



# The Billionaire I Left Behind

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** I loved him. And then I left him. So now why am I living with him?

I had no choice when I broke his heart. My father's betrayal left me drowning in debt and shame.

Staying meant facing the whispers... and him. So, I ran—far from the man who once held my heart in his hands.

Now, I'm back. Not because I want to be here, but because I have nowhere else to go. And fate has one cruel twist—I thought I was inheriting my grandmother's beach house.

Instead, a legal clause forces me to share it with him for three months. If I walk away, I lose everything.

And now I'm falling for him all over again.

He's colder, successful, and devastatingly gorgeous. But sometimes I see glimpses of the boy I loved.

There's a late-night storm. A kiss that shouldn't have happened.

Then I find what I think is proof that he's betraying me.

I broke his heart once. Now, I guess it's my turn to be destroyed.

**Total Pages (Source):** 79

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

## Chapter one

Emma

“She would have loved these flowers,” I murmur, brushing my fingers against the sunflowers woven into the wreath. Bright, cheerful, unapologetically bold just like Grandma.

It’s a small comfort, knowing I got this one thing right. She would have teased me, saying it wasn’t worth the effort, but I know better. Sunflowers were her favorite. They were her.

The minister’s voice drifts through the salt-tinged air, soft and steady. I try to focus on his words, but my mind keeps wandering, caught between the weight of the past and the silence of the future.

The ocean breeze carries the sound of waves from beyond the cemetery gates, mingling with the rustling leaves and the faint shuffle of feet. The whole town showed up today. Mr. Harper from the hardware store. Mrs. Meyers from the diner, and so many more.

These are faces I’ve known my whole life. Grandma meant something to all of them. She meant everything to me.

“Emma, sweetheart,” Mrs. Walters whispers, touching my arm gently. “I’m sorry about your loss.”

I nod stiffly, though my throat feels tight.

“Thank you,” I force the words out, the sound brittle and thin.

She pats my hand and offers me a kind smile before turning back to the service. I glance down at the folded program in my hands, tracing the neat edges with my thumb. The casket is just a few feet away, draped in sunflowers and daisies, but it still doesn't feel real.

And then I feel it.

A prickle at the back of my neck, the sense of being watched. My heart skips, then pounds, a quiet panic threading through me before I even turn to look.

But I do.

And there he is. Bryan Lawson.

He's standing at the back of the crowd, half-hidden in the shadow of a towering oak tree, but there's no mistaking him. Even after all these years, I would know him anywhere.

My breath catches, and my chest tightens.

His eyes lock on mine, and for a split second, everything feels impossibly still. Then time lurches forward, the air thick with the weight of the past.

He's changed, but not enough to make him a stranger. The same tall, broad-shouldered frame. The same confident posture that made everything seem so steady back then. But now, there's something sharper about him that seems more guarded.

The boy I once knew is gone. The man before me is a stranger.

My stomach twists, torn between longing and guilt, regret and something sharp enough to sting.

I try to look away, but my gaze is glued to him, searching his face for... what, exactly?

Bryan looks up, his expression unreadable.

Then, just as abruptly, his eyes narrow, cold, like he's sealing himself off. The impact is immediate, like a thunderclap splitting me open. My breath hitches, my heart pounding so loudly I can hardly hear anything else.

Does he hate me? The question ricochets through my mind, loud and insistent, drowning out everything else. The past crashes into me, his laughter, his touch, the way he looked at me when I left without a goodbye. My betrayal still haunts me, deep in my chest.

His face remains unchanged. He doesn't move closer, doesn't give me anything to hold on to. Just watches me, that steady, piercing gaze that once made me feel like I was the only person in the world.

But now? Now it feels like I'm under a microscope, and I can't tell if he's curious or cold.

The ache unfurls, sudden and sharp, like someone yanked a cord too tight. My throat tightens, and I bite my lip, fighting the stupid urge to call after him, to beg him to say something anything.

And then, before I can gather my scattered thoughts or muster the courage to speak,

he turns.

His back stiffens, his jaw clenches, like he's pushing something deep down. He strides toward the gate and pauses. I swear I see him take a breath, as if to steady himself. His head half-turns, and for one second, I think he might come back.

## Page 2

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But then he disappears, swallowed by the shadows, leaving me standing in the sunlight, feeling colder than I ever have.

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I stand at the kitchen table, a chipped mug in my hands. The deep blue of the porcelain contrasts with my worn-out sweatshirt.

It's barely hours since my grandma has been laid to rest, and I'm already hunched over a notepad to plan for the last of the money I have.

I'm scribbling down numbers as I bite my lip, eyes flicking back and forth between the figure on the paper and the sparse savings left in my bank account. All thanks to the little money I managed to save and the little things I sold when I decided to move back to Ocean Bay.

It's less than five thousand dollars but it's enough for maybe two months, if I'm frugal. And years dealing with my dad's trouble has taught me that. I pause at the thought of my father but shake it off before I can dwell on it.

He isn't here anymore Emma. That's all that has kept me going since he passed away six years back. It doesn't matter if his actions still torment me. What's important is that I don't have to deal with more of his shenanigans.

At least, Grandma made sure that her insurance policy could cover her funeral expenses. Who knows how I would have survived by now if it wasn't for that? On the flipside, my late dad who had done the opposite, left me wallowing in debt for his

funeral.

He probably didn't think he would die so soon. Neither did I. He got into trouble, but I didn't think a hit-and-run six years ago would end him. No one ever found out the truth behind that accident, but I have my suspicions. My father's debts likely led to his seeming accident. Grandma had faded then, from both grief and illness.

My pen taps against the page as my mind races, calculating the cost of essentials for my dream: my own veterinary clinic that for years I've wanted to open here in Ocean Bay.

After I manage to finish college two years back and became a vet doctor, I worked in a couple of clinics but the constant monitoring from my father's debtors and the work environment which focused more on making money than anything else didn't bring me the fulfillment I hoped for. Now, it's time to fulfill my childhood dream.

I can make it work. I have to. The money's tight, but I've always been resourceful. My hands shake as I write down the list again, checking each box, like checking off my hopes, one by one.

A buzz from my phone breaks the silence, pulling my attention away from the notepad. I glance at the screen at a familiar number. It's Mr. Henshaw, my grandma's friend and lawyer.

Instantly, my forehead creases with a frown. I saw him at the funeral just few hours ago. What could be the problem?

"Hello Emma," his voice comes through the speaker.

"Hi Mr. Henshaw, how are you doing?"

“I'm doing well my dear. How are you?”

“I'm fine,” I say instinctually, knowing it's not anything near to my actual emotional state.

“Once again, sorry for your loss,”

“Thank you, is there problem?”

“Not at all. I just need you to come to my office. I'll like to read your late grandmother's will. So, I'll like to know when you will be available.”

I wasn't expecting this so soon. “I can come now,” I reply quickly. It's probably just some documents that need my signature.

There's a pause, then he responds, his tone shifting slightly. “Not yet. I need to call the second beneficiary first.”

My heart stutters. Second beneficiary?

Confusion flits across my face. I grip the phone tighter, my mind reeling. There's no one else. My father's dead. As far as I know Grandma had no other family.

“What do you mean second beneficiary Mr. Henshaw? My grandmother had no other relative that I know off.”

“I understand you have questions about this. All I can say is when you come over for the reading you will get answers to all your questions.”

His words do nothing to reassure me. My head keeps spinning about who this mysterious person is.



“I’ll call you back when we set a date,” he continues, his voice suddenly cooler, a hint of finality in it. “Goodbye.”

The line clicks, and I’m left holding the phone to my ear in stunned silence. A second beneficiary? Who? I feel the walls of the house close in around me.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I let the phone slip from my hand to the table. Grandma's house, once full of life, now feels empty, and quiet in a way that's almost suffocating.

I breathe in, trying to steady myself, but I can't shake the confusion swirling in my mind. I look around, but nothing makes sense.

I push myself away from the table, realizing that my hands are still shaking. As I walk out of the kitchen, my feet carry me without any thought on my end. My mind drifts back to the past, to the days when this house had been full of warmth and noise. To the days when Bryan was a part of it, before everything fell apart.

My fingers graze the banister as I walk through the house, each touch sending a wave of nostalgia through me. The house is weathered, the wood creaky beneath my feet, but I know every inch of it. Grandma's fingerprints are all over the place: in the worn-out rug, the kitchen table where we'd shared meals, and the faded photographs on the walls.

I pause in front of one picture, a photograph of Grandma, beaming as she baked pies in the kitchen. I can almost hear the sound of her humming as she worked, the rich smell of cinnamon filling the air. My throat tightens.

Upstairs, my old room is just as it was when I was a teenager, untouched. Posters of horses still cover the walls, my wannabe junior veterinary books sit neatly on the shelf, and the quilt she made still drapes over the bed.

I step inside, feeling the weight of the past settle over me like a blanket. The bed creaks under my weight as I sit, the dust swirling in the air. It smells the same, musty

with age, but oddly comforting. I sink into the mattress, my gaze falling to the bedframe. My fingers trace over the carving in the wood: B.L. + E.G.

Bryan. I hadn't thought about that in years, hadn't let myself. He carved it there when we were sixteen, his teasing laughter filling the room as I rolled my eyes at his antics. His smile was so easy back then. So carefree.

But then there's the last memory. The last look I got from him before I left.

Now recalling the look in his eyes in the cemetery this morning, and how they were filled with cold judgment makes me shiver. I squeeze my eyes shut, wrap my arms around myself, the memory stabbing me like a blade.

Does he hate me? I can feel the weight of the question pressing down on my chest. I don't deserve his forgiveness. I never did.

I whisper to myself, "I deserve his hate," the words breaking as they leave my lips.

Tears sting my eyes, but I push them back. I can't afford to fall apart now. Not here. Not with everything still hanging in the balance.

This house, this town, Ocean Bay it's my chance for redemption. For a fresh start.

I clench my fists, determined. I'll get my life together. I'll open that vet clinic, no matter the odds. And I'll make Grandma proud.

That's all that matters; there's no point opening old wounds.

Chapter two

Bryan

The office is quiet. Too quiet.

I should be working, going through reports, analyzing numbers, chasing down my new fraud investigation case, but I haven't turned a page in over an hour. The ledger in front of me blurs as my mind drifts, replaying the morning like a broken record.

Emma.

I rub my chest, but the ache doesn't fade. I should have been prepared to see her. After all, it was her grandmother's funeral.

I still can't stop thinking about when my eyes locked on hers, wide, startled, unreadable something cracked open that I wasn't ready for.

Thirteen years. And yet, it still hit me like a wrecking ball.

A sigh drifts from the below. Buddy stretches out on his dog bed next to my desk, paws twitching in his sleep. Lucky mutt. He doesn't have to deal with this mess.

My phone buzzes and I grab it, grateful for the distraction. Nate.

I put him on speaker. "Yeah?"

"How'd the funeral go?" Nate asks, his tone softer than usual.

"Fine."

He exhales. "Wish I could've been there. You know how much I liked Gracie. She always made me those delicious apple turnovers."

## Page 4

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A ghost of a smile flickers across my lips. “She made extra just for you. Said you were too skinny for someone who could bench press a truck.”

Nate chuckles. “She wasn’t wrong.” A pause. “You doing okay?”

I lean back in my chair, rubbing the tension from my neck. “Yeah.”

“Uh-huh.” A beat. “Let me guess. You saw her.”

My jaw tightens. No point lying. “Yeah.”

Silence. Then, “Did you talk?”

I exhale through my nose, staring at the ceiling. “No.”

Another pause. “Huh.”

I scowl. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Nate says, way too casually. “Just... interesting. Thought you were over it.”

I close my eyes, gripping the phone tighter. “I am.”

“Right.” His voice is thick with amusement. “And I’m some monk.”

Buddy lifts his head, ears flicking toward me. I reach down, scratching behind them,

needing something to ground me.

“She looked good, didn’t she?” Nate asks after a moment.

The question is casual, but it lands like a punch. To be honest, she looked too good. Too beautiful.

I should have ignored it, ignored her but my traitorous brain is still stuck on the details. The way the wind lifted the hem of her dress. The sun catching the auburn strands of her hair. That same stubborn tilt of her chin that used to drive me insane.

She shouldn’t still have this hold on me. But she does. And I hate it.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say flatly.

Nate hums. “You sound convincing.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “You need something, or just calling to be a pain in my butt?”

“Oh, I got a reason.” He snickers. “But messing with you is a solid bonus.”

I roll my eyes. “What do you want, Kingston?”

“The hotel add-on. I want your thoughts before I greenlight it.”

I glance at the Kingston Developments file on my desk Ocean Bay’s marina expansion. Fifty million in projected revenue. Normally, I’d already have the numbers crunched. Right now, I can barely focus.

“I’ll look at it later.”

“Uh-huh.” A beat. “Hey, Bryan?”

“What?”

“If you saw her again... would you talk to her?”

The question slams into me like a freight train. I should say no.

But the truth is, I don't know. I should feel anger, for what she did but currently I'm only numb.

## Page 5

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"It doesn't matter we aren't going to be seeing each other again,"

Before he can say anything else, my intercom buzzes with another call.

"Hold on Nate,"

"Jake?"

"Sir, you have a call from Mr. Henshaw, should I connect you,"

There is only one Henshaw I know and it's Paul. An old reputable lawyer in Ocean Bay. He is like a father figure to almost everyone in town just like Gracie was a mother figure to me. If he is calling then it must be something important,"

"I have to go, Henshaw's on the call with me,"

"Old man Henshaw?"

"Yes, and I'll talk to you later,"

I hang up and answer the intercom. "Hi Paul."

"Hello Bryan, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing good and you?"

"I'm fine I'd like to have a word with you. Can you come by my office tomorrow



morning at ten?"

My brow furrows. Henshaw usually calls me from time to time when he needs my assistance one way or the other, but I've never had any reason to deal with him directly or have him invite me to his office.

"What's this about?"

"It's a lot. But I assure you, you'll find out tomorrow."

"Are you sure something isn't wrong?" I press.

"No, no," he says quickly. "Just some business we need to go over. Let's talk in person."

"Okay, I'll be at your office,"

"Thank you, have a nice day,"

He hangs up. I stare at the phone, unease curling in my gut. What on earth does he want to talk to me about? Maybe he needs a favor.

I exhale, rolling my shoulders. No point overthinking it. I'll go, listen to whatever he needs, and get back to work.

But as I pocket my phone, Emma's face flashes in my mind again. Her shock. Her wide eyes. The way she looked like she wanted to say something, but the words never came.

I tell myself to let it go. If only it was that easy to rid her from my mind.

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The drive to Nate and Liz's place is quiet, save for the low rumble of the engine and the occasional rustle of Buddy shifting in the passenger seat. The sky's inky now, the last remnants of daylight bleeding into the horizon. The air is crisp, salt-tinged, quintessential Ocean Bay. I roll my shoulders, trying to shake off the tension I've been carrying all day.

Dinner with Nate and Liz usually grounds me, reminds me that there's still something steady and real outside of my work. All thanks to Liz always having my head if I missed it.

Tonight, though? My mind won't let go of Emma; of the way she looked at me like I was a ghost from a life she'd left behind. Maybe I am. At least she made it clear I was dead to her the minute she left without a word those years ago.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. I won't dwell on that pitiful night. You're done with that phase, it doesn't matter.

Buddy lets out a low huff, like he can sense my mood. His tail thumps once, then he nudges my arm with his nose. I sigh.

## Page 6

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I reach Nate's house in minutes, grab the wrapped package from the seat beside me, and step out. Buddy trots ahead, tail wagging as soon as he spots Rufus by the door. Rufus just about loses his mind, circling Buddy as I make my way up the steps. The sight makes me smile. The front door swings open before I even knock.

"Uncle Bryan!"

Max barrels into me like a tiny linebacker, his arms locking around my waist. I grin, catching him easily before tossing him up in the air just enough to make him squeal.

"Getting heavy, kid," I tease, setting him back down. "What are they feeding you?"

Max laughs, practically bouncing on his feet. "Everything! Mom says I eat like Dad."

It pleases me to hear him call Lizmom. This is all I ever wanted for my sister, happiness. I shake my head as I thought of how furious I had been when I heard she was with Nate. It had felt like betrayal having your best friend dating your sister behind your back.

However, looking back now I have no regrets giving them my blessings. My sister radiates every single day with Nate. It's like she has always been meant to be by his side. To top it all, Nate also looks better over the past few years. He is clearly happy.

"You do," I say as he giggles and raises his head to look at me making me chuckle.

I squat to his height handing him the package watching as his smile widens. "Here. Uncle Bryan saw this and thought you'd like this."

"Thank you, Uncle Bryan!" I catch him as he throws his tiny hands around my neck and hugs me.

"You're welcome," I chuckle as he pulls back. His attention now on the box. His eyes go wide as he rips the paper away, revealing the model rocket kit inside.

"A rocket?!" His excitement is instant, bright. "Can we build it now?"

I ruffle his hair. "Tomorrow, champ. I'm sure your mom and dad are waiting for us."

Nate groans from the doorway, his eyes on Max's gift. "You're spoiling him again."

"Daddy, Uncle Bryan got me a rocket!" he squeals grinning from ear to ear.

"I can see that. It seems Uncle Bryan and Uncle Liam,are determined to buy you all the toys in the world in the literal sense,"

"That's the goal and when his brother or sister arrives we'll have another baby to spoil."

Nate chuckles and shakes his head. His arm around my shoulders as he leads me in.

I smirk, stepping inside. "Best uncle's privilege."

The moment I step in Liz is there. A smile spreading across her face, glowing at twenty-four weeks pregnant, hand resting on her bump. "You're hopeless."

"I'm great with kids," I counter, sliding into my usual chair at the dining table.

Nate snorts. "Yeah, because you get to leave when they start screaming."

I shrug. “Smart man knows his limits.”

Dinner unfolds the way it always does, comforting, easy, familiar. Nate carves the roasted chicken while Liz passes the rolls. Max chatters nonstop about school, filling us in on his latest playground adventures. Rufus weaves around the table, hoping for scraps, and Buddy flops at my feet, his head resting against my boot.

This is the good stuff, the kind of evening that reminds me of what stability looks like. Then Nate smirks. I know that look.

“You could dote on more if you’d settle down like me.”

I stop mid-chew, setting my fork down. “Not for me.”

Liz glances at Nate, then back at me, her expression unreadable. “You always say that” she muses. “Never say never.”

I scoff, but the words cut deeper than they should. My mind flashes, Emma at seventeen, her eyes bright, her hands gripping mine as she whispered about forever.

Then she was gone. I shake my head. “I know better. True love’s a myth, she proved it.”

## Page 7

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Silence lingers for a beat too long before Nate, mercifully, shifts the mood. He taps his phone, putting Liam on speaker.

“Best uncle’s still up for grabs, Lawson,” Liam chimes in.

I scoff. “Dream on, West. My rocket kit trumps your overpriced tech gadgets.”

