layers. She's already past the fact that I'm not gentle. She doesn't think I let her brother get killed by not being there to have his back. She doesn't hold me responsible. She offered me her family even though I've shown her the worst of myself. She fed me, held me, and even helped me sleep. She had sex with me, but she also loved me with her body. And she'd love me with even more of her if I let her.

She's made it clear that if I stopped fighting, that would be okay and not cowardly. She's one of the gentlest people I know, but she's a warrior in her own right. If I just couldn't do it anymore, she'd probably pick up the mantle or pick me up and carry me and all my burdens.

I've been too quiet for too long.

"Okay." She holds up her hands and backs off. "You don't have to decide today. I know it's a long process. I'll leave, even though I don't want to leave. I'll go back home and pack up and get ready to move. I'll talk to my family. They'll understand. I'm coming back here, though. I'm getting an apartment, but I don't need your money to do it. I have some savings, and it will get me through until I can get a job."

"Too good to take it, are you?" I purposely look at the floor because she looks far too enticing in that damn bath towel.

"I'll ask you for it if and when I might need it, but right now, it's not what I want. You're what I want."

How does she do that? How does she make that sound so believable? She could take as much money from me as she wants. She could go anywhere in the world. She could buy herself whatever she desired. She could literally live in her dream home and drive her dream car and never have to work a day in her life again. My money could provide her with anything, but instead, she's looking at me like I'm what she wants, and she's doing it with total conviction. And not for a lack of imagination or

ambition. Not for a lack of intelligence or drive or an inability to make life into a bigger picture. That's the easy road. But looking at me with such sincerity and honesty? Definitely not the easy road. I'm the crap chute.

"I don't need you to come back here," I say to Aspen.

"Yes, you do," she insists.

"I could stop you."

"No, you can't. It's a big city. I can move anywhere in it as it fits my budget and as I please."

"You'll break your parents' hearts."

She blinks hard at that, but like everything else, she swats it away and refuses to break. "I won't. They'll miss me, but they'll understand. It's not forever. I'm a grownup, and there are many varied and reliable methods of communication. We'll all learn how to be okay."

No. I can't let this happen. It doesn't matter how much I might want to believe her or stop literally and figuratively fighting. She can't possibly know I'm what she wants. She can't throw her life away. She can't come here. Not for me. I can't believe her. I know that, at the heart of me, I'm unwanted and unlovable. I'm stained.

If shoving her away to protect her is the only option left, then that's the option I'll have to take.

"I don't want you to. I don't want you, Aspen. I. Don't. Want. You," I say harshly.

The hurt is bright in her eyes, and it's a lance to my heart. The lesions are instant. I'm

bleeding out on the inside and drowning in my own blood. God, it hurts.

And then.

She laughs.

She laughs so hard that she has to grasp her towel in the front and bend over.

She laughs so hard that she snorts.

She laughs so hard even as she does a little dance from foot to foot. “Oh god. Oh my god,” she wheezes. “I’m going to pee myself if you don’t stop that. Your attempts at being big and scary are so funny. For the love of rotisserie chicken, Patrick McDonald, yes, you freaking do want me to come back here. You do want me to stay. You do want to be wanted, and you do want a family. You do want good things out of life. And you do want beauty. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have let me in the front door. You wouldn’t have married me. And even if you’d realized your mistake too late, you could have put me in the pile of stuff to donate and then shipped me out of here, but you didn’t. Right now, you’re only fighting so hard because this is the breaking point. This is the point where it all feels worse before it gets better. I promise. Just come back to Atlanta with me, and you’ll see. We’ll figure things out from there. You’re my friend for life, no matter how foul you want to try and be.”

I don’t know what happened. One minute, I’m standing here completely in awe of this woman, and the next, I have to stumble back to the counter and catch myself. One look in the mirror confirms everything I was afraid of. I don’t look like me. My eyes are far too shiny, too misty, too hopeful. I can see everything she’d laid out in my mind. All I have to do is reach for it. Believe it. Say yes. Trust.

Jace gave me the greatest gift he could have ever thought to give. His family. He knew I needed one. He always knew I'd need one. I thought I left him alone by getting out, but he knew that when I left, I'd be the one alone on the outside.

I don't say anything, but Aspen knows. She wraps her arms around me again. They barely reach, but she holds on so freaking tight. For all she's worth. I drop my head and breathe in the scent of my shampoo in her hair.