“Pfft,” Liam drawls. “You don’t know what I got him yet.”

Max, mouth full, yells, “Tell me, Uncle Liam!”

Liam chuckles. “Nice try, buddy. It’s a surprise.”

Laughter ripples around the table, but mine fades fast. Liz shifts gears. “How was Gracie’s funeral? We left flowers at her grave.”

I nod, throat tight. “That was nice of you.”

Nate, softer now, adds, “She was good to us all.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “She was.”

Liz hesitates, then carefully asks, “Did you see Emma?”

I shrug, keeping my tone nonchalant. “Yeah, briefly.”

The anger flares anyway. Emma’s presence brings it back fresh, the sharp edge of

betrayal slicing through me like it happened yesterday.

Liz's eyes narrow. But thankfully she doesn't push it.

After dinner, Nate and I step onto the porch, the night air cool against my skin. The stars glint over the bay, the waves a quiet murmur in the distance.

"You okay?" Nate asks.

I nod. "Fine."

He studies me for a beat. "Heard Emma's moving back in town now."

I freeze.

The words knock something loose inside me, but I shove it down. I mask it. "Her business, not mine."

Nate hums, unconvinced. But my gut twists.

Emma staying in Ocean Bay means I can't pretend she doesn't exist. Can't convince myself she's just a ghost from the past.

Nate, sensing the shift in my mood, lets it drop. He leans against the railing. "Got a real estate tip, small city, Boise maybe. High potential. Told Liam and he's in. Your call?"

I nod, barely processing. "I trust you. Most of my portfolio's your picks anyway."

We talk about the funding, just a couple million, but my mind is elsewhere. Driving home, my grip on the wheel is tight, Nate's words echoing in my head.

She's staying.

Buddy sighs from the passenger seat, stretching out, oblivious to the storm in my head. My phone buzzes. A text from Henshaw.

"Don't be late tomorrow."

I mutter, "What the heck's going on?" dread and curiosity warring inside me.

Chapter three



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

Emma

The office smells like old books and dust, the air thick and stale, as if no one's cracked open a window in years. A single fan hums in the corner, rattling every few seconds, struggling against the heat.

I smooth my blouse, tugging at a stubborn wrinkle near the hem, though it doesn't make much of a difference. My mind is elsewhere, grocery math, numbers clicking away in the back of my head and how to make my little savings last.

I swallow, pushing down the gnawing unease. It's fine. I'll make it work.

Mr. Henshaw's office is cluttered, stacks of folders teetering on his desk, loose papers scattered across every available surface. Sunlight filters through the dusty blinds, casting faint stripes across the floorboards. It smells faintly of ink and stale coffee.

I shift in my seat, my fingers tracing the smooth edge of the wooden armrest, the question circling in my head like a vulture.

Who's the second beneficiary?

I half-expect a name I don't recognize. Some distant cousin that I've never met. Maybe a forgotten relative from my father's side. Whoever it is, I just want to get this over with.

Henshaw clears his throat, adjusting his glasses. "Emma, good to see you..."

The door opens. The sound cuts through the room like a whipcrack, the air shifting, charged. And then the last person I expect to be here walks in.

Bryan.

My pulse skips, then stumbles, my body betraying me before my mind can catch up. He moves with the same quiet confidence, the same controlled intensity that used to set him apart from every other boy in Ocean Bay.

But he's not a boy anymore. He's broader, sharper, his presence encompassing the entire room.

His blonde hair is a little longer than I remember, tousled just right, like he ran a hand through it in frustration. His jaw is tighter, his shoulders wider, his dress shirt crisp against the muscles beneath.

And that scent. Cedar and salt air, familiar, maddening. It floods my senses, wrapping around me like a memory I never gave permission to return.

I hate that I notice. I hate that I feel it.

His eyes find mine, and for a split second, something tightens in my chest. But it dies fast. Because Bryan Lawson looks at me like I'm nothing.

Cold. Distant. Flat.

Not a flicker of recognition. Not even a hint of the warmth that used to pull me in like the tide.

I force my arms across my chest, gripping my elbows like a shield. This is fine. This is good. He's moved on. He doesn't care.

I wanted this, for him to have moved on. He smiles at Henshaw as they shake hands and exchange pleasantries.

“Did I mix up the time?” I ask, my voice thinner than I’d like.

Henshaw shakes his head, sliding his glasses up his nose. “No mix-up.” His tone shifts. Careful. Neutral. I glance at Bryan, his brows arc but he says nothing. Why is he here? Isn’t a will reading supposed to be private?

"Please have a seat, Bryan,"

I tense as Bryan takes the sit next to me. His body easily dwarfs the chair, and I can feel a warmth that brings back such memories. Stop it Emma, get back to now.

He’s completely unfazed, still not glancing in my direction. It stings.

I shouldn’t care, but I do. Because I remember when his eyes would search for me across a crowded room. I remember being his center of gravity. And now? Now I’m air.

A memory flickers. Bryan at seventeen, spinning me around on the beach, his laughter warm, golden, as sand stuck to our feet. "You’re my best thing, Em."

I shove it down. That’s gone. He’s moved on. I made sure of it.

Then Henshaw drops the bomb. “Bryan’s the other beneficiary.”

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The words hit like a gut punch. I blink. “I’m sorry, what?”

Bryan doesn’t react. Doesn’t look at me. Doesn’t acknowledge me.

He nods at Henshaw, his voice cool, detached. “Paul?”

Henshaw clears his throat. “Emma, your grandmother left the beach house to the both of you. Half each.”

The chair creaks as I sit up straighter. “Wait, what?”

“To retain ownership, you both have to live there together for three months.”

The room tilts. Three months? With him?

I turn to Bryan, expecting him to be as horrified as I am. But he is unreadable. His brow furrows, but that’s the only sign that he’s even remotely rattled.

My fingers clench around the armrest. “This is ridiculous, he doesn’t even need it!”

That does something. His head tilts, slow and calculated, like a predator sizing up prey.

And then, his voice, low, amused, smug. He has a dangerous glint in his eyes. “Don’t be so sure.”

Something about his tone needles under my skin, lighting up every nerve ending. I

straighten, heat creeping up my neck. “You’re actually considering this?”

He shrugs. “I’m interested. Very interested.”

My stomach knots. The way he says it, like he knows this bothers me, makes my blood pressure spike. I can’t tell if he wants the house or if he just wants to watch me squirm.

"Mr. Henshaw, you know my Grandma was sick, possibly she wasn't in her right state of mind."

"Oh, but she was. Everything is documented,"

I pause, my heart thundering against my chest. All I wanted was to come back to town, start my life afresh quietly. I will not let that be ruined by having a man who clearly hates me in my space.

"Is there an alternative? I mean maybe a condition where we don't have to live together."

Henshaw clears his throat. “I'm afraid there is not. It’s this or lose it. She stated that if either of you refuse to fulfill the condition, the house will go to charity.”

"Wait what? What if he refuses?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not going to leave that house to you. Gracie gave me half of it and I intend to get it." His deadly calm voice fills the room sending shivers up my spine.

We lock eyes, mine blazing, his defiant. Neither of us backs down.

The silence stretches, thick, heavy, charged. Then it occurs to me that if he decides to back off, the house will go to charity. Why on earth did Grandma do a thing like this? My eyes burn with tears, but I refuse to let them fall.

Let him hate me. I cannot afford to lose the house, so if it means we share for three months, so be it.

Henshaw exhales, relieved, and slides a set of keys across the desk. "What do you both decide?"

"I'll take the condition," Bryan agrees.

"Perfect, and you?" Henshaw turns his eyes to my direction.

"I'll take it,"

"Perfect," Henshaw says with a smile.

"I believe you have your keys, so I'll just hand the spare to Bryan."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I watch as Henshaw digs into his drawer and brings out another set of keys and hands them to Bryan. Bryan grabs his set and walks out without another word, his back stiff, his movements precise.

I stare at my own keys, my pulse pounding. My fingers tighten around the metal. A whisper leaves my lips, barely audible, meant for someone who is no longer here.

"Grandma... why?"

\*\*\*

I haven't stopped pacing. The keys in my hand jangle with every turn, the sound sharp in the too-quiet house. My other hand is clenched, nails digging into my palm as I run the last hour through my head again and again.

Bryan. Half of the house. Three months. I stop, pressing my fingers against my temple, willing away the dull ache forming behind my eyes. This isn't happening. This cannot be happening.

My phone buzzes on the coffee table, and I don't have to check it to know who it is.

The creditors. Again. The same relentless number calling for the money I don't have. Forty thousand left to pay. Honestly, I don't know how I survived these years handling so much of my father's debt.

I squeeze my eyes shut, swallowing the frustration burning in my throat. It's been six years since my dad died, and I thought the nightmare was finally over. And yet, his

debt still follows me, like a shadow I can't outrun. I jab my thumb against the screen, sending the call to voicemail.

"Why, Grandma?" I whisper, my voice barely audible in the dim light of the living room.

A sharp knock at the front door makes me freeze mid-step. My fingers tighten around the keys still in my hand, the cool metal pressing into my skin. I press my face into a frown wondering who it can be since I'm expecting no one.

For a second, a stupid, ridiculous second, I almost expect it to be Bryan. Surely, he isn't moving in so soon. At least he should give me a couple of hours to process this. But I don't expect him to be considerate of me. Not after what I did to him.

I swallow the lump in my throat and push that thought away. The knock comes again, firmer this time. I exhale, shake off the momentary chill crawling up my spine, and head toward the door. My stomach knots as I pull it open, but the second I see who it is, the weight vanishes.

"Emma!"

"Stella?"

We scream at the same time, and then she's throwing herself at me, arms locking around my shoulders.

The hug is tight, crushing, overwhelming, but I don't care. I hug her back just as hard.

For a moment, we forget everything else. That just yesterday was Grandma's funeral. That I didn't get a real chance to talk to her before I left. That it's been years.



Because right now, none of that matters.

When we finally pull back, Stella grips my arms, her blue eyes scanning my face like she's checking if I'm real.

She exhales, grinning. "Oh, my goodness, you look good."

I laugh, shaking my head. "Liar."

She gasps, offended. "Me? A liar? Never."

I roll my eyes, stepping aside. "Come in before you wake up the entire neighborhood."

She smirks. "Emma, babe, it's the middle of the day."

Still, she strides inside, kicking off her flats like she owns the place because honestly, she practically does.

It's been so long, but nothing about her has changed. She looks just the same as when we were in high school, best friends and always together.

Her hair is still the same wavy blonde, pulled up in a messy bun, probably done in a rush before she got here. She still talks with her hands, her entire body involved in every conversation. And she still fills a room like she's the sun, bright and warm and pulling you into her orbit whether you like it or not.

I shut the door and lean against it, arms crossed. "So, are you gonna tell me how you are, or do I have to guess?"

She grins, plopping onto the couch, stretching her legs out. "I'm fabulous,

obviously.”

I raise a brow. “Still working at the café?”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

“Of course.” She flips her hair dramatically. “Ocean Bay would crumble without my superior coffee-making skills.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Sure, that’s what’s holding the town together.”

She wiggles her brows. “You missed me.”

I sigh, smiling despite myself. “Yeah, I did.”

Her expression softens, just a bit. “Good. Because I missed you too.”

A beat passes, warm and unspoken. She sits up, tilting her head as she studies me. “And you? How are you really?”

I open my mouth to say I’m fine but the words stick. Instead, I glance around the living room, searching for something else to focus on.

That’s when she says it. “I’m glad you’re back,” she murmurs, running a hand along the back of the couch. “At least Grandma’s house will have some life in it again.”

I freeze. A second too long. And she notices.

Stella’s eyes narrow, sharp and knowing. She knows me too well. “Okay,” she says, slow. “What’s wrong?”

I force a smile. “Nothing.”

Her brows lift. “Emma?”

I wave a hand. “I swear, it’s...”

“Uh-huh. Try again.”

I sigh, slumping onto the armchair across from her. “It’s just... complicated.”

She leans in. “Complicated how?”

I grip the cushion beneath me, fighting the urge to bolt.

Just tell her.

I exhale, rubbing my forehead. “Bryan owns half the house.”

Silence. I don’t dare look up. Not yet. Then...

“Wait. What?”

I peek up, and yep. There it is. Stella looks like I just told her aliens landed on Main Street.

I groan, dropping my head back against the chair. “Grandma left the house to both of us. Fifty-fifty.”

Stella blinks. “I ... what?”

“And we must live here. Together. For three months.”

The words land like a bomb. For a second, she’s completely silent. Then she bursts

out laughing.

I glare. “Glad you find my misery entertaining.”

“Oh, babe.” She wipes at her eyes, still giggling. “This town is gonna have a field day with this.”

I groan, shoving a pillow at her. “Not helping.”

She catches it, still grinning. “I mean... come on. Your grandma totally did this on purpose.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I shake my head. “I sincerely don't want to believe that.”

She throws her hands up. “How else do you explain it?”

“She probably thought it was fair.”

“Emma, she worshipped Bryan.”

I sigh, rubbing my temples. “I don't care what she was thinking, okay? I just wanted to get back and move on. Do what I always wanted to do.”

She tilts her head. “What do you mean?”

I hesitate, then reach for the sketchpad on the coffee table, flipping it open. “I'm opening my own vet clinic.”

That gets her attention. Her eyes light up. “Oh, my goodness,” she gasps, snatching the pad from my hands. “You're serious?”

I nod. “I've been planning it for a while. After I finished school and my internship, I worked at a clinic part time. I loved taking care of all the diverse animals there, but I knew that I wanted the business to be my own. I just need to get funds and make it happen.”

Stella flips through the sketches. “This is amazing. The town needs this. I mean after the death of Grayson Davies, the old clinic shut down before it was brought down because of the preschool project.”

I think of old Mr. Grayson who passed a little over two years ago. Hearing about his death had been devastating but it had in some ways given me clarity on what I needed to do with myself.

"Yeah, I need it too. The past few years of my life I've sacrificed my happiness for others but now I just want to do something I love. Give animals the best care possible with little to no fee at all. But it doesn't seem feasible. I've written organizations, done campaigns online but nothing is forthcoming especially when they realize it's not profit oriented."

My voice drifts as I thought about how the past years have focused on repaying my father's debt. How I had left town back then so I wouldn't drag Bryan down with me. Seeing his current success confirms that my decision had been right in that respect, but my heart still aches.

"Hey, don't be like that. We will figure it out together. We can have a fundraising, you know everyone in town will be happy to help,"

"Yeah, they will but I want them to decide to help because they want to. I want to offer the most cost effective medical services for animals as possible."

"I know, everyone has always known how much you dote on them, and I believe we can work on it. You should do some volunteer work, Emma. That will let everyone get to know you again, and then we can start talking about the fundraising to them. I'm sure there will be people who are ready to support your cause,"

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. Trust me, you have my support every step of the way besides I'm sure we are all tired of going to clinic in the next town to get our pets treated. If people knew you want to open a low cost clinic for their pets, they'll do what they can do,"

I stare at her, my eyes almost burning with tears. Wrapping my arms around her, I feel her chuckle as she holds me tight.

"Thank you," I mutter as I pull back.

"You're welcome,"

Something in me steadies. Because this is the only thing that makes sense right now.

Then my phone buzzes again. I glance at it, expecting the creditors. It's not. Henshaw.

My stomach drops. I open the message, reading it twice. "Bryan's moving in tomorrow. 8 a.m. Three months start then."

My breath catches. I feel Stella's gaze on me. "What?" she asks.

I swallow hard. "He's moving in, tomorrow."

Stella blinks. "Tomorrow?"

I nod, my fingers tightening around my notebook. She lets out a low whistle. "Wow! He's really going through with it."

I exhale. "Yeah. Looks like it."

Her grin returns. "Oh, babe. This is gonna be a mess."



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I shoot her a look. She just smirks. And for the first time since returning, I don't feel entirely alone.

### Chapter four

Bryan

The Marina Bar is buzzing, filled with the usual mix of locals, tourists, and fishermen unwinding after a long day. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the marina stretches out, boats bobbing lazily under the fading orange sky. Inside, the scent of grilled seafood, salt air, and beer lingers.

I sit at our usual corner booth, nursing a root beer, my fingers tapping against the glass. Buddy sprawls at my feet, his tail giving a slow, rhythmic thump.

I should be focused on business. But my mind is still stuck on the will. Three months. With her.

I rub a hand down my face, scowling. What was Grandma Gracie thinking? The door swings open, and Nate and Liam stride in, bringing their usual energy with them.

Spotting me immediately, they head over. Squatting beside Buddy, they give him a few rubs which he lazily enjoys before gobbling up the treats they each brought with them.

Nate claps my shoulder as he slides into the booth. "You look like you just got hit by a truck."

I grunt. "You should see the truck."

Liam smirks, slipping in next to him. "That bad?"

I shake my head, exhaling slowly. "You wouldn't believe the junk I was told today."

Nate leans back, stretching an arm over the booth. "Alright, now I'm interested."

Liam signals to the waitress for drinks. "Let me guess, another fishy account?"

I huff out a humorless laugh. "Try living arrangement."

Nate frowns. "What?"

Liam tilts his head. "You don't have a roommate."

I drag a hand down my face. "Yeah. About that."

Their brows lift, and I can already tell they're bracing for something ridiculous. I lean forward, deadpan. "I went to see Henshaw today."

Nate straightens, interest sparking. "Oh, right, you mentioned that earlier. What'd he want?"

I roll my shoulders. "To tell me that I own half of Gracie's house."

"Whoa. I mean, what about Emma?"

I tense hearing her name. I recall the distraught look on her face when Henshaw told her the terms. Did I repulse her so much that the idea of staying under the same roof with me was abhorrent to her? I shouldn't care about what she thinks of me but

somehow is all I can think of.

"She owns the other half,"

Liam shrugs. "Okay... and I still don't see where the living arrangement comes in. You can decide to sell your half to her."

"And I can't do anything with it unless I live there with her for three months."

Silence. Then Nate laughs. Loud.

Liam blinks. "Wait. What?"

Nate leans forward, grinning. "Are you kidding? Gracie is something else."

Liam's mouth quirks. "She really wants you to live with Emma?"

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

They wait, eyes locked on me. I sigh. The booth falls completely silent. Then...

Liam bursts out laughing as well, while Nate just stares at me, stunned.

Liam shakes his head, chuckling. "That woman is playing chess from the afterlife."

Nate finally exhales, incredulous. "She seriously tied you two together like that?"

I nod, tight-lipped. They exchange one of those looks, the kind that makes my blood pressure spike.

Nate, still grinning, leans back. "Alright, alright. Joke's over. Obviously, you're not going to do it."

Liam nods. "Yeah. You'll forfeit, right?"

I take a slow sip of my drink. "No."

Their smiles fade instantly. Nate blinks. "Wait. You're actually doing it?"

Liam tilts his head, studying me. "You'd rather live with Emma for three months than just... let the house go?"

I grit my teeth. "Leaving it to her is too easy."

Nate whistles low. "Wow! You're really holding onto that grudge, huh?"

I scoff, rolling my shoulders. “You act like she didn’t completely disappear on me without a word.”

Liam’s expression is unreadable. “That was thirteen years ago.”

“And?”

Liam sighs, shaking his head. Nate smirks. “So, what’s the plan, then? Make her life miserable?”

I shrug, not confirming or denying. But the truth is, I haven’t even figured that out yet. Liam narrows his eyes. “You don’t even need the house, Bryan.”

I lift a brow. “So?”

Nate leans forward. “So... why? Why not just walk away?”

I hesitate. Because part of me knows the real answer. It’s not about the house. It’s about her.

I hate that she thinks she can come back like nothing happened. That she looked at me today with those big, guilty eyes, and I still felt something. I hate that some stupid, irrational part of me wants her to regret leaving.

I set my drink down with a thud. “Because I won’t give her the satisfaction. Besides, if either of us doesn’t agree, then the house goes to charity. Not that I care if Emma loses the house, I care about Gracie. She was too good to me, and I won’t let her house go like that.”

Liam and Nate exchange another look. One that makes me want to punch something.

Nate smirks. “Okay. Sure. That’s the reason.”

I glare. “Drop it.”

Liam chuckles. “If you say so.”

I shake my head, changing the subject. “What’s going on with Boise?”

Nate grins, letting me off the hook. “Thirty million split three ways. Town homes, retail, dog park. I’ve got a site locked, ten mil down.”

Liam nods. “My tech’s in, another ten mil.”

I roll my shoulders, dragging myself back to work mode. “I’m good for ten.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

Nate grins. “Kingston Marina’s portfolio grows again, your picks, my builds, his gadgets.”

We clink glasses, but I’m still not fully present. Because as much as I tell myself it’s just a house...

Emma’s face from today still lingers. Her fragrance, lavender and fresh air, won’t leave my head. And that ticks me off more than anything.

Liam leans back, watching me too closely. “That cliff house... If you restore it, it’ll sell for two mil, easy.”

Nate nods. “Could be worth the investment.”

I pretend to consider it casually. Because, yeah leveraging it makes sense. But we all know that’s not why I’m really staying.

Liam smirks, it’s like he is reading my mind. “Sleep on it. Might not hate it as much as you think.”

Am I that predictable with my thoughts? Or they just assume she is rattling me? I grit my teeth. “Shut up.”

Nate laughs. I push up from the booth, tossing cash onto the table. “I’ll see you at the office.”

Nate winks. “See you at your new home.”

I growl at him as I stride out, Buddy trotting at my side. The cool night air does nothing to clear my head.

Tomorrow, I move in. Not for her. Not for the past. Just to win. Buddy nudges my leg, as if he doesn't believe me either.

I exhale sharply, muttering, "Three months living together is nothing. I'll just pretend like she doesn't exist, easy."

And for the first time in years, I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

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It's morning as I pull into the gravel driveway, killing the engine with more force than necessary.

The house looms ahead weathered, worn, and stubbornly standing against the ocean wind. Just like its last owner.

I exhale sharply, gripping the steering wheel. Three months. That's all. Three months, and I'll be out of here.

I push the door open, stepping out as salty air whips against my face. Buddy jumps down from the passenger seat, tail wagging, already eager to explore.

Lucky him. He doesn't have to deal with all of this emotion.

I grab my duffel from the backseat and sling it over my shoulder. The house groans in the breeze, the porch sagging slightly under my weight as I climb the steps. I shove the key into the lock, twisting... Only for the door to yank open from the inside.



Emma.

Frozen mid-step, her hand still gripping the handle, eyes wide with disbelief. My grip on the duffel tightens.

Her hair is pulled up, a loose strand falling against her cheek. I notice, hate that I do. She's in worn jeans and a faded tee, nothing special, but somehow it still makes my gut twist in ways I don't want to acknowledge.

Her gaze sharpens, snapping out of her shock. "Hi,"

I scoff, shifting my bag higher. "Hello."

For a moment we stand frozen, I stare at her unable to stop my heart from racing faster. She is beautiful, in every sense of the word. Well, except for her heart. She is selfish, a woman who made me believe in the fairy tale of love but has none to give.

I'm still dwelling on this when Buddy rushes towards her. He starts jumping trying to get her attention. I raise my eyes at this. Buddy isn't usually this friendly with strangers. I watch as she squats and rubs him making him even happier.

She chuckles as Buddy licks her face. The sound going straight to my heart. She is beautiful. Absolutely stunning.

"Can I come in now?"

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

She huffs out a sharp breath, rising to her feet before stepping back to let me in. The second I cross the threshold; the house smells like her.

Lavender and something warm, familiar. Don't even go there.

Emma turns away, stalking toward a pile of boxes. I let my gaze sweep over the space, dusty furniture, creaky floors, Gracie's old clock ticking against the silence.

It shouldn't feel like home. But the memories are buried deep in the walls, clawing their way out. Emma suddenly whirls back, arms crossed.

"We should talk about how this is going to work," she says, her voice steady. "I think we should split the space."

I arch a brow. That's it? No argument? No drawn-out battle? I don't know what I was expecting, but not this. "Split the space," I echo, watching her closely.

She nods. "Upstairs is mine, you take downstairs and the back bedroom upstairs. And we split our times in the kitchen. That way, we stay out of each other's way."

My eyes narrow. There's no hesitation in her tone, no flicker of doubt, like she's completely unaffected by the idea of living under the same roof again.

My jaw tightens. "What if I don't agree?" I ask.

Emma doesn't flinch. She just crosses her arms over her chest and lifts her chin.

“Then we make each other miserable for three months,” she says plainly. “But I don’t see the point. I just want to get by.”

That shouldn’t affect me. But something about the way she says it, the quiet strain behind her words, the flicker of exhaustion in her eyes hits me in a place I don’t want to acknowledge.

I drag a hand down my face. Three months. That’s all this is.

“Fine,” I say, exhaling sharply. Emma nods and tells me that I can take one of the bedrooms upstairs as well.

Buddy trots past me, immediately sniffing at the couch, completely unaware of the tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

I take a step toward the living room, looking around at the dust-covered furniture, the old wooden banister leading upstairs.

And suddenly, memories rushes in. Sixteen, racing Emma up the stairs, her laugh echoing through the halls. Her grandma calling after us from the kitchen, lemonade in hand, scolding us for tracking sand inside.

I grit my teeth. The house feels too alive with memories. And I hate that she’s in them.

I turn going to one of the rooms, ready to get this over with. I must confess the house is in a bad state. It would take weeks if not months to bring it back to life.

When I circle back to the dining room, I find Emma hunched over a box, her shoulders stiff. Something in my chest curls.

She looks small, fingers hovering over a leather-bound book. I recognize it immediately. A photo album.

She flips it open, and I see it. Me. Her. Grandma. We're grinning around a bonfire, the summer before she left.

I exhale sharply, and she hears it. Her head jerks up. Our eyes lock. And in that moment, the air shifts and I see it in her eyes, grief. Raw, aching, just like mine.

She looks away fast, but the damage is done. I felt it too. For the first time since she left, we're not two strangers standing on opposite sides of a war. We're just... Bryan and Emma. Both of us missing the same person.

I storm upstairs, hating how that moment cracked something in me. Because it can't happen. Not again. I toss my bag onto the bed, pacing, forcing the emotions back down where they belong.

I hate that she still gets to me. I hate that I notice the way she tucks her hair behind her ear, the way her voice wavers over Grandma's name.

And I really, really hate that I want to reach for her just now. Not happening. I rub a hand over my face and reach for my phone, just as a voice drifts up from downstairs.

Emma.

I freeze, listening. "I just need time to settle in my new place. I told you I'd always reach out."

There's a pause. Then softer, "You don't have to worry, I can't forget about you."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

My chest tightens. The rational side of me says it's nothing. But my gut? It twists.

I grab my keys and fire off a text to Nate. "Marina. Now." Because I need air. I need distraction. And I need to stop my wayward thoughts about Emma Greene.

### Chapter five

#### Emma

The dripping faucet is going to drive me insane. I grip the wrench harder, twisting it against the rusted pipe with every ounce of frustration I have left. Creak. Splash!

A cold jet of water sprays my face, drenching my T-shirt. "Ugh!"

I slam the wrench onto the counter, pressing my palms against my soaked jeans, glaring at the faucet like it personally wronged me. It kind of has. The house is falling apart, and my savings? It's falling apart faster.

I eye the notebook on the counter where I've been tracking every dollar that I have left. The numbers are bad. The plumber's estimate from two days ago is circled in red, money I can't afford to spend, not unless I want to starve for the next month.

So, fixing it myself? It's the only option. And failing at fixing it? My second full-time job, apparently.

I grab a rag, wringing it out before tossing it toward the trash bag I filled earlier. I need to get rid of all this mess, and then I'll try again.

Maybe. I bundle up the soaked rags, open the door, and step outside. The ocean air is crisp, cutting through the warm morning sun. The seagulls screech overhead, the scent of salt thick in the wind.

And then, I see him. Buddy.

The only one who has not made me feel like I'm living here alone. He has been my companion for the past few days. However, today he doesn't look his usual self.

That's when I see it. He's slumped near the trash bins, his tail motionless, his breathing ragged.

My heart lurches. I drop the bag, rushing toward him.

"Buddy?"

He doesn't perk up. Doesn't wag his tail. Just blinks at me slowly, his eyes dull.

No. No, no, no.

I kneel beside him, running my hands over his body, feeling for any swelling, tenderness, or signs of pain. His belly feels bloated. Soft, but not normal.

My mind snaps, something is wrong. This could be anything, something he ate, a toxin, a reaction. My stomach knots. The house is old, filled with peeling paint, old chemicals, maybe even rat poison left behind.

Think, Emma.

Hydrogen peroxide. If he ingested something toxic, I need to get it out.

I spring to my feet, darting back inside and rifling through my bag. I always carry some, force of habit after years of emergency vet cases in the city.

Back outside, I tilt his muzzle gently. “Come on, big guy,” I murmur, measuring out a teaspoon and easing it into his mouth. Buddy whines but swallows.

“Just a little more,” I coax. “It’ll help, I promise.”

Seconds feel like forever. And then he gags. And vomits. I sag with relief.

It’s greenish. I scan the mess quickly, spotting flecks of what looks like paint chips. Oh no. That must be it. Paint thinner residue.

He’s still breathing heavily, but he looks slightly more alert. That buys me time. But he needs more than this.

I scoop him up, his body heavy in my arms. His weight is solid all sixty pounds of warm, familiar fur. My arms burn, but I push through it, stumbling toward my beat-up hatchback.

The next town has an animal clinic. It’s our only option since there isn’t a clinic here. I lower him into the passenger seat, then fumble for my phone with trembling hands.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I don't have Bryan's number. But I have Henshaw's. I dial, pressing the phone hard against my ear as I tear out of the driveway, tires kicking up gravel.

He picks up on the third ring. "Emma?"

I swerve onto the main road, wind roaring through the open windows.

"Tom, I need Bryan's number. Now. Buddy's sick."

There's a pause. Then, gruffly, "Hold on."

A text dings through a moment later. I don't hesitate. I call Bryan. Thankfully, he answers on the second ring.

"It's Emma," I say, breathless. "Buddy's bad. Can you meet me at the vet clinic in the next town, now?"

"What?" Then, clipped, "On my way."

It takes a little over forty minutes to get there. The clinic is old, peeling white paint, a crooked sign.

Inside, the waiting room is full, I'm sure it's because it's the only clinic within a couple of miles radius. A terrier whining, a golden retriever licking its bandaged paw. When the receptionist sees us she immediately points to the back, and I hurry past with a grateful nod.



The doctor is already working on a hissing tabby when I rush in, Buddy cradled against my chest. Doc looks up sharply. I don't wait for greetings.

"Paint thinner poisoning," I say. "I induced vomiting, but he's still lethargic."

Doc nods, immediately clearing a space. I lower Buddy onto the exam table, heart pounding.

He hooks up an IV, checking vitals. Then, finally, he exhales.

"He'll be okay," Doc says. "You caught it early, kept it from getting worse."

My knees nearly buckle. I don't realize I'm still shaking until a new presence fills the doorway.

Bryan.

He storms in, his expression wild, his breathing sharp. His jeans are worn, his navy shirt unbuttoned at the top, his cedar scent cutting through the sterile air.

He looks at Buddy first. Then at me. His eyes flick over my drenched T-shirt, the paint smudges on my arms, the exhaustion in my stance. He steps closer, but I beat him to it.

"He's okay," I say quickly. "Doc said we got to him in time."

Bryan's chest rises, falls. His jaw tightens.

Then, softly, "Thanks."

It's gruff. Sincere. And for some stupid, stupid reason, it hits. Something shifts in his

gaze, just for a second. Less cold, more raw and I look away.

“Just doing what needed to be done,” I say, voice steady. “It’s Buddy. Of course, I’d help.”

Doc adjusts the IV, then mutters to himself.

“Too many pets, too little me,” he sighs. “I swear, we need more than this clinic around these towns.”

Bryan’s eyes flick toward me. Does he see it? The way my fingers tighten around the exam table. The way my resolve hardens. Ocean Bay having a new clinic will definitely help, especially for faster care in emergencies.

\*\*\*

The attic air is thick with dust, the scent of aged wood and old paper clinging to my clothes. The single bulb above flickers weakly, its glow barely reaching the corners of the space. Cobwebs stretch between rafters, dust motes swirl in the slanted light, and the ocean hums in the distance, steady and familiar.

Buddy trots beside me, tail wagging as he sniffs curiously at a stacks of boxes, his nose twitching in excitement. I smile, slipping a dog biscuit from my pocket and holding it out. He snatches it up eagerly, crunching loudly before snuffling through the dust again.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

It's been days since the clinic. He's better now, strong, playful, completely oblivious to how close he came to real danger. I exhale, a familiar ache pressing at my chest. At least one of us gets to live without carrying the weight of the past.

I reach for another box, dragging it closer, but pause when my fingers brush against the cool metal of the attic door handle. It's firm. Solid. Not loose anymore.

I frown, glancing down at the bucket of tools sitting beside the attic entrance. I hadn't touched them. But someone had.

I step back, my brow furrowing. The leaky faucet in the kitchen has also been fixed. The stubborn attic door handle tightened.

I don't need to ask who did it. My grip tightens around the edge of the box as an image of Bryan flashes in my mind.

Him, standing at the sink, sleeves rolled up, brow furrowed in that serious way he always had when he was fixing something.

It's ridiculous, how easily my pulse jumps at the thought, how my body remembers things my mind refuses to dwell on.

He didn't have to fix anything. But he did. I inhale slowly, steadying myself, but my lips betray me, a small smile tugs at the corners.

Don't overthink it, Emma. I shake off the feeling and focus on sorting through the box in front of me.

The old wooden box is tucked beneath a pile of blankets. The latch is rusted, but the lid lifts easily with a creak.

Inside, neatly stacked letters sit atop faded postcards and a cracked leather notebook. Grandma's handwriting is instantly recognizable on some, the soft slant, the delicate curls at the edges.

I run my fingers lightly over the envelopes, my chest tightening. She must have kept these for years. Some are addressed to me, some to old friends, but one name stops me cold.

Bryan.

My breath catches. I hesitate, heart hammering, then gently lift the letter bearing his name. The paper is yellowed, slightly crinkled at the edges, but her script is as strong as ever.

"You're family, son; always will be. Take care of her." Grandma had written all those years ago.

My throat closes. The weight of guilt presses hard, a sharp, cutting thing. I glance at Buddy, who has curled up on an old blanket nearby, his eyes half-lidded in contentment.

I force myself to breathe, to push back the memories that claw at the edges of my mind. Bryan, sixteen, standing on the porch, arms full of wood planks, sweat on his brow, that cocky smirk on his lips.

"Teamwork, Em," he'd said, nudging me with his elbow. I'd laughed, rolling my eyes, but my heart had been so full back then. The boy who made everything feel safe, steady.

I squeeze my eyes shut. The attic feels too small. Too full of ghosts. I swallow hard and glance toward the door, toward the fixes Bryan made, the quiet ways he still takes care of things, even when he doesn't have to.

Does he still feel it? That urge to protect, to fix, to be the one who makes things right? Or is this just habit, something he does without thinking, without meaning?

I shake my head, pushing the thought away. It doesn't matter.

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The familiar chime of the coffee shop door rings as I step inside, the rich scent of espresso and warm cinnamon wrapping around me. It's busier than I expected for a late afternoon, but The Brew Barn has always been a town staple the kind of place where people linger over coffee, swapping stories and gossip that spreads faster than the ocean wind.

Stella's already waiting at our usual corner booth, waving excitedly. I haven't even sat down yet before she blurts, "Okay, I need every single detail."

I snort, shaking my head as I slide into the seat across from her. "Good to see you too."

She grins, pushing a steaming latte across the table toward me. "I already ordered for you. Your favorite chocolate, and I need answers."

I take the cup, savoring the warmth in my hands. "Answers about what?"

She arches a brow. "Oh, don't play dumb. Bryan. The house. You living with him. The town is buzzing, Em."

I groan, dropping my forehead onto the table. “Please tell me there’s no betting pool.”

“Oh, there absolutely is.”

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I lift my head, glaring. “You better not be in on it.”

She takes a slow sip of her coffee, refusing to confirm or deny. I sigh, leaning back in my seat. “It’s fine.”

Stella’s expression flatlines. “Fine?”

“Fine.”

She glares harder. I roll my eyes. “For the past few days, we weren’t talking. But then Buddy got sick, and now... we’re just cordial.”

Stella leans forward; interest piqued. “Wait, Buddy got sick? What happened?”

I rub a hand over my face. “He got into something, probably old paint or thinner. I had to take him to Doc Wheeler’s clinic in the next town, and Bryan freaked out.”

She scoffs. “Of course, he did. He loves that dog.”

I nod, taking a slow sip of my coffee. “I’ve grown fond of Buddy too. Anyway, Buddy’s fine now. But since then, Bryan’s been... I don’t know. Just there, fixing things around the house without saying anything.”

Stella’s eyes widen. “Fixing things? What kind of things?”

I shrug, looking down at my cup. “The faucet. The attic door handle. Probably more I haven’t even noticed yet.”

She gasp-laughs, shaking her head. “Oh really, Emma? This man is fixing your part of the house for you, and you’re telling me nothing is happening?”

I glare. “Nothing is happening.”

Stella smirks. “You keep telling yourself that.”

I exhale, glancing out the window, watching the waves roll onto the shore. “I don’t want anything to happen, Stella. He hates me and I can’t blame him. After all, I’m the one who left town without a word. He’s probably only helping to return the favor I did for buddy. I just want to focus on my plans.”

Her smirk fades into curiosity. “Speaking of, what is the plan? You were talking about opening your own clinic, but... are you really going to do it?”