"I'll come to Atlanta." Sure, I can go. I can try. Fuck, I think I'd even dig around in dirt like she suggested if she wanted me to. I'd probably do just about anything for Aspen.

"Yay, Rick!" she exclaims against my chest. "I promise it will be even better than the rotisserie chicken."

Chapter sixteen

Rick

Meeting Aspen's parents is the most nerve-inducing thing I've ever faced. I'm pretty much a wreck, and I don't know if I'm doing much to hide it.

We flew first class back to Atlanta. It wasn't my first experience with the upgraded service, but it was Aspen's, and it was charming to see how excited she was. The entire time, she acted like everything was going to be okay, and it almost made me believe it would be. She told me all about her parents, and she shared memories of growing up. She talked non-stop the whole flight, which was fine. I wasn't going to sleep, and somehow, her filling the time with all those memories made me feel a little bit more like this wasn't a colossal mistake. It made me feel like I belonged—at least slightly—now that I was privy to her childhood and teenage years.

When we landed, we got a cab straight to Aspen's parents' house.

I expected something a little bit bigger, made of stone or maybe brick, so I was half surprised to find a smaller seventies-style split level. It's yellow and cheerful. There are flowerbeds here, but they don't bother me. Truthfully, I have no beef with gardens. I just hated the one my grandfather was so proud of. It was one-of-a-kind, and now it's gone-of-a-kind, but the rest? They're okay. They can remain, and they can be beautiful. It doesn't make me angry or give me bad vibes.

The fence that surrounds most of the house is brown and peeling. It's a little bit lopsided along the left, heading into the backyard. I'm shit at construction, but part of me wants to get at that fence and make it straight and proud again.

I could pay to have it done, but I'd rather learn how to do it myself.

"Are you going to throw up?" Aspen asks as we walk up the driveway.

There's no sidewalk that cuts through the front door. It comes off the top of the asphalt driveway and winds to the front door. Now that I'm close, I can see the old siding is pretty weathered. The paint is cracked and ready to flake in spots. But it seems so normal. Somehow, this house radiates kindness.

"No," I reply as I test the air. It's sweet. Hot. Floral scented.

She looks at me with concern. "Are you sure? You look kind of pale."

"I'm sure. I've had lots of training on how to not vomit or eject other bodily fluids in tense situations."

Her eyes sweep over me. She's a little bit tense, too, and I'm not kidding about what I just said, but she grins and grabs my hand like I've just made the funniest joke. She

strokes my fingers, and I resist the urge to jerk them back and tuck them into my pockets so her dad doesn't come out, see her fondling any part of me, and chop it off with a meat cleaver.

It would hurt so much more than a shotgun blast. Or any bullet, for that matter.

I'd get inventive if I were a father, and my little girl went across the country and did everything Aspen did. I'd make me pay, and I'd do it slowly and excruciatingly.

"You are going to throw up," Aspen comments.

I'm just starting to register how hot it is out here. It's astonishing that after a lifetime of blocking things out, I'm starting to be so very bad at becoming numb and impartial. I'm losing my masks, my armor, and my general impenetrability. I'm starting to feel the temperature, notice the weather, and take note of the sky and the world around me. I'm starting to smell flowers and appreciate good cooking. I even slept the past two nights with Aspen curled up beside me in the one bed left in the house. She waited for me to fall asleep, and she was awake when I woke up in the morning. It was like she was keeping guard just in case I woke up. In case I had a nightmare.

I sometimes wish I did. But I never have. I've never had a single nightmare or even a dream about anything I've done or anything that's happened. I never relive the good or the bad. All I have are memories when I'm awake, and I became so good at shoving them down that, for the most part, I didn't even have those.

"I'm not."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

“If you have to, no one will mind. But I promise it’s not necessary. My parents aren’t going to—”

Just then, the front door opens, and Aspen’s mom and dad hurtle out. Her dad, as I suspected, has the same sandy hair. Same as Jace’s hair too. Her mom, on the other hand, is a strawberry blonde. And both their hair is shot through with more than a small amount of grey. Her dad is tall and athletically built like Jace, while her mom is on the smaller side. Shorter and more petite.

They rush at their daughter, but they stop themselves from being too rough and frantic. If I had lost a son and a stepson already, and this was my one remaining child, I’d be frantic too. Then I’d reach for the knife set and my torture implements. A rake or a pitchfork would be nice. I’d make it uncomfortable, throwing it back in historically awful ways.

Aspen’s mom caresses her hair while her dad sets a hand on her shoulder.