I hesitate, running my finger along the rim of my cup.

“I... don’t know.”

Stella frowns. “What do you mean you don’t know? That was always the goal.”

I exhale, rubbing my forehead. “I know. But...”

I pull out my phone, open my inbox, and slide it across the table. “Just this morning, I got another rejection email for financing.”

Stella scans the message, then scowls. “Are you kidding me? They rejected YOU? Have they met you?”

I force a laugh. “Apparently, my ‘business plan lacks feasibility given the current economic climate.’ And since it is not profit oriented let’s just say it isn’t such a great



plan.”

Stella shoves my phone back toward me. “That’s nonsense.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrug. “It’s not like I have another option.”

Her eyes narrow in determination. “Oh, no. We are not giving up on this.”

I sigh, shaking my head. “Stell, I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I’ve been at this for months. Every time I think I’m getting somewhere, another door slams shut.”

“Then we keep knocking.” She grins, pulling out her laptop. “I’ll help you apply for more funding. We’ll cast a wider net.”

I stare at her. “You’d do that?”

She gives me a look. “Emma. You’re my best friend. Of course, I would.”

## Page 21

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Something tightens in my chest. I haven't had support like this in a long time. I reach across the table, squeezing her hand. "Thank you."

She smiles, squeezing back. "Always."

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Stella leans back, grinning mischievously. "So, you never actually answered my question."

I blink. "What question?"

She waggles her eyebrows. "What's it like actually living with Bryan?"

I groan, dropping my head onto the table again. "Em."

"Stella."

She laughs, nudging my foot under the table. "Come on. You can't tell me it's just cordial."

I lift my head, sighing. "Okay, fine. It's... weird."

She leans in, excited. "Weird how?"

I hesitate. "I mean... we don't fight. Not really. We're not friends, but we're not exactly avoiding each other either. It's like..." I trail off, struggling to put it into words.

Stella tilts her head. “Like old wounds that aren’t quite healed yet?”

I flinch. Because yeah. That’s exactly what it feels like. She watches me carefully, her playful expression softening. “Are you okay?”

I nod, but the movement feels stiff. “I will be.”

She reaches across the table, squeezing my hand again. Three months. That’s all I have to get through. And then I can move on.

## Chapter six

Bryan

Buddy barrels toward the porch, ears flapping, tongue hanging out, completely ignoring the ball I just threw. I frown, watching him change course mid-run, something’s caught his attention. And then I see her.

Emma’s just stepped into the yard, hair loose, ocean breeze catching the edges of her sweatshirt. She’s probably heading to her car or the shed, or anywhere that isn’t me, but Buddy has other ideas.

With an excited bark, he launches himself at her, tail wagging so hard he nearly topples her over. She laughs, crouching to ruffle his ears, completely oblivious to the way my chest tightens at the sound.

I grip the porch rail a little harder than necessary. I should go inside. Let her do whatever she came out here for and pretend she doesn’t exist.

Instead, I stay exactly where I am. Watching. Noticing too much.

The way she scratches behind Buddy's ears, exactly where he loves it most. The way her fingers move gently, familiar, like she's done it a thousand times before.

The way her eyes crinkle when she smiles, wide and bright, completely unguarded. It hits me like a punch to the gut. I've seen that exact look before. Years ago.

When she'd sat on the beach, cradling a hurt seagull in her lap, so determined to help.

I remember telling her, "You're gonna be a great vet one day, Em." And she'd smiled at me, so full of dreams and certainty.

What happened to that girl? What happened to her plans, her future, the thing she swore she wanted more than anything?

I shove the thought away before it takes root. It's not my business. Not anymore.

Buddy flops onto his back, exposing his belly in surrender, and Emma laughs, scratching him without hesitation. Her hair falls into her face, a loose strand brushing against her cheek.

I don't mean to stare. But I do. And for one stupid, fleeting second, I forget why I'm supposed to hate her. Why this should be easy. Why I should be able to stand here, watching her smile, and feel absolutely nothing. Instead, I feel too much. And I hate it.

## Page 22

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“You spoil him,” I say, forcing my voice into something neutral.

Emma glances up, finally noticing me. Her smile fades slightly, like she just remembered who she’s with.

“I like him,” she says simply, turning back to Buddy.

He rolls onto his side, sighing in contentment. I exhale, shoving my hands into my pockets. “You’re making it worse,” I mutter.

Emma arches a brow, amused. “Worse?”

I nod toward Buddy, who looks like he’s seconds from falling asleep at her feet.

“He’ll be impossible now.”

She smirks, scratching under his chin. “Maybe that’s a “you” problem.” That smirk. That teasing tone.

It drags me straight back to late-night bonfires, stolen kisses on the boardwalk, and the way she used to look at me like I was her favorite thing in the world.

I swallow hard, shifting my weight. “I should get back to work.”

Emma stands, dusting off her jeans. “Yeah. Me too.”

She hesitates, then adds, “I’m making dinner later.”

I glance at her, unsure if I heard her right. She shrugs, looking at me like she's expecting rejection.

"If you want some," she says, almost like an afterthought.

For a full second, I debate saying no. Keeping things distant. Safe. But before I can stop myself, before I can even think it through. I hear myself say, "Yeah. Okay."

Emma blinks, surprised. I don't blame her. Actually, I surprised myself too.

\*\*\*

The dining room is dimly lit, the overhead bulb swaying slightly with the draft from the old windows. The house groans as the wind shifts outside, the sound blending with the distant crash of the ocean. I grip my spoon a little tighter.

The whole thing feels too... domestic. Too familiar. Too much like something I shouldn't want.

Across the table, Emma sits with her own bowl, her fingers wrapped around a mismatched spoon like it's the most natural thing in the world.

She stirs absentmindedly, barefoot, hair tied up messily, sweater slipping off one shoulder. I shouldn't be noticing that. I shouldn't be noticing anything about her. But I do.

The soup's nothing fancy, canned chicken noodle with some extra veggies added, some bread she toasted in the oven. Basic. Thrown together. But it's warm, and it doesn't taste like something I grabbed from a takeout bag on my way home from work. That part I ignore.

We eat in silence for a while, the only sounds being the clink of spoons against ceramic and the occasional whistle of the wind. Buddy is munching on his own dinner completely oblivious to anything else.

She clears her throat. “This place fights us.”

I glance up, brows furrowed. “What?”

She gestures vaguely, smirking. “Leaks, creaks, Buddy nearly poisoning himself, your couch armrest breaking off when you sat on it this morning.”

A snort escapes before I can stop it. She’s not wrong. “The house is a stubborn old heap,” I mutter.

Emma tilts her head, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Fits right in, then.”

My spoon pauses mid-air. I glance at her, waiting for the punchline. She shrugs, all innocence. “You, Bryan. The house. Stubborn.”

I roll my eyes, but I don’t argue. She’s got a point. She tears off a piece of bread, dipping it absently into her soup. “You remember that time we tried painting Grandma’s shed?”

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I snort. “Remember it? Pretty sure the thing still has streaks of green where it shouldn’t.”

Emma grins, full and bright, and something in my chest shifts uncomfortably.

“You were terrible,” she accuses.

“I was fifteen.”

“You got more paint on the ground than the shed.”

“You got more paint in your hair than anywhere else,” I fire back, smirking.

She laughs clear, unrestrained, effortless. And I hate how much I feel it. It’s like being pulled into a rip current unexpected, strong, dragging me into something I have no business drowning in.

For a second ... just a second, it feels like old times. Like seventeen again. Like summer bonfires and stolen kisses. Like she never left. And that’s dangerous.

She shifts in her chair, leaning forward slightly as she reaches for another piece of bread. The movement sends a faint wisp of lavender in my direction. My grip on my spoon tightens.

Her sleeve brushes the table, the flickering light catching on the delicate curve of her jaw. My pulse kicks up before I can stop it.



No.

No. No. No.

I rip my gaze away, staring hard at my soup. This isn't happening. She left. She made her choice. I won't let myself forget that.

Silence stretches again, but it's different now. It's heavier. Charged. She doesn't seem to notice.

She just sips her soup like nothing's changed, like she didn't just drag me through a dozen memories I've spent years trying to bury. I push my bowl away, suddenly done.

"I'll do the dishes. First, I need to get some air."

Emma glances up, but she doesn't question it. She just nods.

"Night," she murmurs, standing and stretching.

I don't respond. I don't trust my voice. I watch her disappear up the stairs, the soft creak of old wood marking her steps.

When she's gone, I exhale slowly, rubbing a hand over my face. I can't do this. Whatever this is. The small talk. The memories. The feelings creeping in when I swore that I wouldn't let them.

I made peace with what happened a long time ago. I told myself I was over her. And I believed it.

But now? Now, I'm not so sure.

## Chapter seven

Emma

I push another box aside, wincing as a cloud of dust puffs into the air. "Ugh." I cough, waving a hand in front of my face. "Grandma, what were you storing in here? Ancient relics?"

Buddy, stretched out beside me, lifts his head at my voice, ears perking. Then, deciding I'm not actually addressing him, he rests his head back on his paws with a heavy sigh. I smirk. "Yeah, yeah. I know. You're moral support, not physical labor."

His tail thumps once against the floor in agreement. Shaking my head, I reach for another box. This one is different, smaller, sturdier, the edges frayed but still intact. My brow furrows as I brush away the layer of dust coating the top. The words "House Dreams" are written in Grandma's unmistakable script.

A small jolt runs through me. My fingers trace the lettering as my throat tightens. This was her hopes and dreams. With careful hands, I open the cover. Inside, sketches, notes, lists, all of them for the house.

A new coat of paint. Fixing up the porch. Redoing the backyard, turning it into something warm and welcoming.

She had lots of plans for this place. And she never got to see them through. A lump forms in my throat, and I swallow it down. My grip tightens on the binder. Maybe she couldn't finish it. But we can.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I find Bryan in the kitchen, forearms coated with sawdust, sleeves rolled up as he sands down a wooden shelf. Pausing in the doorway, I watch him for a moment before I clear my throat.

"Found something interesting."

He doesn't glance up. "Good for you."

"It's about the house." That gets his attention. He slows his movements, gaze flicking toward me.

I lift the binder. "Grandma's renovation plans."

His brows pull together slightly as he wipes his hands on a rag. "Oh." His eyes drop to the binder, and for a second, he just stares at it. Then, finally, he nods toward it. "What's in there?"

I step closer, flipping it open, angling it toward him so he can see. "Ideas. Sketches. She wanted to fix up the porch. Repaint the place. Make the backyard more inviting."

His jaw shifts, something flickering behind his eyes. I press on. "We could do it. Together."

That gets a reaction. His brows lift, a slow, sceptical tilt of his head. "We?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Bryan. We."

His lips twitch, not quite a smirk, but close. Then he leans back against the counter, crossing his arms. "And why exactly would I do that?"

I blink at him. "Because it was important to her."

Something shifts in his gaze, but he doesn't look away. I force myself to hold it.

Then, after a beat, he exhales through his nose. "You really want to do this?"

"I do."

Another pause. Then, finally, he nods. "Fine."

I blink. "Fine?"

He shrugs, like it's no big deal, like I didn't just expect an argument. "For her," he says simply.

Something warm unfurls in my chest. I wasn't expecting him to agree. At least, not this easily.

I glance down at the page we're both looking at, pointing at one of the sketches. "She had some interesting ideas."

He tilts his head. "Like?"

I smirk. "She wanted to paint the shutters bright blue."

His brows shoot up. "Seriously?"

I laugh. "She called it 'coastal charm.'"

Bryan shakes his head. "That's... bold."

"You hate it already, don't you?"

His lips press together, trying not to smirk. "I hate that I can already see you fighting me on it."

I grin. "Maybe."

His gaze lingers on me for a second longer before he shakes his head and turns back to his shelf.

I watch him for a beat before I exhale, tucking the binder against my chest. Maybe. Maybe is enough for now.

\*\*\*

We've been here a few weeks now, and we seem to be getting along in a weird sort of way. The scent of fresh paint hangs in the air, thick with turpentine and salt. The old walls of Grandma's house are finally taking in a new color, a soft, muted blue, almost the same shade as the ocean on a calm day. The roller glides across the surface, leaving smooth, even strokes behind.

I step back, hands on my hips, surveying my work. It's coming together. Bit by bit, this house is starting to look like a home again. A deep clang echoes from below. I smirk. Bryan's still at it.

Buddy, stretched out beside me, lazily gnaws at his favorite chew toy, oblivious to the way my mind keeps drifting to the man in the basement. I shake my head, rolling my eyes at myself. It's just about the house.

That's what this lightness in my chest is about. That's why there's warmth curling in my stomach. That's why I'm smiling more than usual. It's not because of him.

I dip my roller back into the paint tray, humming absently, the sound mingling with the steady rhythm of Bryan's hammering downstairs. It's oddly comforting, his presence filling the quiet corners of the house.

I never realized how much I missed it; how much I missed this. For a second, I let myself sink into the memory.

Summers spent in this house, Bryan beside me, both of us barefoot and sun-kissed,

dreaming about everything we'd do one day. Back then, it always felt like there was time. That we had all the time in the world.

I shake the thought away, setting the roller down as I wipe my hands on my jeans. No use looking back.

Another clang. A muffled curse. I snort, grabbing a clean rag before heading downstairs.

The basement is dim, the air cooler, carrying the scent of sawdust and damp wood. Bryan is crouched near the door hinge, sleeves rolled up, sweat beading along his forearms.

I pause at the bottom step. Man alive, does he look good!

The dim lighting casts shadows along his jaw, the sharp angles of his face more defined. His hair is slightly tousled and a bead of sweat trails down the side of his neck.

I swallow. Nope. Not thinking about that. Instead, I clear my throat. "Need help?"

He doesn't look up, just grunts. "Nah."

A second later, metal scrapes, the hinge sticking again, and he mutters another curse under his breath.

I smirk. "Right. You've totally got this under control."

He glares at me. "If you're here to mock me, you can leave."

I step closer, arms crossed. "And miss watching you struggle? Not a chance."

He exhales heavily, dragging a hand down his face. “The thing’s warped. Keeps catching.”

I nudge his knee with my foot. “Scoot.” He narrows his eyes but moves back just enough.

I kneel beside him, grabbing the screwdriver and inspecting the hinge. It’s rusted over in parts, the screws slightly bent from years of use. “See? You’re using too much force,” I say, twisting it carefully. “Loosen it first, then...”

Our hands brush. I freeze.

His fingers are warm, rough, and the contact sends a jolt straight through me. For a second, neither of us moves.

The air shifts. Heavy. Charged. I force myself to keep my eyes on the hinge. But I feel it.

The way his breathing changes. The way his body stills beside me. The way my own pulse betrays me, hammering a little too hard.

His voice is lower when he speaks. “You always had to prove you were better at this stuff.”

I arch a brow, turning to face him. Bad idea. He’s too close.

His face is just inches away, those green eyes locked onto mine. The hint of sweat and cedar in the air makes my stomach do an uncomfortable flip.

No way. I clear my throat. “I am better.”



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A slow smirk tugs at his lips. “Debatable.”

I force myself to roll my eyes and look back at the hinge. “Are you going to help or just argue?”

He huffs a small laugh, the sound surprisingly warm. I hate how much I like it.

We work together in silence, fingers occasionally brushing. Every touch sends another spark skittering through my veins, and I pretend not to notice when his hands hesitate a second too long before pulling away.

Finally, after some adjustments, the hinge gives way smoothly. Bryan leans back, wiping his forearm across his forehead. “Finally.”

I grin. “See? Told you.”

He just shakes his head, watching me. Something flickers in his expression, something unreadable. I feel my cheeks heat.

“What?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Then, quietly... “Nothing.”

I don’t believe him. And I hate that I wish I could. The rest of the evening is easier.

Bryan fixes the last of the loose nails in the staircase while I finish organizing the supplies. It’s quiet, but not uncomfortable.

I catch myself stealing glances at him more often than I should. And every time I do, my chest tightens in a way I can't explain.

Later, as we finish cleaning up, Bryan dusts his hands off and heads toward the stairs. "Goodnight."

His voice is gruff, clipped but there's something softer underneath. I hesitate, fingers brushing over the rag in my hands. Then, before I can stop myself, I whisper;

"Missed this."

He pauses on the steps.

For a second, I think he heard me. But then, without turning, he continues up, leaving me alone in the dim basement, my pulse still too loud in my ears.

\*\*\*

The old house settles around me, creaking softly in the hush of night. The only light in my room comes from the small lamp on the nightstand, its soft glow stretching over peeling wallpaper, casting long, sleepy shadows along the walls. The air is cool, tinged with sea salt and old wood, the distant crash of waves a steady pulse in the silence.

Buddy is curled at the foot of my bed, his rhythmic breathing a comfort, his warmth a steady weight against my feet. I wonder what Bryan thinks about Buddy's disloyalty, and it makes me smile. Good doggie.

We spent the whole day working, painting, fixing things, making this place liveable again. My body is sore, my fingers stiff from gripping paint rollers and screwdrivers.

But my mind refuses to settle. I flip open Grandma's binder, smoothing my hand over the worn pages.

Her careful script fills every inch, notes on window replacements, ideas for the garden, even sketches for a porch swing. She had dreams for this place. Big ones.

I wish she was here. Not just because she'd know exactly what to do about the creaky floors and peeling paint, but because she always knew what to say ... and because I love and miss her.

She would've known how to handle living under the same roof as Bryan. She would've had something wise and firm to say about the way my stomach keeps flipping every time he's near.

I think about today. The way we moved around each other so easily. The quiet teamwork.

And him. His laugh, low and unguarded, when I reminded him of his terrible painting skills. The way his eyes had flickered with something unreadable when our hands brushed. How his presence, solid and steady, made everything feel less heavy.

I don't know why I feel like this. Or maybe I do. I close my eyes and let my mind drift back. Bryan at 17. Back when he was mine.

The summer heat sticky in the air, his hands brushing over my scraped knee after I tripped chasing Buddy on the beach. His voice, firm but gentle. "Can't lose you, Em."

I had laughed it off then, teasing him for being dramatic. But he meant it. And I had left anyway.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am*

I press the binder shut, my chest tight. The past doesn't matter. Not now. I need to focus on the future. On the clinic. On Dad's debt that's been suffocating me.

I glance at my phone on the nightstand, its screen dark and silent. The last email from the creditors still lingers in my mind. \$5,000 due in two months.

I barely have half of that right now. I need a job. Something fast. Before they start hounding me again.

I exhale slowly, rubbing my temples. It's overwhelming. The weight of it all.

But for the first time in a long time, it doesn't feel as unbearable. Maybe because Bryan's here.

Maybe because, despite everything, despite the walls we've both built, despite all the reasons we shouldn't, it feels good living with him. Safer. Less lonely.

A sudden thud downstairs jolts me upright, heart pounding. Buddy stirs, lifting his head with a low whine, ears twitching toward the sound.

I hold my breath. Did Bryan drop something? Is he still awake?