“Honey,” he says, his eyes misting over. “We’re so glad you’re home.”

Her mom can’t blink back her tears as she hugs Aspen hard. Aspen leans into it, not stiff in the least. “It’s okay, Mom. I’m back, and I’m fine. I also brought Rick with me.” She pats her mom’s back.

Her dad’s eyes track to mine, and I expect to find murderous fire in them. I expect him to be contemplating a garage full of tools and which one he’d like to use on me first. Grinder, skill saw, drill and bits, hammer, chainsaw, bolt cutters...

But his eyes are warm as he holds out a hand to me. “Patrick, it’s good to meet you.”

I’m sure it could be better. I’m sure he’s wired up some kind of taser to the inside of his hand, and somehow, it will only get me and not him. Maybe there’s a tripwire setup. If I take a step forward to shake that hand, I’ll be obliterated by a low-hung flying axe.

Regardless, I shake his hand anyway. It’s the right thing to do.

No tasers. No axes. No flaming arrows or hidden torches. There’s no pit full of spikes that I fall into. Just a warm, firm hand shaking mine.

“Why don’t we sit out in the back? It’s shady there this time of day, and we have new patio furniture. I also made lemonade. You can help me, Aspen. We’ll bring snacks,” her mom says.

Aspen looks both her parents over. “That’s code for my dad wants to grill you about your intentions while my mom takes forever putting together cheese and crackers or cutting up a watermelon.”

“Gentle grilling,” her dad corrects. He’s got a kind face. He doesn’t look at me like he hates me, and that’s more than I could manage if I were him. He doesn’t look at his daughter like she’s reckless, like she’s lost her mind, or like she’s not an adult who can make her own choices.

I can tell they’re relieved she’s back. That she’s safe. They were worried, which makes sense. They’re not jumping all over her, though. They’re not chastising her, embarrassing her, or being rude. Either they’re holding back, or they respect Aspen. She might be their child, but she’s her own person as well.

“Okay,” Aspen agrees reluctantly. She steps away from her parents and squeezes my

hand in front of them. I gulp hard, but no one flies at me to throttle me. “But five minutes.” The look she gives her parents is stern. “I mean it.”

“You’re welcome here,” her dad says to me as he nods at Aspen. “If my son wanted you to be a part of our family, then you will be. That’s a promise.”

“It is,” her mom adds softly. She’s crying again—quiet, gentle tears. Her tears seem like an echo of her personality. I can see where Aspen got her gentle spirit from, as well as all the hidden steel inside her.

These people lost a child, and it was only a year ago, but grief didn’t destroy them. They’re still able to stand here and welcome me with genuine sentiment, not because they feel forced or guilted into doing it. I thought the house radiated kindness when I walked up the drive, but if it does, it’s because it’s been permeated over the years with the goodness of this family.

Aspen pats my hand and reluctantly releases it. Then, I do what I wanted to do earlier and jam it into my pocket. We each have a suitcase, and Aspen and her mom grab the handles and pull them into the house. I don’t get a chance to protest about them not lifting it because they do it easily. I’m used to packing light. I think my carry-on-sized bag probably weighs ten pounds, if that.

The door shuts quietly behind them, leaving me alone with Aspen’s dad.

Jace’s dad.

“We’ll go around back,” he says. He’s got the kind of soft-spoken voice that is still so commanding. I bet he’s just like Jace. Used to leading without ever giving orders or bossing people around. Jace was the kind of man people instantly liked, trusted, and followed. He was the kind of person who would have stepped in front of a bullet for a total stranger, what more the men he considered his brothers. He would have done so

much more for any of us.

I swallow thickly as I follow Aspen's dad through the gate he unlatches in the fence. Then, we walk past the crooked section to a deck that appears new. The boards look so newly stained that I can practically smell the chemicals.

"The fence has to go next." So her dad has obviously noticed the lean. "It's been a work in progress. I only get so many days off every summer, but I'm taking a week off next month, and I'll get her done and done right. Not to knock the old girl. She's been standing for a good thirty years, so I guess she doesn't owe us anything. We'll pile up the boards that are still salvageable and donate them to someone who might need them for a project. That way, she can have a second shot at being useful."

We sit down on a brand-new outdoor sectional. The cushions are a bright cherry red.

"This is Margaret's pride and joy, this sectional. We saved up for it. Five hundred dollars seems like a splurge, but we'll take care of it, and hopefully, it lasts. She takes the cushions in and out at least ten times a day."

I think he's serious. I sit carefully, not wanting to wreck anything, even if that's illogical.