For a second, I consider going down. Checking on him. Seeing if he's okay. But I stop myself, fingers tightening around the quilt.

No. I can't. Because if I do, if I see him, if I hear his voice, if I let myself sink any further into whatever this is...

I don't know if I'll be able to pull myself back out. I close my eyes, take a slow breath, and force myself to stay in bed.

## Chapter eight

Bryan

I tighten my grip on the wheel, fingers flexing against the leather as Ocean Bay's coastline stretches ahead, the horizon smudged with orange. The truck hums beneath me, Buddy snoring beside me in the passenger seat, his head drooped over his paws, ears twitching in his sleep. He's so darned adorable.

The highway's empty, save for the occasional glint of a passing car, but my mind's anything but quiet. I keep hearing her.

That laugh, light, unguarded and spinning through my head like a song stuck on repeat. It's been looping since last night, since she teased me about my miserable painting skills, since I caught myself staring at the way she scrunches her nose, grinning.

Too close. I roll my shoulders, flex my fingers against the wheel, and mutter, "It's just the house."

Just the proximity. Just forced circumstance. Nothing else.

My foot presses a little harder on the gas, the cab filling with the soft crackle of the radio struggling to hold a signal. I flick it off, the silence pressing in. The ache in my chest is a slow, dull thing, stretching wider with every mile.

Because it's not just the house. Her face flashes behind my eyes.

That morning in the kitchen I watched her, sleeves shoved up, a smudge of flour dusting her cheek as she kneaded dough ... lost in thought, oblivious to me watching.

The way she hummed while painting, off-key but soft, filling the silence between us. The small sound she made when our hands brushed fixing that hinge, barely anything, but it had hit me hard.

I grit my teeth, gripping the wheel tighter. It's dangerous, this pull. This slow, sinking feeling like I'm being dragged toward something I swore off years ago.

She proved that love doesn't mean anything. That leaving is easy. That I wasn't enough to make her stay. And yet, here I am, fighting a war with my own pulse.

The sign for Ocean Bay Hardware looms ahead, its crooked wooden letters unchanged since I was a kid. I flick the blinker, pulling into the lot, gravel crunching under the tires. Buddy stirs, yawns, but doesn't lift his head as I kill the engine and step out, stretching stiff shoulders.

Inside, the scent of sawdust and old metal clings to the air; the place is cramped and cluttered, just as I remember. Shelves are packed tight, nails, screws, paint cans stacked high.

I head straight for the lumber aisle, keeping my head down. The last thing I need is small-town chatter.

I grab what I need, new boards to fix the porch railing, extra nails, another bucket of paint. Good gravy. Someone help me. I'm actually going through with her renovation plan. As I turn toward the counter, I spot Old Man Pete, Ocean Bay's go-to for anything hardware-related, standing behind the register with a knowing grin.

"Well, well," Pete drawls, adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses. "Didn't think I'd see

the day Bryan Lawson played handyman. Thought you were more of a sign-the-check kind of guy."

I gruff out a laugh, dropping the supplies on the counter. "Gotta keep the place standing. Can't have it falling apart around me."

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Pete's smirk widens. "Ah, sure, sure. Funny thing, though word around town is you and Emma are Ocean Bay's sweethearts again. Cohabitation, sounds downright domestic."

I freeze. The heck? My jaw tightens, pulse jumping in irritation. "It's not like that."

Pete waves a hand, grinning. "Oh, I know. Just sayin'. Town's talkin'. You two were the stuff of small-town legend back in the day. Seems like history's got a way of repeating itself."

I shove cash onto the counter, sharp and clipped. "Just business. Emma and I aren't back together."

Pete snorts, "Sure, son. If you say so." He starts bagging up my things, but his smirk lingers, like he knows something I don't.

I roll my shoulders, exhaling slow. She doesn't get to come back and tangle me up like this, make me second-guess things I locked down years ago.

Pete pushes the bag toward me, and as I grab it, he throws out one last jab. "Tell your girl I say hi."

I stiffen. Toss the bag over my shoulder. Pick up the lumber. Storm out the door.

The truck door slams shut behind me, Buddy lifting his head at the noise. My pulse is still hammering as I yank the keys into the ignition, gripping the wheel hard.



Tell your girl I say hi. Your girl.

I grit my teeth, muttering under my breath. "She's not mine." But the words echo anyway, tightening my chest.

She's not mine. She never was. She left. And for the first time in a long time, I can't tell if I'm saying it because I believe it...

Or because I need to.

\*\*\*

I step into the house, the scent of sawdust and salt air mixing, a bundle of lumber balanced against my shoulder. The evening light slants through the open windows, casting everything in gold. And the sound of waves hums low in the background.

The place already looks different, fresh paint covering years of neglect, things slowly coming together. I don't expect to see her like this.

Emma, red-faced, bracing against a heavy oak dresser, muscles straining as she tries to shove it across the floor. Her brows pinch, lips pressing together in stubborn determination. Buddy watches, tail wagging, and she grits out, "Al... most... there."

It's not happening. That dresser isn't budging an inch. I drop the lumber near the doorway, stepping in before she hurts herself. "Move."

She exhales sharply, stepping back just as I grab the edge. Heavy, sure, but not impossible. I grip, lift, shift ...easy. The thing settles against the wall with a final thud.

Emma lets out a breath, hands on her knees, then dusts them against her jeans.

"Thanks, really."

The softness in her voice throws me off. It's not forced, not guarded, just genuine. The same way she used to say it, back when every little thing I did for her mattered. When she'd look at me with that exact warmth in her eyes, like I was steady, dependable, hers.

I shouldn't like it. But for some reason, my throat tightens, my grip on control slipping just a little. Her gratitude lights up her face, and for a second, I forget how to fight it.

Lavender drifts in the air between us, and it takes everything in me not to close my eyes, not to let the pull between us win. I clear my throat, forcing my voice to stay level. "Working together's ... not awful."

It comes out softer than I meant it to be. Her lips curve, slow and sweet, and I feel it hit deep in my chest. A warmth I don't want, don't need, but it spreads anyway, breaking through my walls like it has no right to.

"Better than fighting," she says, shifting on her feet. And she's right. I don't want to admit it, but I don't hate this.

The quiet moments where we just exist in the same space. The way we've stopped clashing over every little thing. The way, somehow, it's easy. Too easy.

She moves past me toward the broom, and her arm grazes mine. It's nothing. Barely a touch. But it's enough.

Enough to send a jolt through me, enough to make my breath hitch before I force myself back into control. She hums, light and casual, sweeping up dust, oblivious to the storm raging inside me.

I turn away, gripping the back of my neck, muttering, "Yeah, better."

And that's the problem. It's too much better. And I don't know if I can keep this up.

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The night air is crisp, tinged with salt and the distant hum of waves crashing below the cliff. I step onto the porch, stretching my shoulders, exhaling slowly as I try to clear my head.

I don't know why I thought coming out here would help. The past few hours have been too much.

Emma and I working together, falling into a rhythm that shouldn't feel this easy. The way she looked at me when I lifted that dresser like I'd done something worth noticing. How her arm brushed mine, brief but electric, like my whole body was waiting for her touch.

I shouldn't want more. I can't want more. I drag a hand down my face, turning toward the steps when I see her.

She's curled up on the old bench, knees tucked beneath her, golden light from the lantern flickering across her face. She looks like a memory, something fragile but stubbornly real.

She glances up at me, her voice soft. "Couldn't sleep?"

I hesitate. I should go inside. Avoid this. Avoid her. But my feet don't move.

I settle onto the bench, leaving space but not enough. Buddy stretches on the ground below us, sighing in that contented way of his, completely oblivious to the storm

raging in my chest.

Emma leans back, tilting her face toward the sky, the stars casting silver against her skin. "Still beautiful," she murmurs, and for a second, I think she means...

I swallow hard. "Yeah."

She shifts, looking at me with something unreadable. "You ever just... think about what you wanted when you were younger?"

My brow furrows. "Like what?"

She exhales, hugging her arms around herself. "Dreams. Plans. What you thought your life would be."

I glance down at Buddy, scratching behind his ear. "Didn't have time for dreams back then. Just survival. Scrapping for every dime to make Lawson Financial work."

Her lips twitch. "And now look at you."

That catches me off guard. Her voice is warm, soft around the edges, and for some reason, it settles under my skin, pressing into a place I didn't know was raw.

"I'm proud of you, Bryan."

A shiver runs through me before I can stop it. It's been years since anyone said that to me, since she said that to me.

I should look away, shake it off, but instead, my throat tightens, and my fingers curl against my thigh. "Never thought I'd hear you say that again."

She gives a small, almost hesitant smile. "Well, I mean it."

And just like that, I'm sinking. The space between us feels smaller. The weight of the night, the hush of the ocean, the steady flicker of the lantern, it's all pressing in.

She shifts slightly, her knee brushing mine. Just a touch. Just enough.

I should move. I should pull away. But I don't.

Instead, I glance at her, really looking this time. The way the shadows dance across her face, the way the starlight catches in her eyes, the way she's staring at me like she's waiting.

"I regret not pushing harder," I murmur, my voice lower than I mean for it to be.

She tilts her head. "In what?"

I shake my head. "Business. Life. Maybe both."

She nods slowly, her fingers tracing the worn wood of the bench. "Me too, lost time."

It's quiet then. A thick, weighted silence. No past. No old wounds. Just this moment. And her. She's close; so, so close.

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I catch the slight part of her lips, the way her breath hitches, the way her hand stills against the wood. The air between us is electric, like a storm ready to break.

Before I can second-guess it, before I can tell myself this is dangerous, I lean in.

Slow. Testing. Her eyes flutter shut just before our lips meet. Soft. Tentative.

The taste of her mint and warmth rushes through me like a wildfire. Her lips part slightly, a small sound catching in her throat, and I'm done for. I pull her in as our kiss deepens.

Every muscle in my body locks, my heart hammering so hard I can feel it in my ribs. It's been years. Years. And somehow, it still feels like home. But suddenly ... Buddy barks.

Emma jolts, pulling back just as the dog lunges at a moth flitting near the lantern. The moment shatters, leaving behind nothing but the wild thudding of my pulse and the space where she'd just been.

She stares at me, lips parted, eyes wide. I see everything in that look. The surprise. The want. The fear. Her breath comes fast, and then, before I can say a word, she scrambles to her feet.

"I...uh ... goodnight," she stammers, bolting inside.

The door slams behind her, leaving me on the porch, staring after her like a damn fool. Buddy circles once, then flops down beside me, letting out a huff. I press my

fingers to my lips, the warmth of her still lingering.

What now? I don't have an answer. But for the first time in a long, long time, I know I'm truly in trouble.

## Chapter nine

Emma

The kitchen is too quiet. Only the soft hiss of the coffee pot fills the space, the air thick with last night.

I barely slept. Every time I closed my eyes, it was there, the brush of his lips, the heat of his skin, the way his breath caught before we pulled away. I can still feel it, like an imprint, like something I shouldn't have let happen but desperately wanted to.

I grip my mug tighter, rinsing it under the stream of water, watching the way the light catches on the soap suds. It was nothing. A mistake.

I tell myself that. Over and over. But my body isn't listening. Because I want it to happen again. The floor creaks behind me, and I stiffen, already knowing who it is before I turn.

Bryan stands at the doorway, hair a mess, jaw tense, a deep crease between his brows. He looks like he barely slept either.

Buddy thumps his tail against the floor, gnawing lazily at a bone under the table, completely unaffected by the tension suffocating the room.

I glance away, pretending to be absorbed in drying my hands, but the weight of Bryan's stare burns against my skin. Say something.



He clears his throat, voice rough. “About last night ...” He hesitates, dragging a hand through his hair. “It was a mistake. Sorry.”

A mistake.

The words slam into me harder than I expect, disappointment sharp and instant. I should agree. I should nod, laugh it off, pretend it didn’t mean anything.

But I know better. It did mean something. And judging by the way he’s avoiding my gaze; it meant something to him too.

I force a short nod, my voice even when I say, “Yeah. Won’t happen again.”

Lie.

His jaw tightens, and for a second, I swear he’s about to say something else. But instead, he just nods and steps past me, reaching for the coffee pot.

I turn away too, needing space. But space is useless when his scent is still there. Cedar and sea air, warmth and him.

My fingers twitch against the countertop. I need a distraction, something to shatter whatever this is before I lose my mind.

I grab my clinic sketches from the counter and turn to face him. “I’ve got these, vet clinic ideas. I’d like to ask for your opinions about some things. That’s if you don’t mind,”

His eyes flick to the binder in my hands, brows lifting slightly. “Of course, I don’t mind. I’m just surprised you’re still serious about that.”

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The challenge in his voice makes something in me snap to attention. I lift my chin. “I’ve always been serious about it.”

Bryan stares at me for a beat longer before he sets his coffee down and steps closer. Too close.

I hold my breath. He leans forward, peering at the pages, his shoulder brushing mine. Every nerve in my body tightens.

Don’t react. Don’t react.

But I do. His warmth seeps through my sleeve, his scent clouding my thoughts, making it hard to focus on anything except how it felt when he kissed me.

I exhale slowly, gripping the binder tighter. He flips through the pages, his fingers brushing the edges of the paper, and says, “You’ll need a bigger kennel space. And solar panels to cut costs.”

I blink. Solar panels? I expected indifference, maybe even teasing, but not... this. His voice is unreadable, but the suggestion is practical, well-thought-out. He actually cares.

I stare at him, unsure of what to say. He shrugs, still not looking at me. “It’s a smart idea but are you sure you want to run a non-profit clinic?”

Something in my chest tugs tight. Maybe I’m not sure. I mean I live for animals, it has never been a doubt. But what worries me is will it click? Will the clinic work?

I swallow down the words, unwilling to push whatever line we're toeing. Before I can respond, my phone buzzes on the table.

Stella. I grab it, grateful for the escape. "Hey."

Her voice is bright, excited. "Morning, stranger! Hope you're not too busy because I have something for you."

I glance at Bryan, but he's turned back to his coffee, pretending he's not listening.

"What's up?"

"There is a shelter workday we have every once a year. We usually have vets from all over come around for a couple of weeks since we don't have a clinic here yet. They always need a lot of volunteers. I think you should be part of it."

My grip tightens on the phone. This is a brilliant idea, this way I can figure out how best to help people with the clinic.

She keeps talking, voice animated. "Think about it, Em! It'll give you a chance to put your name out there, get to know the people who could back your clinic. You need support, and this could be it."

She's right. I bite my lip, stealing a glance at Bryan. He's still quiet, still pretending he's not eavesdropping, but I can tell he's listening.

I exhale. "When does it start?"

"Tomorrow."

Tomorrow. A real chance. A way forward. I glance down at my binder, then back at

Bryan. “Perfect,” I murmur, more to myself than Stella.

Stella squeals. “Knew you’d say yes! I’ll send you details. See you soon!”

I hang up and set my phone down, unable to fight the small, hopeful smile creeping onto my lips. For the first time in a long time, things feel... possible.

I glance at Bryan. He’s watching me now, eyes unreadable, fingers wrapped around his coffee mug like he’s holding onto something tighter than he should. I don’t know what he’s thinking, but for the first time since coming back, I don’t feel alone in this.

I clear my throat. “I have to do some things.”

He nods, but something flickers in his expression. Something I don’t have time to think about. Not now. Not after last night.

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The scent of wet fur and antiseptic clings to the air, mingling with the sound of barking dogs and the scratch of Stella’s pen against a clipboard. The shelter is bustling, voices overlapping as volunteers move between kennels, feeding, cleaning, soothing nervous animals. I could have offered my services as a veterinarian, but it felt more important this time to just be there as a regular volunteer, helping wherever needed. Besides, a lot of area vets came.

I should be focused on the work. But his words won’t stop replaying in my head. It’s been over a day since he said it, since he brushed me off like our kiss was nothing. Like it hadn’t shaken me to my core.

My chest tightens, an ache sitting right in the center, pulsing with every breath.

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I shouldn't be surprised. What did I expect? That Bryan Lawson, the man who barely looked at me when I first came back, would suddenly want me again?

That he would be the boy I remembered, the one who used to kiss me like I was the only thing that mattered? The one who would sneak up behind me just to press a smile against my neck, who used to murmur my name like a promise?

A bitter laugh threatens to escape. Of course not. I left him. I broke him. And he's made sure I know it.

Still, the fact that I wanted more when it was nothing but a mistake to him? That hurts me and infuriates me.

"Emma?"

Stella's voice snaps me out of my spiral, and I blink, realizing I've been scrubbing the same kennel door for at least five minutes. My knuckles are white around the rag.

"You okay?" Stella frowns, arms crossed, watching me too closely.

I force a smile. "Yeah. Just zoned out."

Her eyes narrow. "Sure. That wouldn't have anything to do with you-know-who, would it?"

My stomach clenches, but I keep my expression even. "No idea what you're talking about."

“Right.” She smirks, tossing a kibble bag onto the counter. “So, you totally didn’t look like you wanted to either punch something or cry while scrubbing that kennel.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s just a dirty kennel.”

“Uh-huh.” She taps a pen against the clipboard. “So, what happened with Bryan?”

“Nothing.”

Stella lifts a brow. “Liar.”

I sigh, setting the rag down. “It’s fine. We... kissed.” The word tastes strange on my tongue, too heavy with everything I don’t say.

"Oh, my goodness! I knew it!"

"Hey, lower your voice," I whisper while glancing around.

"Sorry, but I need details. How was it?"

"It was good. But..."

"But what?" Her face bright with excitement eager to scoop the juicy details.

“And then he said it was a mistake. That’s it.”

Stella’s mouth falls open. “He what?”

I shrug like it doesn’t sting. “It doesn’t matter. I mean we aren’t dating anymore so he’s right.”

She snorts. “Right. And I’m the Queen of England.” I shoot her a look, but she keeps going.

“Emma. You and Bryan have history. He doesn’t just kiss you and feel nothing. That man looked like he was ready to set the world on fire the night of the funeral when he saw you.”

I shake my head. “Well, according to him, I’m just history he won’t repeat.”

Her face twists. “He said that?”

Before I can answer, a voice filters in through the open restroom door. Mia and Jen, two of the other volunteers. I stiffen.

“...Emma and Bryan thought they’d rekindle, but he told Old Man Pete it’s nothing. Just platonic.”

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My breath catches. Jen's voice follows, a laugh in her tone. "Ouch. And here I thought she had a chance. 'It's just business'... his words, not mine."

The air drains from my lungs. There it is. Confirmation. Stella watches me, eyes sharp. I don't move. I don't breathe. It's stupid how much it hurts.

I knew what he thought. He said it himself. But hearing it from someone else? Knowing he told Old Man Pete that I'm just his past, nothing more? Shows he wants to make things clear to everyone.

It feels like a fresh cut, bleeding out slow. Jen snickers. "Poor girl."

I squeeze my fists so tight my nails bite into my palms. I don't know how long I stand there, spine stiff, every inch of me screaming don't let them see it hurts.