I think I might have ruined their daughter.

And I didn't keep their son safe.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

I've done enough damage already.

I expect the usual what are your intentions with my daughter interrogation, but Aspen's dad just sets one knee on top of the other and lets his leather sandal waggle off the front of his foot. He jiggles it until it slips back to where it's supposed to be.

"I think Aspen was serious about being in there for just a few minutes. If you want to ask me what kind of person I am, what I've done with your daughter, and what I'm planning on doing with her in the future, you should start before they get back," I say, trying to keep any nerves from my voice.

Her dad raises an amused brow at me. "It's alright, son. She already explained all of that on the phone."

Son. I know that word is commonplace, but to me, it's jarring. I've never been anyone's son. Not really.

Aspen stepped out of the house yesterday. She went into the backyard, and I gave her privacy. I knew she was talking to her parents. I knew she was probably telling them everything and trying to do damage control, but I didn't ask her about it, and she didn't explain anything to me after. She just asked if I was okay checking in online since our flight was leaving early.

It's still early enough now. It's not even noon, and we've flown halfway across the country, gotten our bags, caught a cab, and had the first introduction that I was not-so-secretly dreading.

I wonder if Aspen told them about Jace. About how I left and abandoned him. I wonder if she told them we're married. That we've consummated said marriage and are still planning on annulling it. I wonder if she told them that she wants to move to San Jose if I don't want to live in Atlanta or somewhere else if I should decide to go elsewhere.

"I'm not going to lie. We're worried. We want the best life for Aspen. We want her to be happy. We want her to be safe and loved. We are really trying not to smother her." His eyes grow sad, and so, so tired. "We're trying not to make her feel like she has to take Jace's place because he's not here. I know some parents want to hold their only remaining child tightly, but that's not fair to her. She knows her mind, and she should be free to make her own choices. She told us that you have enough money to make all her dreams come true, but she also said she didn't want it. She said the one thing she wants is for us to get to know you and love you, not like you're Jace, because you aren't, but like you're a man who needs it. Even if Jace hadn't asked us to do this, we still would have because she asked. Everyone should have a family. Everyone should know what it is like to be loved. Hopefully, you don't mind us fumbling around while trying at it. Wherever you are, and wherever Aspen is, you're a part of our family if you want to be."

I know it's not the money. If I were broke and seven times more troubled, these kind, amazing people would still be here, offering this to me. I know they're doing it for Aspen because they love her, and obviously, they're doing it for Jace, but it's already more than I deserve.

My throat is so thick that, for a moment, I can't say anything. Yes, mine.

"I'm...if Aspen has told you anything at all about me—"Duh, she's told them everything. Weren't you listening just now?"She probably understated my not-so-fine points. She has a tendency to see past that."

“I don’t think so. She’s quite a realist, in my experience. She doesn’t walk around with rose-colored googly eyes on. If she chooses to see the good in a person, it’s because it’s there.”

“I think she might be straining her eyes if she sees good in me,” I mutter.

“Hmm.” Her dad’s foot jiggles again, and his sandal nearly slides off. But the big leather strap across the top keeps it on. “I suppose we’ll see.”

“What if she moves because she has some wild notion that she wants to be close to me?” What if she doesn’t, and I can’t stand it? What the hell is happening to me that I can’t imagine being alone anymore? That I can’t imagine Aspen not being close by, even just as a friend.

Fuck, I don’t want her to be just a friend.

I would take her as a friend and count myself so fucking lucky and then some, but is that what I truly want? No, it isn’t. It isn’t, and I can admit that to myself. If I couldn’t admit it, I wouldn’t have come here with her. I would have sent her on her way, given her the annulment, and even made a big production of doing postcards because I said I would.

“Then that’s her choice. I know she’ll stay in touch as best she can. Her going off to explore different options and be who she was always meant to be doesn’t mean she doesn’t love us.” His eyes narrow, taking me in. “And I know she’ll be safe if she does move out because you would never let anything happen to her.”

Fucking right, I wouldn’t. Thinking about that even being a possibility and Aspen coming to some kind of harm or pain makes me want to die. It hurts so badly that I can’t even think about it. I just can’t go there. I will do everything in my power to keep her safe. I will do everything in my power to keep from hurting her, even if it

means that I stop pushing her away and learn how to not be an asshole.

“We’d like it if both of you would stay here for a while, or at least as long as you can before you’re off on other adventures, but we hope that even if you do go off, singly or together, you’ll check in with us. You’re welcome to call or text, but know that you’re always welcome in this house.”