Because it shouldn't. It shouldn't. It was one kiss.

"A mistake." His words. So why does it feel like I've just been sucker-punched?

Stella's jaw clenches, but before she can say anything, I force out a breath. I won't react. I won't let them win. I straighten, smoothing my face into a calm mask. "Forget it."

Stella's eyes flash as she tells me that I don't have to pretend to be fine. "Yeah, I do." I swallow the lump in my throat. "Because I am."

She doesn't believe me. But she lets it go.



A soft whimper catches my attention, and I turn toward the kennels. A small, trembling dog barely more than a puppy huddles in the corner, its thin frame curled tight. Something about the look in its eyes, the fear, the uncertainty hits too close to home. I push everything else aside.

Bryan, the gossip, the stupid ache in my chest. None of it matters. I kneel in front of the kennel, my voice soft. "Hey there, buddy. Let's get you out of here."

The dog hesitates but doesn't back away. And as I unclip the latch, focusing on what I can control, I pretend that I'm not breaking inside.

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The house is quiet when I step inside, the dim glow of the old lamp in the corner casting soft shadows across the half-painted walls. The scent of fresh paint still lingers, mingling with the salty breeze sneaking through the slightly open window.

Buddy lifts his head from the rug, tail thumping lazily before he stretches and pads toward me, nudging my leg in greeting. His warmth is a small comfort, but it doesn't touch the sting in my chest.

Mia's voice still loops in my head. "Just Business."

I drop onto the couch, my body heavy with exhaustion that has nothing to do with the long hours at the shelter. My clinic sketches sit on the coffee table, but I can't focus. I stare at them, the lines blurring, my mind trapped in that bathroom stall, replaying every word.

Bryan told Old Man Pete it was just business between us. The ache deepens, sharp and humiliating. I knew he regretted the kiss, I knew he wanted distance but hearing it from someone else, knowing he said it so bluntly, as if I was just some fleeting

mistake that he had no intention of repeating...

It hurts more than it should. I grip the edge of the couch, nails pressing into the fabric, willing myself to let it go.

I don't get the chance. The front door opens, and Bryan steps in, dropping his keys onto the entryway table. His gaze lands on me instantly.

I know what he sees, stiff shoulders, clenched jaw, the rawness around my eyes I can't seem to shake no matter how much I will it away.

His brow furrows, that quiet, perceptive concern in his face that used to make me feel safe. That used to undo me completely. "You okay?" His voice is low, steady.

I force a shrug, keeping my gaze locked on my sketches. "Fine." The word is flat, brittle.

A beat of silence. He doesn't buy it.

He steps further in, slow, cautious, like he's trying to read between the lines I don't want to give him. His presence pulls at me, his cedar scent wrapping around me in a way that makes my stomach twist.

I hate that I still respond to it. Hate that even after everything, after hearing exactly how he feels, some ridiculous part of me still wants him close.

Buddy sits on the floor beside me, resting his head on my knees. I stroke behind his ears absently, using the motion to ground myself.

Bryan sighs, running a hand through his hair before moving toward the couch. He hesitates, then sits down next to me, leaving just enough space between us to make it

clear he's keeping things neutral.

“Something's up,” he says, his voice softer this time. “Talk to me.” The words make my heart twist painfully. Because for a second, it almost feels like before. Like the Bryan who used to care. Like the boy who used to listen to everything, who'd pull me into his arms and let me spill whatever was weighing on me without judgment.

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But that's not this Bryan. This Bryan thinks I'm a mistake. This Bryan doesn't want me. I grip the hem of my sweatshirt, fingers curling into the fabric, my pulse a dull roar in my ears.

I want to talk. I want to ask him why he's announcing my business around town. I want to ask if he really said those things, if I was just fooling myself thinking he genuinely cares instead of all his kindness being just business.

But I can't. So, I press the words down, bury them deep. "I'm just tired," I murmur instead.

Bryan watches me for a moment, like he's weighing whether to push or let it go. Then, slowly, he nods. His silence should be a relief, but it isn't. Because he doesn't leave. He just stays.

He's sitting beside me, close enough that I can feel his warmth, close enough that if I let my guard down, if I let myself shift even slightly, my shoulder would brush his. I don't. I can't.

Instead, I focus on Buddy, fingers scratching behind his ears, the steady rise and fall of his breathing the only thing keeping me grounded.

Minutes pass. Neither of us speaks. It's not uncomfortable, but it's heavy. Thick with everything we don't say.

Then Bryan exhales, shifting slightly, his voice lower than before. "He knows you're off," he says, nodding toward Buddy. "Me too."

My fingers still. The air between us tightens. My throat locks up, the fight to keep everything contained suddenly so much harder than before.

I swallow, gripping the fabric of my sweatshirt so tight my knuckles turn white. I should brush it off again. I should get up, pretend like I don't care, make some excuse and escape upstairs.

But I can't move. Because he's looking at me now, really looking. And for the first time since this whole mess started, I don't know if I have the strength to keep pretending.

## Chapter ten

Bryan

The sun's high overhead by the time I finish digging out the last of the overgrown weeds. My shirt's damp with sweat, dirt streaking my forearms, but I barely notice. My focus is on the small patch of earth in front of me, the forgotten garden, the one Emma used to tend with that soft, devoted care she had for everything that breathed.

It's been buried for years under weeds and tangled vines, forgotten just like everything else we left behind. But today, something in me refuses to let it stay that way. Maybe it's guilt.

Maybe it's the fact that I haven't seen her properly in days, just glimpses in the morning when she rushes out, exhaustion on her face when she drags herself home late at night. I tell myself I don't care, and that it's good she's keeping her distance.

But the ache in my chest every time I walk past her empty parts of the house says otherwise.

Buddy sprawls under a tree nearby, his snores mixing with the distant crash of the waves below the cliffs. I drop my shovel, running an arm over my forehead, the salt breeze is cool against my overheated skin. And then, the sound of a door creaking open.

I glance up just as Emma steps onto the porch, a coffee mug clutched between her hands. She's in one of those oversized sweaters she always wears when she's comfortable, her hair loose, the morning sun catching the golden strands. It reminds me of how she usually preferred to wear my clothes back then.

She stops mid-step when she sees the garden, her eyes widening. For a second, she just stares. Then, in a whisper, she says, "You're fixing it?"

I shrug, rolling my shoulders. "Figured it was time."

Her gaze flicks to me, then back to the freshly unearthed flowerbed. She moves slowly, stepping off the porch, the wood creaking beneath her feet. The closer she gets, the more I notice the way her fingers tighten around her mug, knuckles pale like she's gripping onto something she can't quite name.

She kneels beside the bed, running a hand lightly over the turned soil. Her lips press together, eyes distant, lost in whatever memory this place pulls out of her.

"Grandma used to sit here," she murmurs, tracing a finger over a tangled root. "Telling stories."

I nod, my voice coming rough. "And her terrible jokes."

Emma glances up, a flicker of something warm in her gaze. "Yeah." A small smile tugs at her lips. "Like that one about the roses."

I can't stop the corner of my mouth from twitching. "She thought she was hilarious."

Emma's laugh is soft, the sound like wind through the trees, light, nostalgic. "She was."

Silence stretches between us, but it isn't awkward. For the first time in days, it feels... normal. Like the weight of everything between us is momentarily lighter.

Then, before I can stop myself, the words slip out. "I missed you here."

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Emma stills. Her fingers tighten in the soil, her breath catching so faintly that if I weren't so darned focused on her, I wouldn't have noticed. She doesn't look at me right away, but when she does, something in her eyes is different. Raw.

Like she's trying to hold back something too big to name. I brace myself, expecting her to shut it down, to brush it off. But she doesn't.

She just nods, so small I almost miss it. And for the first time in years, I feel like I've reached a part of her that's been locked away since the day she left.

Before I can figure out what to do with that, a car rumbles up the driveway. I turn just as my sister Liz swings open her door and steps out, a grin already forming.

Her hands rest on her belly as she waddles toward us, the baby bump stretching her dress. "Well, well," she calls out, eyes twinkling. "Is that my brother gardening?"

I groan. "Don't start."

Liz smirks and barely glances at me before heading straight for Emma. "Come here, you."

Emma blinks in surprise before Liz pulls her into a warm hug. Emma lets out a breathy laugh, arms wrapping around her. When they pull apart, Liz studies her closely. "How are you?"

Emma hesitates but gives a small smile. "I'm okay. Getting there."



"I hope my brother hasn't been a pain in the butt?" I roll my eyes as Emma chuckles.

"No, he hasn't. It's so good to see you again, Liz."

"Same here! We missed you so much around here. Anyways, it's good you're back. I'll fill you in on everything,"

"Thanks, and congratulations by the way," Emma says her eyes falling on Liz's belly.

Liz pats her arm, satisfied. "Thank you." Then she grins, tilting her head at both of us.

"I was passing by and thought I'd stop in and use the opportunity to invite the both of you for barbecue this Sunday. You're both coming because I'm not taking no for an answer."

I groan knowing how serious she is. Emma's lips part like she's about to decline, but Liz shakes her head, cutting her off before she can start.

"No excuses. Max needs an aunt around. My brother and Liam have both refused to bring a woman around, leaving me alone to deal with all the men in my life, including Max. Now that I have the chance to share the burden with you, I'm not letting it go."

Emma's mouth opens, closes, then she laughs lightly. "I ... okay. Okay, I'll come."

Liz beams, then turns to me. "And you, try to act like a human, yeah? No sulking in corners."

I roll my eyes, but there's no real heat behind it. "I don't sulk."

Liz snorts. "Right." She turns back to Emma. "Good luck with this one."

Emma lets out a breathy laugh, but there's something softer in the way she glances at me, something unreadable.

Liz gives a final wink before heading back to her car, waving as she pulls away. As the sound of the engine fades, Emma turns to me. For a second, neither of us speaks.

Then she clears her throat, gesturing toward the flowerbed. "Thanks for this. Really."

I nod, gripping the handle of the shovel. "Figured you'd like it."

She hesitates, then, softer, "I do."

The air between us shifts. Her eyes search mine, like there's something else she wants to say. Something on the edge of a confession.

Then, before either of us can break whatever this moment is, she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and murmurs, "I should get ready for work." She's been working in the next town for the veterinarian and it seems to have opened her desire for her own clinic here in town even more.

She turns to head inside. I watch her go, the warmth of her presence lingering even after she disappears.

Then Liz's words echo in my head. She'd said that teamwork looked good on the two of us. I exhale, gripping the shovel tighter.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

I don't know what's happening between us. But whatever it is, it started to feel inevitable until that day when she suddenly changed. I wish I knew what happened to ...

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The house is quiet, the kind of stillness that comes late at night when the world outside is asleep. A dim lamp flickers in the corner, casting long shadows over the walls and the scattered remnants of the day's work. Buddy sprawls on the rug, letting out a soft snore, his paws twitching like he's chasing something in a dream.

I should be sleeping too. Instead, I'm here, picking through an old box of Grandma Gracie's things, fingers trailing over worn photographs and trinkets that still smell faintly like her, lavender, cinnamon, a hint of the sea.

I tell myself I'm just restless. That it's just something to do. That it has nothing to do with her.

Emma had gone to bed hours ago. I'd heard the soft creak of the stairs as she retreated to her room, the sound lingering longer than it should have. I don't know why I keep noticing things like that. Or maybe I do. For some reason Buddy stayed with me. Maybe in that sweet dog-brain of his he knew I needed him near.

I run a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply, then push aside a stack of old recipe cards, an embroidered handkerchief, a tiny ceramic cat she'd kept on the kitchen windowsill. That's when I see it. A letter.

The envelope is yellowed at the edges, the ink slightly faded but still strong, still unmistakable.

To Bryan and Emma.

My stomach knots. Grandma Gracie's handwriting.

I hesitate for a second, my pulse picking up. Then, before I can talk myself out of it, I break the seal, fingers clumsy, heart hammering as I unfold the paper inside. Her words are simple, but they hit like a punch to the ribs.

This house is yours to mend ... yourselves too. Love matters most.

The air in the room shifts, heavier now, pressing against my chest. She knew.

She knew before we even stepped back in this house, before the will, before any of it. This wasn't just about property or old memories.

She planned this. I swallow hard, gripping the letter tighter. The words blur slightly, but I don't need to read them again. They're already burned into my mind.

Emma's laughter flickers in my memory, soft, unguarded, from this morning in the garden. The way her eyes lit up when she saw what I'd done. The way she ran her fingers through the soil, like she was touching something sacred.

The way she still looks at me sometimes, like she wants to say something but stops herself. My hands shake as I fold the letter back up.

She's still Emma. Still the same girl who used to curl up next to me on this very couch, barefoot and sun-warmed from the beach, talking about nothing and everything all at once. And she's still the same girl who left me without a word.

A muscle in my jaw tightens. I shove the letter into my pocket, my fingers curling into a fist around it.

I push to my feet, needing something, anything to clear my head. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, I twist the cap off with too much force, taking a long swig. The bitterness does nothing to dull the unease curling in my gut.

The sound of a floorboard creaking upstairs makes me freeze. My grip tightens around the bottle as I glance toward the staircase.

Emma. She's awake.

I hold my breath, waiting. Listening. Will she come down? Will she find me standing here, with this letter burning a hole in my pocket? For a moment, everything in me wants her to.

But then the house settles again, and I exhale, long and slow, pressing the heel of my hand against my chest like I can push back the ache there.

I take another drink, staring out the window at the dark waves rolling toward shore. Tomorrow, I'll pretend like I never found it.

Like I'm not standing here, breaking all over again.

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Sunday arrives. The smell of grilled burgers and smoked ribs thickens the warm Ocean Bay air as laughter rings through Nate and Liz's backyard. The late afternoon sun slants low, golden light filtering through the trees, casting long shadows over the picnic tables and the kids darting around the yard.

Max shrieks with delight, dodging between Buddy and Nate's dog Scout, a football clutched tight in his arms. Pip, the tiny terrier, yaps furiously, his little legs barely keeping up.

I tighten my grip on the six-pack in my hand as Emma and I step through the open gate. I shouldn't be here. Shouldn't have come.

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But Liz had insisted. And Nate? That smug bastard had just smirked and said, “BBQs are family tradition, man. No excuses.”

Family. The word has sat wrong in my gut since the moment it left Nate’s mouth.

Because this? This is the closest thing to a family I’ve ever had. And she’s here.

Emma shifts beside me, shoulders tense, before Liz turns and beams, arms already outstretched. “Emma!”

Emma barely has time to react before Liz pulls her into a tight hug, belly pressing between them. Emma laughs softly, hugging back. “Wow, you’re really showing now.”

“Six months of eating every carb in sight.” Liz grins, pulling back. “And you, look at you, you’re glowing.”

I glance at Emma out of the corner of my eye. I wouldn’t call it glowing. But there’s something different. Something about the way her shoulders have loosened in the past couple of weeks, the way the crease between her brows isn’t as deep as it was when we first moved into the house.

The way she laughs more now. I look away, jaw clenching. Not my business.

Nate claps a hand against my shoulder, grinning. “Glad you made it, man.”

I grunt in response, and Nate chuckles. “C’mon, let’s grab a beer.”

We move toward the cooler, the ice shifting as Nate pulls out two bottles and pops the caps with ease. I take mine, nodding toward Max. “Kid’s getting faster.”

“Yeah, he is. But don’t think I didn’t notice you watching someone else.”

I stiffen. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Nate smirks, taking a long swig of his beer before tilting his head toward the yard.

Emma stands near the fire pit, tossing a ball with Max, her hair loose and catching the sunlight, laughter spilling from her lips. She’s light. Carefree in a way I haven’t seen in years. My chest tightens.

“You’ve been staring at her since we got here,” Nate murmurs.

I scowl. “You’re imagining things.”

Nate just raises an eyebrow. “Am I?”

“She’s just…” I stop, lips pressing into a firm line.

“She’s just what?”

I exhale sharply, taking a long sip of my beer. “She’s Emma. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” Nate leans against the porch railing, crossing his arms. “Because the way you’re looking at her right now says otherwise.”

I bristle. “Nothing’s happening. Nothing’s going to happen. I made a mistake with her once, and I won’t repeat it. She is always going to be a disaster waiting to happen.”



Nate smirks, clearly enjoying this too much. “Sure, man. Whatever you say.”

My grip tightens around the beer bottle. Because Nate doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand what it was like to wake up one day and find out the person you love, the person you thought you had a future with, vanished.

No warning. No goodbye. Nothing. Emma left me once, and I’m not about to let her do it again.

Even if it means keeping myself at a distance. Even if it means ignoring the way my gut twists every time she laughs.

Every time she looks at me like she still sees something in me worth holding on to. I run a hand down my face. This is ridiculous. I’m not some lovesick fool. Not anymore.

A sudden gasp from behind us makes us turn toward the house. I frown, scanning the porch, the back door, but see nothing.

Nate shrugs. “Maybe Liz dropped something.”

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I nod but don't shake the uneasy feeling curling at the back of my neck. Something feels off.

But I push it aside, turning back toward the yard just in time to see Emma brush a strand of hair behind her ear, her smile soft as she listens to Max chatter about his latest school project.

My chest tightens. Nate nudges me with his elbow, voice low. "You keep saying it's nothing. But you and I both know it's not."

I exhale sharply, dragging a hand through my hair. "Doesn't matter."

Nate huffs out a laugh. "You sure about that? Because the way you're clenching that beer bottle says otherwise."

I force my grip to loosen, but my pulse thrums in my ears and I don't want this to be something.

I throw back the last of my beer, avoiding Nate's knowing stare.

"Drop it," I mutter, turning toward the grill. "I'm here for the food, not the speculation."

Nate smirks but lets it go. But as I watch Emma from the corner of my eye, the way she tosses her head back in laughter, the way the wind plays with the strands of her hair...

Nate might be right. And worse, I know I'm lying to myself.

## Chapter eleven

Emma

The break room at the animal shelter smells like cheap coffee and disinfectant, the kind of scent that lingers in places that run on tired volunteers and love for animals. The chipped table wobbles when I set my cup down, my other hand smoothing out the sketches in front of me. Lines of ink forming my dream, the reception area, the exam rooms, the cozy kennel space. My future.

I roll my shoulders back, exhaling through my nose. This is what matters, not the words I can't unhear. And it's not the way Bryan's voice, cool and dismissive, had sent a knife through me at the barbeque. Calling me a mistake. I squeeze my fingers tighter around the pen.

Stella drops into the chair across from me with her usual flair, a donut in one hand, a file in the other. She takes one look at my scattered papers and grins. "Tell me this means you're finally making moves."

I nod, tapping the sketchpad. "Yeah. Been working through logistics, seeing where I can cut costs. I figured I'd start small, basic facilities, a few staff members, focus on pet care and emergency services first."

She takes a long sip of her coffee, eyes sharp. "And funding?"

I hesitate. "That's where I hit a wall. Grants aren't coming through fast enough. I'm thinking of reaching out to the community like you suggested. Small fundraiser, maybe. A pet-wash event, bake sale, something to get people involved."

Stella snaps her fingers. “I love that! Ocean Bay’s big on local business. If we pitch it right, we could get sponsors too, small ones at first, then work up to bigger investors. Maybe even get businesses to donate supplies instead of cash.”

I nod, excitement stirring. This could work. I could build this from the ground up, the way I always dreamed. On my own.

Then Stella smirks. “And you do know who’d be a great investor.”

I look up warily. “No.”

She leans in, wiggling her eyebrows. “Bryan.”

The name slams into me like a sucker punch. My stomach twists, grip tightening around my pen until my knuckles ache. “No.” The word comes out too sharp, too fast. Stella blinks. “Whoa. Just a thought.”

I swallow hard, looking back down at my sketches. I don’t need his help. I don’t need his money, his influence, or his pity. I hear his voice, the words that cut deep, history he won’t repeat. A flush creeps up my neck, shame and something raw curling in my chest.

Stella watches me for a long moment, chewing her lip. Then, as if reading my mind, she shrugs. “Fine. We’ll do it without him.”

I force a nod, ignoring the knot in my throat. “Yeah. We will.”

She studies me for another beat, then changes the subject, launching into plans about flyers and pitching the fundraiser to the shelter crew. I nod along, letting her voice drown out the ache still lodged deep inside.

The door creaks open, and in walk volunteers Claire and Pearl, both carrying brown paper bags. Claire is a vet tech while Pearl simply loves animals. I glance up, offering a faint smile.

“Thought you might be hungry,” Claire says, setting one of the bags on the table. Pearl, ever the quiet one, simply nods, her kind eyes soft as she places the other on the counter.

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“Thanks,” I say, voice warmer now as I stand up to grab one of the bags. “You two are the best.”

“We know,” Pearl responds with a smile, always the one to keep things light. Claire adds, “You’ve been working hard. No need to thank us.”

Pearl glances at the papers scattered on the table. “What’s all this?”

“Oh,” I hesitate, suddenly feeling vulnerable. “It’s... just some sketches. Plans, really.”

Claire steps closer, eyes scanning the designs. “These look serious. What exactly are you planning?”

I exchange a glance with Stella, who smirks knowingly, then clear my throat. “It’s for an animal clinic. I mean Ocean Bay needs one. It could also help neighboring towns especially since the clinic will be free. So, I’m pressing myself to get my plan moving to reality.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then Claire blinks. “Wait ... a clinic? You’re opening a free clinic?”

Pearl’s face lights up. “Emma, that’s amazing! Why didn’t you tell us?”

I shrug, suddenly overwhelmed by their enthusiasm. “I’m not sure how soon I’ll be able to make it happen. Funding’s still an issue, and I’m still working out the logistics. But it’s something I’ve been dreaming about for years.”

Pearl claps her hands together. “Well, now that we know, we’re definitely going to help!”

Claire nods firmly. “Absolutely. I mean I believe you’ll do really well. Have you considered just converting this shelter to an actual veterinarian supported clinic?”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “I appreciate your offers, but I’m still working on the basics. I need funding, a location, equipment... there’s a long way to go. I believe the town needs both – this one for lost and abandoned animals as well as a veterinary clinic ... one that people can bring their own pets to for care. Of course I will also provide services for these animals too.”

Pearl waves a hand. “We’ll find a way. You’re not doing this alone.”

Claire folds her arms. “And if you need extra hands, I’d be happy to help on the side. I’ve got experience working with animals. I can run some part-time shifts if needed.”

I stare at them, something warm and unexpected unfurling in my chest. This is real. This is happening. They see it. They believe in it.

Stella smirks, nudging my arm. “I told you the town would back you.” I swallow hard, nodding. “Yeah... you did.”

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The shelter still smells like wet fur, but now it’s joined by the faintest hint of coffee from the volunteer station in the corner. Cages rattle as restless dogs shift inside them, and somewhere near the exam room, a cat yowls in protest. I barely notice anymore, too focused on massaging a small lump on a kitten’s back. Mrs. Gray who is adopting tiny Mittens watches with worried eyes.

“She’s okay,” I assure her, feeling the tension ease under my fingertips. “It’s just a little muscle strain. Nothing serious. Keep an eye on her, but she’ll be good as new in a few days.”

Mrs. Gray sighs in relief, clutching Mittens close to her chest. “You’re a miracle, dear. Ocean Bay’s lucky to have you back.”

The words send a tight knot curling in my chest. Am I back? Or am I just...passing through, trying to hold myself together?

I push the thought away and stand, dusting off my jeans. Across the room Stella’s wrangling a wiggling part-golden retriever pup, laughing as he nearly bowls her over in excitement. Claire, flips through charts at the front desk, muttering about vaccination schedules.

The shelter is a mess of noise, motion, and barely controlled chaos ... exactly the way I like it. And for the first time in weeks, I feel like I belong somewhere again.

Stella catches my eye and waves me over. “Time to put those big ideas into action.” She slaps a flyer onto the table between us, a rough sketch of our fundraiser announcement. “We’re making this official, Ocean Bay’s first bake sale and pet-clinic fundraiser is happening in four weeks.”

I can’t help but grin. “Seriously?”

“Yup,” she pops the ‘p.’ “Claire’s pulling in vet contacts to see if we can get some supply donations, and Pearl’s bridge club has already signed up to bake.”

Claire glances up from her clipboard, nodding. “I’ll ask around. We might get some leftover supplies from my last clinic. It won’t be much, but every bit helps.”



Beside me, Pearl beams, a massive grey cat purring in her arms. “Anything for our local animal healer.”

Warmth spreads through me. I never thought I’d feel this kind of support again, not after so long running, scraping by, carrying my father’s debts on my back. But standing here, listening to their easy confidence in me, I start to believe that maybe, just maybe, this could work.

I reach for a pen, making a few notes on the flyer. “I’ll work on getting more information out. We need posters, social media posts, and...”

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The rumble of an engine outside cuts me off. I freeze. My fingers tighten around the pen as I hear the unmistakable crunch of heavy boots on gravel.

No. Not now. Claire glances toward the door as it swings open. “Wow, is that who I think it is?” I don’t have to turn around to know it’s Bryan.

The sound of his steps hits me before I even see him. The weight of his presence in the room shifts the air, drawing every nerve in my body tight.

"Hello everyone," he greets, and Stella and the others happily greets him. Buddy comes to my side wanting a rub which I give him along with some treats from my pocket. I try my best to ignore my racing heart.

“Someone told me you needed some help around here,” Bryan says, voice calm, casual. Too casual. Like nothing’s wrong. Like he didn’t say those words. Just platonic. History he won’t repeat. She is a disaster waiting to happen.

I grip the edge of the table, fighting the irrational sting in my chest. Keep it together, Emma.

Stella smirks, tossing a wrench in his direction. “Figured we can put your money where your mouth is. Think you can handle a few loose hinges and busted locks?”

Bryan catches the wrench one-handed, barely sparing her a glance. His eyes are on me. I hate that I feel them.

That stupid tug in my gut, that awareness of how his t-shirt clings just enough to

broad shoulders, how his jeans fit like they were made for him. It shouldn't matter. But it does.

"Sure, I can handle that."

I turn back to the flyers, feigning disinterest. "Thanks," I say stiffly, shuffling papers.

Silence stretches between us. I feel him hesitate. Then he moves, heading toward the back where the supply closets and cage doors need fixing.

I let out a slow breath, hands still shaking slightly. It's nothing, I tell myself. Nothing. Just him helping out, that's all. Just me focusing on this, on the clinic, on my future.

Still, I can't help but feel his eyes flicker back toward me before he disappears down the hall. And I hate that I notice.

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The soft bubbling of soup fills the quiet kitchen at home, the scent of rosemary and garlic curling into the air. The dim light sways overhead, casting flickering shadows against the half-painted walls. My hand tightens around the wooden spoon as I stir, gaze locked on the slow swirl of broth.

I should feel lighter after today, after seeing the fundraiser plans coming together, after getting through another shift at the shelter. But all I feel is a dull ache pressing at my chest.

One month. One month gone. Two left to go.

The thought makes my stomach clench. Two months until the will's terms are fulfilled. Two months until I can figure out what happens next. Two months until I

won't have to share space with a man who despite my best efforts still affects me more than he should.

I push harder at the soup, trying to drown out the gnawing memories of today: the way Bryan showed up at the shelter, the way his eyes flicked toward me more times than I cared to admit, the way the air in that room shifted when he walked in.

The numbers flash in my head, \$2,250 left. Barely enough to scrape by for another month. I need to push harder. Take on more shifts with Doc Wheeler in the next town, reach out to more donors, keep my head down and more focused.

The door creaks, and my breath catches despite myself. His feet scuff against the wooden floor, his suit jacket rustling as he shrugs it off. I don't turn. I don't need to. I already know it's Bryan.

Buddy's tail thumps against the floor, his lazy greeting met with a quiet, gruff, "Hey, boy." The deep rumble of his voice slides over my skin, as familiar as the ocean waves crashing against the cliffs outside. My grip tightens on the spoon.

I hear him move closer. The warmth of his presence settles just a few feet behind me, close enough that the air feels heavier, charged. My pulse betrays me, a tiny stutter against my ribs, and I hate that I notice.

"How've you been?" His voice is lower than usual, softer, like he's trying not to push.

I force a shrug, keeping my focus on the pot. "Fine."

The spoon clacks against the side of the pan, betraying the tension curling inside me. The silence that follows is thick, stretching between us like a taut rope. I don't look at him. I won't.

But I feel him watching. His footsteps shift, the faintest movement that tells me he's stepped even closer. "You sure about that? It seems something is up." His tone is careful, unreadable.

My stomach twists. I hate the way his concern sounds like it means something. Like he still sees me. "Nothing's up," I say too quickly, too sharp. I can hear it in my own voice, how brittle it sounds. How obvious it is that something is very much up.

Bryan doesn't move; doesn't let it go. I feel his presence settle behind me, steady and unmoving, like he's waiting for me to crack.

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I stir harder, jaw tightening. Don't do this, Bryan. Just let it go.

But he doesn't. "You've been quiet." His voice is measured, like he's feeling out his next words. "And I know when something's wrong."

Something about that makes my breath hitch. Because he does know. He always did. Back then, he'd read me like an open book before I even realized I was struggling. And that part of him hasn't changed, no matter how much I pretend he doesn't care.

I exhale sharply, forcing a humorless chuckle. "Maybe I just don't feel like talking."

I will not let him see how much he's affecting me. Bryan doesn't answer right away. Instead, I feel the tension rolling off him in waves, as if he's trying to pick his next move. Then, quietly, he mutters, "Alright."

But I don't trust the way he says it. The spoon in my hand stills, and for the first time since he walked in, I risk a glance over my shoulder. And I instantly regret it.

His eyes are steady, sharp, knowing as they are locked onto mine, studying me in a way that makes my throat go dry. There's something there, something unreadable but intense, like he's peeling back the layers of my guarded silence.

It makes my stomach twist. It makes me want to run.

Buddy whines suddenly, breaking whatever moment had settled between us. I blink, jerking my gaze back to the pot, inhaling sharply.

Behind me, Bryan exhales, a rough sound. Then, stepping back, he again murmurs, “Alright.”

My heart jumps, something uncertain curling in my chest. He’s not letting this go. He never could.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, willing myself to push past the stupid sting of it all. When I open them, he’s already gone, his retreating footsteps echoing down the hall.

I release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. It scares me that he still knows me so well despite the years apart.

## Chapter twelve

Bryan

I step into the shelter, the sharp scent of bleach and damp fur filling my lungs as the familiar clatter of kennels echoes through the space. Volunteers shuffle around, feeding dogs, filling out paperwork, lost in their routine. But I only see her. Emma.

She’s crouched beside a wiry little mutt, her hands gentle as she checks its paws. Her ponytail swings forward, a loose strand brushing her cheek, and for a second, I forget why I’m here.

She looks up, startled, her gaze locking onto mine. A flicker of surprise crosses her face before she schools her expression into something neutral.

“Bryan?” Her voice is wary, as if she hadn’t expected to see me here. She straightens, dusting her hands on her jeans. “What are you doing here?”

I shift the box in my arms, nodding toward the storage room. “Brought some things for the animals. Supplies for the cages.”

Her lips press together, and she nods. “That’s... nice of you.”

Nice.

I don’t miss how distant her voice is, how she keeps her hands busy, her gaze flicking everywhere but me.

Three days. That’s how long she’s been acting like I don’t exist. Three days since that night in the kitchen when I’d caught her looking like she was carrying the weight of the world, and she refused to let me in. Three days of her walking around the house like a ghost, slipping in late, leaving early, avoiding any real conversation.

And I had let it slide. Until now. I set the box down with more force than necessary. “What’s with you?”

Her shoulders stiffen, but she doesn’t turn around. Instead, she grabs a clipboard off the counter and busies herself with reading except I can tell she’s not reading at all.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she says flatly.

I exhale, trying to keep my patience. “You’ve been acting different. Avoiding me.”

She lets out a humorless laugh, shaking her head as she jots something down on the clipboard. “I’ve been busy, Bryan.”

I step closer, lowering my voice. “Emma.”



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She finally turns, arms crossed over her chest, chin lifted in that stubborn way I remember too well. “What?”

Her voice is sharp, clipped, but beneath it, there’s something else. Something raw. I narrow my eyes. “Just talk to me.”

She stares at me, jaw tight, something flashing behind her eyes before she forces out a bitter laugh. “Talk to you?” she echoes, voice laced with disbelief.

Then she shakes her head, muttering under her breath, “This is unbelievable.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “What is that supposed to mean?”

She exhales sharply, fingers tightening around the clipboard like it’s the only thing keeping her together. Then, finally, she looks up, and the emotion in her gaze hits me like a fist to the gut.

“I heard you,” she says. My stomach drops. I blink. “What?”

Her lips part, like she can’t believe I have the audacity to play dumb. “At Nate’s,” she snaps. “I heard you.”

I go rigid. And then, before I can even process what she’s saying, she throws my own words back at me like a blade.

“Never will.” Her voice cracks slightly, but she pushes forward. “That’s what you said, right? That we’re history you won’t repeat? That I’ll always be a mistake to

you.”

A lump forms in my throat. She swallows hard, a bitter smile curving her lips. “Don’t worry, Bryan,” she says, her voice quieter now, hollower. “I get it.” She turns away before I can say a word.

I step forward, my heart hammering. “Emma, wait...”

“No,” she says sharply, gripping the leash of a dog that doesn’t even need walking. “You were right and that’s why I don’t want you to make another mistake.”

And with that, she’s gone, leaving me standing there in the middle of the shelter with a weight in my chest heavier than I’ve ever felt before.

I messed up. And this time, I don’t know if I can fix it.

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I rub a hand down my face as I step into the kitchen, my phone pressed between my shoulder and ear. Buddy is sprawled on the rug, chewing on a toy, completely oblivious to my tension. The house is too quiet. Emma barely speaks to me anymore, and when she does, it’s clipped, careful, like she’s measuring every word before giving me the bare minimum.

I should be used to it by now. Should have expected it. But it still sits wrong.

My phone buzzes and Liz’s voice crackles through the line, full of energy as always. “Finally! Thought I’d have to hunt you down.”

I snort, dropping into a chair. “You’re six months pregnant, Liz. Not much hunting you can do these days.”

She gasps, all offended. “Excuse you, I waddle with purpose.”

I shake my head, a smirk tugging at my lips despite myself. “Right. My mistake.”

“Absolutely right,” she mutters, then jumps straight to the point. “Anyway, I need you to handle something for me.”

I lean back, already bracing myself. “If it’s baby stuff, you know Nate’s got that covered.”

“Please, Nate’s been on dad duty since I peed on a stick. I need a break from his nesting phase before he drives me insane.” That gets a chuckle out of me. “Alright, what do you need?”

She hums, clearly pleased I’m playing along. “I need the best event planner for my shower.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Liz...”

“Before you even think about saying no,” she interrupts, “remember that I’m carrying your future niece or nephew, and I will absolutely use pregnancy hormones to guilt-trip you.”

I sigh, already pulling up contacts. “You’re impossible.”

“And you love me for it,” she quips. “Now, while I have you ...”

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There it is. That shift in her tone. The one that tells me she's about to bring up something I won't like.

I hesitate. "What?"

"Emma's fundraiser how is it going?" she says casually, like it's something I should already know about.

My brows furrow. "What fundraiser?"

There's a beat of silence. Then Liz sighs. "Oh, Bryan. Are you serious you don't know? It's all over town."

"Are you serious?" I snap, sitting up.

"She's raising money for her clinic," Liz explains. "It's happening in four weeks. She didn't tell you?"

I swallow hard. "No." Which makes sense, doesn't it? I'd given her no reason to.

Liz groans. "You are so dense." I drag a hand through my hair. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means she's avoiding you on purpose because you screwed up," she says bluntly. "She heard what you said at my place, Bry. Nate told me."

I shut my eyes. I had told Nate what had happened. "I know," I mutter.

“Do you?” she presses. “Because I’m guessing you still haven’t fixed it.”

I grip the edge of the table, my jaw tight. “Liz, it’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not,” she argues. “You care about her. You wouldn’t be this worked up if you didn’t.”

I stay silent, because what the heck do I say to that? Liz sighs. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on in that thick head of yours, but I do know Emma’s doing something incredible for this town, and she needs all the help she can get.”

I exhale, rubbing a hand over my jaw.

“Maybe you can’t fix everything overnight,” Liz continues, voice softer now, “but you can help her with this. And honestly, if you want to stand a chance at making things right, it’s a good place to start.”

Her words settle in my chest, heavy. I think of Emma, of how hard she’s working, of how she probably won’t even ask for help because she’s too proud.

I drag in a slow breath. “Okay.”

Liz brightens. “Yeah?” “Yeah,” I mutter. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Good,” she says smugly. “And Bry?”

“What?”

“Don’t screw it up.”

She hangs up before I can respond. I stare at my phone for a beat, my mind already

racing. Four weeks. If Emma won't let me in, then I'll find another way to show her I do care, and that I didn't mean what I had said.

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I step into the living room, rubbing a hand over my jaw. The air inside the house is warm, thick with the scent of old books and something faintly floral, lavender. Yes, always lavender.

Emma's hunched over the table, flipping through a worn sketchpad, completely unaware of my presence. The soft glow from the lamp above casts her in gold, highlighting the slope of her neck, the way her lips press together in thought.

My stomach tightens. She doesn't look up, just keeps sketching, tapping her pen against the paper. "Emma."

She tenses, her pen pausing mid-stroke. Slowly, she lifts her head, her eyes cautious, unreadable.

I step further in, forcing myself to breathe through the mess of emotions knotted in my chest. "I wanted to say I'm sorry," I start, voice steady, even though it doesn't feel that way. "For what I said at Nate's house, what you overheard."