I don’t ask what happens if Aspen and I don’t work out. That might happen, but I know she’ll never cut me out of her life, even if it does. She’s so tough and smart and emotionally capable that she’ll teach me how to get there with her. I might be the opposite and be quite...emotionally fucking stunted in comparison. I know I won’t ever have half her internal strength, but I do know she’s made me a promise. She promised me a family, and she’d never go back on it, no matter what happened between us.

I don’t want to give her a reason to go back on it.

“Thank you, sir.” I shouldn’t have tacked on the sir part. I feel ridiculous doing it, but maybe it’s right. Either way, her dad doesn’t look annoyed. He just looks as peaceful as Aspen often does. He looks like he always has a good joke up his sleeve, like Jace. Also, he looks like he’ll be tough when he has to be, kind the rest of the time, and good to people even if he has to be firm. Above all, he seems like a fair man. A truly good man. Truly good people are hard to come by.

I’m far from truly good.

“I’ve never had a family before,” I squeeze out. “I don’t know if I’ll get it right.”

“There’s no right or wrong. Just be who you are,” Aspen’s dad says.

I wonder if Aspen has mentioned the dirt thing. Maybe. Who knows what she’s told

her parents? When her dad said everything, he probably did know everything. She maybe even told her parents that we're romantically involved. I think she did keep the married part to herself, at least for now. Maybe that will just be between us since we plan to undo it. I said before that the brick factory might get out of control if certain things are mentioned, and I stick by that.

"Aspen suggested that I study some kind of biology. Or ecology. Something to do with soils. I didn't like the idea at first, but after giving it a slight bit of consideration, I think it might be something I'd enjoy."

"Everyone has to start somewhere. Maybe you can get some books first to see if it's something you enjoy. I think that would be fascinating. I've always wanted to have an ant or worm farm."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

“Goodness! Talking about ant farms again! It’s becoming an obsession. You should probably just do it.” Aspen’s mom steps out through the patio door with Aspen close behind her. They have a plate of watermelon, a pitcher of juice, a stack of cups, and another plate of sandwiches, and they’re carrying it all effortlessly.

I leap up to help. There’s a coffee table out here made of the same wicker as the patio furniture. I set the plate of watermelon down, and the rest of the food joins.

“I think you’d be a great ant owner, Dad. Or worms. Worms are fun too.”

Aspen takes the seat next to me, smiling away. She’s not at all worried that her parents might still change their minds and produce medieval-style torture implements out of nowhere.

But no. They just all sit and stare at me without glowering. They’re so cheerful, inviting, open, and warm. All the things Jace was. And all the things I’m not.

Aspen’s mom is the first one to break the silence after we all have a tall, sweaty glass of lemonade in our hands. Homemade lemonade with freshly squeezed lemons and so much pulp floating around in there that it’s thick.

“Rick, why don’t you tell us about yourself?” Aspen’s mom starts.

Aspen groans. “Mom, you already know everything. We’re not doing this. You can get to know him the regular way, not have him eject all the answers you want when I’ve already given you half of them.” She stands and walks behind my chair. Then, she puts one hand on my shoulder. Her touch. Her touch is so fucking powerful.

Right from the start, I think Aspen might have known we'd end up here. Okay, so she probably didn't. It was never part of her plan—not that there was much of one—but maybe it was in her head all along that I wouldn't be okay until I was feeling again. Until I was learning to feel everything I'd blocked out for so long and all the stuff I never had half a chance to learn at all. Anyway, here we are now. It feels like a road that extends across the whole country, and we've traveled the road in such a short time. We made each other promises, and as soon as we did, there was no going back.

There's no going back now.

“The only thing you need to know about Rick that I haven't told you both yet is that he's mine.”

Gah! I watch her parents tense, and they share glances with each other. Now it starts. The trapdoor opens, and I'm slid into the basement for a few nights of epic questioning that isn't going to be gentle. This is where all the shotguns finally make an appearance. And knives. Those too. Maybe even swords. If not, I'm sure a broom could be made to do some real damage. It's very likely an angry mother trying to protect her daughter could whip that up in no time.

What does she mean by I'm hers? We haven't...we haven't gotten to that part yet.

“He's my friend,” Aspen clarifies, but her hand tightens on my shoulder. “He's the man Jace wanted me to look after, and he's the man Jace picked out for me to look after me. We're always going to be connected through him and our memories of him. I want him to be a part of all of us, but he's always going to be in my life now. Whatever we decide that looks like. Maybe as friends, maybe as something more one day when we're ready to put a title on it. But I want to say it. I want to say it so he can hear it because he feels like he's never belonged anywhere or to anyone. He belongs to me.” She circles around and drops down to her knees on the deck.

I'm going to die. I'm going to die in all the ways.

"To this family," her dad adds softly. "I've already welcomed him."

"Yes." Her mom blinks back more tears. "You're always welcome with us. We'd like it if you would stay."

"We might have things to deal with in San Jose," Aspen whispers. "But we'll do what we can."

I never would have imagined that I'd be publicly claimed. Her parents have done what my own flesh and blood couldn't do. They've welcomed me. They want me. There might be a great deal to sort out, but they've made it easy. No, they made it *lookeasy*. Opening their hearts like this isn't easy. It costs a person to do this. It's painful. It's so damn real.

Right now, my throat is so damn thick and closed up.

Aspen sets her cup down and puts both hands on her knees. She looks me right in the eyes, and hers are so deep and gentle. They're always full. Full of all the emotions she feels and welcomes and lives. She's not afraid of life. There was a time when I wasn't afraid of anything life could throw at me either because the worst was already behind me. I knew there was never going to be this in front of me, so what did I have to lose?

"You're always welcome back here, even if you have to go or wherever you choose to go. We hope you'll stay in touch. Daily.Aspen."

She laughs, launches herself onto my lap, and kisses my forehead. "Yes, Mom. We will."

Jesus, this woman. She's so bold and so unafraid. She's got courage the likes I've never seen before and I've known men who have faced down bullets and hostile situations on the daily. It's not just her parents that she has to face. It's the weight of life and the expectations of a brother who isn't here with us, who we loved so much. She has to stare down life while attached to me, and what does she do? She doesn't just handle it like a darned champ. She out and out claims me.

Rick is mine.

"We will," I echo, finally feeling brave enough to look her parents in the eyes. "I'll take care of her. You have my word. I'll do everything I can to be the man Jace wanted me to be."

Aspen presses her hands on my shoulders. "We'll take you just the way you are, but we'd be happy to grow with you. And don't go off on me about how self-helpish that sounds."

"Never," I say.

Aspen's mom and dad reach for each other and hold hands. They share a meaningful look.

"We didn't get a chance to have a celebration of life for Jace. We just had his regular funeral, and by regular, I mean it was an honorable funeral for a man who served his country. But I'd like to do something that's just for family and close friends. Just for all of us who knew him and loved him as more than that," Aspen's mom says.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:40 am

I didn't go to the funeral. I just couldn't. Not when I was eaten alive by guilt, but also because if I didn't, then I could imagine Jace as he was the last time I saw him. I knew the funeral would be formal, stiff, and painful. I knew it would be layered in grief. I knew it wouldn't be anything even close to what he would have wanted.

"Yes!" Aspen's cheeks are wet when she looks back at me. Soaking wet. Her tears are flowing, soaking her face, but still, she gives me the smallest smile. "I've wanted that, Mom. He would like that so much. His mom would approve, and I know there will be a huge turnout. We can show all the funny videos from when he was younger, talk about the books he loved and the sports he played, and tell the jokes he could never get enough of. And all his friends can share what he meant to them. You're right. He was so much more than just a soldier."

She's been trying to get me to believe the same thing.

But I wasn't. For the longest time, I was just living a lost life as a civilian, but on the inside, I was still every bit of the soldier I'd always been.

"Are you coming, Rick?"

I loop my arms around Aspen's tiny frame and lock my fingers behind her back. Yes, I can let this happen. I can let it happen slowly. I can let it seep into me. This hope, these people, the goodness and the love. I can do this. It's not going to kill me. Rather, it's going to save me.

"I'll be there," I promise. And then, because that's still not enough, I add, "I'll be right there."

Chapter seventeen

Aspen

Epilogue

It's amazing what love can do for a person.

Rick sleeps through the night. I always thought he didn't sleep because he didn't want to dream or have nightmares, but he doesn't, and I don't think he ever did. He was just so well trained that he couldn't make his body cooperate. I also don't think he ever felt properly safe, and having an expensive security system and a huge, fairly impenetrable house had nothing to do with it.

Once he first started to open up, there was no stopping him. Rick is marvelously kind. He's one of the most brilliant people I know, and he's generous. He still cares very much about this country, even if he's not serving it officially, and he cares about the wider world too. He loves being a part of our family. Nothing is more important to him.

I once claimed him because he needed to be claimed. He needed to know he belonged to someone, that he mattered and was a part of their heart. Ever since that day, though, he's been claiming me in little ways, and now we belong to each other.

After we did finally confess to my parents that we got married and then got an annulment, they made us promise to save a real marriage for when we were absolutely certain. Love can be just as strong without a ring. There are always vows and promises involved when you truly want to be with someone. So, we waited. We waited, and we made it official last year, two and a half years after we got the annulment.

“Patrick McDonald, what do you think you’re doing?” I blink sleepily into yellow, watery sunlight. At least the sun is up before Rick. Or maybe not. He has a habit of rising at ungodly early hours, but that means he goes to bed early, too, and I’m not going to complain about that. Often, we don’t get to sleep until late.

He tugs on a fresh T-shirt and shakes out a pair of jeans from the dresser drawer. He’s so neat with his folding, and I swear nothing ever has even a fold line in it when he’s done with it. I hang most of my clothes, but I’ve seen the marvel of nature that is his shirts and pants and even his boxers and socks.

“Your dad’s fishes. I need to make sure they’re okay.”

I smile softly at him while blinking my poor, tired eyes. It must be five in the morning. The sun gets up early in June. I pat the empty spot on the bed and run my palm over the creased sheets. They’re still warm. “Sweetheart, I think they can wait an hour. Dad doesn’t even get up until seven or seven-thirty. It’s like, what? Five now? They can wait a few hours.”

“I promised I’d take care of them while they’re gone.”

My parents are in Scotland for a month, taking a honeymoon sort of trip that they never took when they were younger because they didn’t have the money. Back then, when my dad met my mom, not expecting to find love again, he was helping to support Jace and his mom, so he didn’t have a lot of extra cash. My parents also both worked, and it was hard for them to take any amount of extended time off. Then, I came along a few years later, and they really didn’t have any time or extra cash to go away for an extended vacation.

Rick made it possible for them to retire. Last year, he finally got his grandpa’s finances sorted out. He was able to sell the house in San Jose, which he had been renting out until he could get it free and clear. Then, in the interim, we bought the

house down the street from my parents because he did have some cash on hand. And we fixed it up. After he really came into his money, no one wanted to move. Yet. We'll get there someday. We just haven't picked a place or a country, and no one needs a mansion. We might even buy a big house with a basement suite and have my parents live there, with us on the top floor, or switch it around if they want, but nothing has been decided yet.

We truly fell in love with Atlanta, but maybe that's because we fell in love with each other in Atlanta. We might have been falling before that, but the real deal happened after we got here. We got married just a few months ago, in April, in Atlanta. The city won't hold us forever, but it will hold a great big part of my heart for the rest of my life. Rick's too. Atlanta is also the place where we found out we were starting our own family. We've been trying for months, and three weeks ago, I got the very early first positive test.

It's still so early, but I'm definitely pregnant, even if I don't feel tired or sick yet. Even if that never happens for me, in a few months, there's going to be a tiny little bump, and that bump will grow, and then our son or daughter will make their way into a world that I hope will be wonderful like the one I grew up in. For them, it's going to be a world completely different from how Rick was raised. Our child will be loved. He or she will be wanted beyond measure. Our child will be adored and have family, always.

Rick was so scared when we first started trying for a baby. I went off birth control over six months ago. We talked about it. He said he'd be a shit father, not ever having had one of his own, but it only took a few days to convince him that he'd be the best father in the world. My dad was probably the most responsible for that because after he told Rick that he did indeed have a father now, Rick came to me and said it was never too late to learn. He said he'd do everything in his power to be a good dad. He was so shy when he confessed to me that, secretly, some part of him always wanted children.

I push the sheets off and slip to the edge of the bed. Instead of getting out, I pull my T-shirt over my head and wriggle out of my shorts. “Now, can I convince you to stay in bed for another hour?”

Rick can’t hide how his pupils become enormous. “That’s devious, Mrs. McDonald. That’s cheating. Those poor fish. They’re going to be neglected. They were already neglected. I can’t let them return to that state.”

They’re rescue fish. My dad didn’t end up having an ant or a worm farm, but he did run across a coworker who was genuinely distressed about what to do with a tank full of fish that his son no longer wanted to look after. Dad offered to take them, and so started the rescue fish mission. He now has ten tanks, all set up in the basement, and it’s been a real source of joy for him. For Rick too, honestly. They sometimes spend hours in the basement together, talking about life, cleaning tanks, and learning about how to give those fish the best life they can have.

“The fish will be fine for another half an hour if I can’t convince you to stay the whole hour. But if you give me enough time to shower with you, I can go over with you, and while you feed them, I’ll make us blueberry pancakes.”

“Your parents cleaned out their fridge,” Rick points out.

“I’ll pack a picnic.”

He doesn’t tell me that it’s impractical when we live so close. He doesn’t tell me we can just slip back here after. Instead, he grins at me like that’s the most romantic proposition he’s ever heard. He slips back into bed and takes me in his arms. It’s my favorite place in the world. Wherever we go, wherever we move, and whatever adventures we have, he’s always going to be my home, and I’ll always be his.

“You tend to get a little wild when we shower, darling. Are you sure half an hour is enough time?”

“I’m the one who gets wild?” I squeal. “Goodness. I think you might have misremembered things. I might have to show you video evidence to prove that you’re wrong.”

Rick pinches my bottom lightly. “You don’t have video evidence.”

I wink at him. “Don’t I?”

“Naughty. And for that, you shall be punished most thoroughly.”

“I don’t, I don’t,” I exclaim with a laugh, squirming as his fingers sweep over my side, getting ready to tickle me. “But I’ll give you a play-by-play in real time if that helps jog your memory.”

“You know...” He lowers his face to mine, ready to kiss me. “That might just help.”

“Would it help if I told you that I love you? That I’m always going to love you? That the letter Jace wrote was the best one in the world? That you’re my entire heart, and having you here is so much better than being pen pals?”

He gives me a mock-serious look, but his eyes light up the way they do every single time I tell him that I love him. Saying those words is so wonderful, and I’ll never stop, especially because I know how much it means to him to hear them after an entire lifetime of thinking no one did and no one ever would.

“In all seriousness, I love you with every part of my soul, even the messed up parts,” Rick says softly.

“I know. I know, and it’s the most beautiful thing. All your messed up parts are perfect too.” I kiss him hard and deep, holding him to me. I’m not done being playful yet, and loving each other is serious, but we’ve found so much healing through humor. “If I weren’t already pregnant, I’d tell you that you should try, but since I already am, we might have to skip it. It does seem rather pointless now that we’ve accomplished our objective.”

“Skip it, my ass,” he growls, sliding a leg over mine and flipping himself effortlessly on top of me.

Whatever we do with our lives, wherever we go from here, we’ll do it together. We’ve already come so far. I don’t know if we’ll buy a cabin and do the bushcraft thing, travel the world, or keep a house here in Atlanta—probably always that because I don’t think my parents will ever leave. Rick already teaches self-defense classes on a volunteer basis every single day except the weekends. He goes to one of the local community centers from Monday to Friday for hours in the afternoons. He teaches everyone, from kids to seniors, how to protect themselves. And me? I’ve spent the last two years getting my Masters, and even if it is in business, and I have no idea what I want to do with it yet, I know I’ll get there. I just finished, so I have time to figure out how to put it to the best use. Since Rick started his volunteer work,

and after all the money he's donated, I think it would be great to work at a non-profit. I want to go back to work and help to make the world a better place for everyone, including the little person we're soon going to be raising.

Or maybe we can start our own company, something that Rick and I will get to do together. I just don't know yet, but maybe it's okay not to know. Back when I was taking my Masters, Rick told me every single day that it was important, and I was brilliant, and I've already done great things because I've changed his world. I don't need to immediately jump into having a hardcore career immediately after finishing school. If we do something together, like start our own non-profit and maybe help veterans, which we're both so passionate about, then we can work from anywhere and can set our own hours. We can have time for our family and still have very meaningful careers. I like that we'll have the freedom to be creative in the way our souls were meant to be. I was never meant to be chained to a desk, giving someone a mindless nine to five, and Rick was never meant to be used as a weapon. Creating a foundation will put all our talents to the best use they can ever possibly be put to.

I grasp Rick's broad, strong shoulders, marveling all over again at how soft his skin is over all that hard muscle. I believe he mentioned my favorite part of his anatomy, so I can't let that go unanswered. "Oh good, we're going to talk about your bottom. That's one of the best topics. I think about it a lot, you know. I daydream about it pretty much constantly."

"You're a wicked woman," he grunts as I slip my hand around a part of him that is definitely not his bottom.

I treat him to my most dazzling grin. "I know, Patrick McDonald. I know."