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She tilts her head slightly, studying me, and for a moment, I think she might let me off easy. But then she shrugs. “You don’t have to.”

Her voice is even, controlled, but her fingers tighten around the edges of her sketchpad. I take a step closer, resting my hands on the back of the chair across from her. “Yeah, I do.”

Her eyes flick away, staring at a point over my shoulder. “It’s fine.”

It’s not. I can feel it. “I said what I said because I was scared,” I admit. “Confused. I thought keeping my distance would make everything easier.”

Her lips part slightly, but she doesn’t speak. I exhale, gripping the chair a little tighter. “I was wrong.” A flicker of something crosses her face pain, hesitation.

She finally looks at me again, and something shifts. A slow burn in my chest, something dangerous and familiar. Her gaze lingers, warm, searching, and I feel it, like that night on the porch, like every time she gets too close. I swallow hard.

“I forgive you,” she says quietly, but there’s a pause before she adds, “Doesn’t change anything, though.”

I nod, forcing myself to accept that. She’s letting me back in, but only so far. “Fair enough.” Silence stretches between us, but it’s not as sharp as before. I clear my throat. “So... fundraising?”

She blinks, obviously caught off guard by the shift. “How do you know about that?”

I smirk. “Liz. Besides everyone in town knows about it except me, of course.”

Emma lets out a small, exasperated sigh. “Bryan...”

I pull out the folded list from my pocket and slide it across the table. “No, it's okay. I deserve it. Anyways, I've been making a few calls.”

She hesitates before picking it up. As her eyes skim the paper, her brows knit together in confusion. “You did all this?”

“Yeah.” I sit down, resting my forearms on the table. “Local businesses, sponsors, a raffle. Figured it might help.”

Emma's lips part slightly, stunned. “You didn't have to,” she says after a beat.

I shrug. “Wanted to.”

She looks down at the paper again, shaking her head like she can't believe it. “Why?”

I don't have an answer she'd want to hear. Instead, I lean back. “If this doesn't cover enough, I'll invest in the clinic myself.”

Her head snaps up. “No!”

I arch a brow. “No?”

She shakes her head, jaw tight. “Bryan, this is my thing. I must do this on my own.”

I study her, the way her shoulders square, the fire in her eyes. “I get that,” I say slowly. “But I'm not offering to take over. I'm offering to help. Besides before you came around the guys and I were thinking of getting a clinic in Ocean Bay, and get



some doctors into town to run it. But now that you are doing it, the least I can do is help.”

She exhales sharply, her fingers tightening around the paper. “I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything.”

I frown. “Owe you?”

“For...” She stops herself, pressing her lips together.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. “Emma, I don’t do things out of guilt.”

She swallows hard, staring down at the sketches in front of her. “Just think about it,” I say. “That’s all I’m asking.” For a long moment, she doesn’t speak. Then finally, she nods. “Okay.”

It’s not much. But it’s something. We spend the next hour going over fundraiser details, her bake sale list, my raffle calls. The tension between us softens, something easier settling in. At one point, she glances up at me, her eyes catching mine, and for a split second, the air between us shifts again. I can’t look away.

Her lips part slightly like she wants to say something, but she doesn’t. Instead, she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear in that endearing “Emma” way and looks back down at her papers.

I let out a slow breath, running a hand over my face. I’m in deeper than I thought. And it scares the heck out of me.

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Emma yawns, stretching her arms over her head. “I should head up.”

I nod, watching as she gathers her papers. She hesitates for a second, then offers a small, genuine smile. “Thanks, Bryan. Really.”

I clear my throat, forcing a smirk. “Don’t get used to it.”

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the way her lips tug slightly at the corners. Then she’s gone, footsteps fading upstairs.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing a hand over my jaw. Buddy lifts his head, ears twitching.

“What am I doing?” I mutter to him. He just yawns and drops his head again, completely unbothered.

I wish I could say the same.

### Chapter thirteen

Emma

The Ocean Bay Community Center is alive with chatter, laughter, and the occasional bark from the portable pet wash station outside. The scent of freshly baked goods mingles with the salty breeze drifting through the open doors. Every table is brimming with donations, cookies, cupcakes, raffle items all the results of four weeks of planning.

And somehow... it worked. I blink at the turnout, a strange mix of awe and disbelief twisting in my chest. I did this. Or at least, I helped make it happen.

“You okay?” Stella nudges me, balancing a tray of lemonade cups. “You’re just standing there looking like you saw a ghost.”

I exhale, shaking my head. “I just... I didn’t expect this many people.”

She grins. “Well, believe it. Because it’s happening.”

And she’s right. Everywhere I look, there are people, locals, volunteers, even some unfamiliar faces all here to support the clinic. Some are browsing the bake sale, others are standing by the raffle table, reading the prize list. Kids chase Buddy near the pet wash, giggling as he happily dodges the water sprays.

Claire, Pearl and Stella have been immense help. And above all Bryan has been surprisingly supportive over the past four weeks. Our interactions aren’t as strained as before.

And then as if on cue... I see him. He’s near the entrance, arms folded, posture easy, eyes scanning the crowd like he’s taking it all in. He hasn’t left since he arrived early this morning, unloading crates of water and supplies. But now, he’s watching me.

Something flickers in my chest, something I try to ignore as I force myself to look away before I do something stupid. Like walk over to him. Like care that he’s here.

Before I can dwell on it, a familiar voice calls out loud, teasing. “Alright, alright, where’s the woman of the hour?”

I turn to see Nate and Liam heading toward me, both smirking.

"Hi guys. I'm so happy you made it,"

"Bryan would have our heads if we didn't come, and we came to support you and to give you this," Liam says as Nate holds out an envelope.

Oh no. I gape at them. "Well, thank you. Thank you both so much."

"You're welcome, and it's a little token to support you and the amazing goal you're working toward."

I accept it and gape when I see the amounts on the two checks. "Oh, my goodness, this is a lot, too much. I don't think I can accept this." I stretch the envelope back toward them, but Nate waves his finger. "Sorry, no refunds."

Liam chuckles. "He's right. Once the checks are written, it's out of our hands."

I stare at them, my stomach twisting. "This is too much."

"It's exactly what you need," Nate corrects, then smirks. "Consider it payment for helping mess with Bryan."

This brings a laugh from all of us. Liam nods. "Yeah, think of it as a thank you for coming back to town."

I open my mouth to argue, but Bryan steps up beside me, arching a brow. "Just take it, Em."

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I whip around, narrowing my eyes. “This was your idea, wasn’t it?” His lips twitch, but he doesn’t confirm or deny. Nate claps him on the back. “I mean, he was very convincing.”

I don’t know what to say. My throat tightens, my heart hammering with too many emotions at once.

Bryan, as if sensing my hesitation, speaks quietly. “This is for your clinic. You've always dreamed of this.”

His words hit deeper than I expect. I exhale, finally taking the envelope. “Thank you. Thank you, both.”

Nate grins. “That’s what we like to hear.”

Liam gives me a wink before stepping away, and before I can process anything further, Stella swoops in, pulling me into a hug.

“You did it!” she beams. “And don’t even try to thank me. This is all you.” I shake my head. “I couldn’t have done it without everyone here.”

She pulls back, winking. “Well, we all knew you could.”

Another wave of emotion swells in my chest, but before I can get completely caught up in it, Stella nudges me toward the makeshift stage.

“Speech time.”

Oh. Right.

My pulse kicks up a notch, but I push through the nerves as I step onto the platform. The microphone crackles as I adjust it, and suddenly, every eye in the room is on me. I can do this.

I clear my throat. “First, I need to thank a few people. Stella, Claire, Pearl, you three have been my backbone through all of this.” Scattered applause fills the room, Pearl dabbing at her eyes in the front row.

I swallow, and my gaze unintentionally flickers back to Bryan. He’s still watching me, still holding that unreadable look, and I hate that my heart stumbles over itself. “And...” My voice catches. “Bryan.”

His jaw twitches slightly. “Thank you,” I say softly. He doesn’t move, doesn’t react much at all. But I see it. The way his fingers curl slightly, the way his chest rises and falls in a deeper breath.

Turning back to the crowd, I focus. “This clinic,” I say, voice stronger now, “is for Ocean Bay. For every animal that deserves care. For every pet owner who shouldn’t have to drive miles away for treatment. For every stray that needs a second chance.”

A murmur of agreement spreads through the room. I grip the mic tighter. “And, personally? It’s for me. Because I lost my cat, Whiskers, when I was ten. We didn’t have the resources we needed here. And I promised myself that one day, I’d change that.”

I continue with my speech over the next few minutes as applause erupts, with cheers and whistles ringing through the air. “And folks, I want to especially thank another man who has given so much of his life to all the towns around here, including Ocean Bay and its animals. The fact that Doc Wheeler from Laylow Bay is here supporting

my cause makes me feel so blessed. Will you all raise your hands to this wonderful man?"

I step off the stage after thanking everyone else for their support. Stella immediately throws her arms around me. "You killed it!"

I laugh, tension easing slightly. But as I scan the room, I find Bryan still standing where he was before. Still watching. Still here.

And for some reason, seeing him fills me with an unexplainable joy.

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The community center is quieter now, the chatter and excitement of the day fading into the hum of the ocean just beyond the doors. Most of the volunteers have packed up, leaving behind half-stacked chairs and scattered raffle tickets littering the floor.

I tug off my apron, dusting flour from the front, and stretch my sore arms. My body hums with exhaustion, but my heart is still racing from today's turnout. From him.

Bryan. And yes, he's still here.

I hesitate in the doorway of the back room, spotting him near a stack of crates, sweeping ... sleeves rolled up, hair slightly messy, movements steady. He doesn't look like a billionaire, like the man who built an empire. Right now, he looks... calm, effortless. Just a guy doing his part, grounding himself in something simple. Why is he still here?

Buddy is sprawled near a pile of donation boxes, his tail flicking in lazy contentment. He barely lifts his head when I step closer.

“Didn’t expect you here still,” I say, voice light, masking the sudden tightness in my chest.

Bryan glances up mid-sweep, one brow lifting. “Just about to leave.” That’s it. That’s all he says.

I almost roll my eyes. Of course, he wouldn’t just say that he just wanted to stay and see this through with me. But I feel it. It’s there, between the unspoken words, the way he’s still sweeping long after everyone else has left.



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I move closer, feeling oddly shy despite everything. “Thanks,” I say softly. “For everything. It meant more with you here.”

The broom stills in his hands. His green eyes lift to mine, steady, warm. And my pulse stumbles.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The air shifts, thickens, charged with something neither of us is willing to name. He’s close enough that I catch his scent, cedar and salt air, grounding, familiar. A warmth I haven’t let myself lean into for years. Too close.

I need to pull back. But instead, I step forward. And before I can overthink it, I hug him. It’s instinct, a rush of gratitude, of emotion too big to hold in. I expect him to stiffen, to hesitate. For one agonizing second, he does.

Then he exhales, his arms coming around me. His body is warm, solid, the press of him against me sending a wave of hot memories crashing through my defenses. He smells the same, feels the same, and for a fleeting second, it’s like nothing has changed.

Except everything has. We pull apart slowly. My breath is unsteady, my heart knocking hard against my ribs.

“Sorry,” I murmur, voice unsteady. “I just... I got emotional. You’ve supported me from the start of this, and I...”

Bryan shakes his head, cutting me off. “Don’t apologize. Besides, I’ve not done

much.”

His voice is lower now, rougher. There’s something unreadable in his eyes, something too much.

I look away, needing space, needing air. “You don’t have to do anything else,” I tell him, stepping back. “You’ve done more than enough these past few weeks.”

Bryan exhales, raking a hand through his hair. “I still have a donation to give.”

I blink. “Bryan…”

“We had a deal,” he reminds me. “If the fundraiser didn’t work, I’d step in. It did work. But I still want to contribute.”

I shake my head, heart twisting. “You’ve already done so much.”

“Not enough,” he says simply. His voice is so calm, so certain, that it steals the argument right from my lips.

I try again. “Bryan…”

“I believe in you, Emma.” My breath catches.

He steps closer, his gaze locked on mine, unwavering. “Your dreams. This clinic. I believe in it. And I’m going to support you every step of the way.”

His words knock the air from my lungs. For a second, I forget how to speak. The intensity in his voice, the raw truth behind it, it’s everything.

It’s the words I never thought I’d hear from him again. The kind of faith I had lost

after leaving him years ago. My throat tightens. I should say something. Thank you, I appreciate it, I'm grateful. But my lips part and nothing comes out.

Because this? This means something. This means everything. Then, my phone buzzes. The moment shatters like glass hitting pavement.

I blink, reality crashing back into place. My fingers tremble as I dig the phone out of my pocket and glance at the screen. My stomach plummets. The message is short, clipped, and enough to ruin everything. Your deadline is up. We expect payment by tomorrow. No extensions.

Cold washes through me, drowning out the warmth from moments ago. No, no, no. I had more time. I was supposed to have more time. I swallow hard, forcing my face into something neutral as I shove the phone back into my pocket.

Bryan frowns, immediately noticing my shift. "What's wrong?"

Everything.

"Nothing." I shake my head, stepping back. "I just..." My voice catches. I exhale. "I have to go."

Bryan watches me, eyes narrowing slightly. He doesn't believe me. He never did when I lied.

But right now? I can't talk about it. Not when the walls I've spent weeks rebuilding are threatening to crumble. Not when the weight of everything suddenly feels unbearable.

So, I turn before he can press, forcing my feet to move, forcing myself away from the man who somehow still sees too much.

And for the first time today, I feel utterly alone.

### Chapter fourteen

Bryan

The morning air is crisp, the scent of salt lingering as waves crash against the cliffs beyond the backyard. The garden is finally starting to take shape, roses standing tall, weeds no longer strangling the beds. It's been slow work, but I don't mind.

Not today. Because all I can think about is her. Emma.

The way she lit up at the fundraiser was amazing. When she stood in front of the entire town and spoke about her dream, her passion spilled into the crowd. The way she caught my eye from across the room and held it took my breath away.

She should be proud of herself. For that matter, I'm proud of her.

I shake my head, smirking to myself as I kneel, pruning the lower bushes near the fence. Never thought I'd be the kind of guy who spent his morning tending roses, but here I am.

My sleeves are pushed up, dirt smudging my forearm, but it doesn't bother me. Not when I hear her voice behind me.

"Still at it?"

I glance up. Emma stands at the porch steps, cradling a steaming mug in both hands, her sweater slightly oversized, jeans hugging her legs, hair catching the sunlight.

Beautiful.

I force my gaze back to the bush I'm trimming, keeping my voice casual. "The roses need more attention."

She hums, stepping down into the yard. I hear the scrape of her boots against the stone pathway before she kneels beside me, tugging on gloves.

"I'll help," she says simply, grabbing a trowel and digging into the soil like it's second nature.

She's here. With me. And it's easy. No tension, no walls. Just the two of us, working side by side, the way it used to be.

We fall into rhythm, she loosens the dirt, I plant the bulbs, the occasional thud of the shovel and rustle of leaves filling the silence. Every so often, I sneak a glance at her. She's lost in the work, a small smile playing at her lips as she carefully pats soil over a fresh hole.

Man, I've missed that smile. She lifts a hand to brush a stray hair from her face, smudging dirt across her cheek in the process.

I chuckle. "You've got..." I motion to my own cheek.

She frowns, swiping at the wrong spot. "Here?"

"Other side."

She tries again, still missing. I shake my head, reaching forward before I think better of it. My fingers graze her cheek, wiping the dirt away in a slow, deliberate motion.

The moment stretches. Her breath catches, her eyes locking onto mine bright, stunning and for a second, I forget how to breathe.

She's so close. The scent of lavender lingers between us, mingling with the damp earth, and I swear the sun shines a little warmer.

She swallows, her voice soft. "Like old times."

I clear my throat, pulling back. "Yeah," I murmur, throwing myself back into digging before I do something reckless.

She doesn't move away, though. Doesn't run. This is dangerous.

A sudden scraping noise pulls our attention. Buddy trots over, paws kicking up dirt, something gripped between his teeth. He drops it beside Emma's knee with a clink, a chipped clay pot, faded daisies painted along its sides. I stiffen.

Emma's fingers brush over the surface, her expression shifting into something unreadable.

"This is... our pot." Her astonishment is palpable. It's not a question. My chest tightens as the memory hits.

Fourteen years ago, two reckless kids painted the thing on Grandma's porch, laughing as we smeared colors on each other instead of the clay. We had planted daisies in it, saying they'd be our thing.

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Emma traces the crack running along its side, her voice quieter now. “I thought it was gone.”

I swallow. “Found it buried behind the shed a few weeks ago.” She glances up, her eyes searching mine. “And you kept it?”

I exhale, gripping the pot and reaching for a small tube of glue in the supply basket. “Yeah, I mean it was worth fixing.” The words aren’t just about the pot.

Emma must have heard the layers beneath them, because something shifts in her gaze. She doesn’t say anything for a long beat. Just watches as I carefully patch the crack, smoothing glue along the break. Then, she smiles. Soft. Real. And not mad.

It shouldn’t feel like a win, but it does. We work in silence after that, finishing the last of the planting. She presses the final bulb into the dirt, patting the soil gently. “Looks good,” she murmurs.

I nod, brushing my hands off on my jeans. “Yeah.”

Neither of us moves. Her hands are still covered in soil, her fingers curled slightly, but she doesn’t pull away from the spot where we kneel, side by side. She looks at me then, really looks, as if debating something.

My pulse kicks up. Something’s shifting between us.

I can feel it in the way her breath hitches, in the way the space between us seems too small, in the way I don’t want this moment to end.



Do I say something? Do I push this, push her the way I've been fighting not to?

But before I can decide, she exhales, brushing dirt off her jeans as she stands. "Thanks for this."

Her voice is light, controlled. Like she's forcing distance. And maybe she is.

I nod, pushing myself up beside her. "Anytime."

She lingers for a second longer, then turns toward the house, Buddy trailing behind her. I watch her go; my stomach tight.

And I know now, for sure ... this isn't over.

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The living room is dimly lit, the lantern on the coffee table casts a warm glow. Outside, the ocean hums softly, waves rolling against the cliffs. The air inside is thick with something I can't quite name maybe it's exhaustion from the day's work in the garden, or maybe it's Emma.

She's sitting across from me on the rug, legs folded beneath her, fingers shuffling through a deck of Uno cards like it's second nature. She looks completely at ease, her hair messy from the wind earlier, cheeks flushed from the warmth of the house. I should look away. I should stop watching her. But I don't.

Emma glances up, catching me staring, and tilts her head. "What?"

I clear my throat, shifting my weight like it'll shake off the effect she has on me. "Let's play."

Her brows lift, amused. “Uno?”

I nod, reaching for the cards in her hands. My fingers brush hers, and for a second, neither of us move. The small touch sizzles, sending a jolt straight through me, and I see the slight hitch in her breath before she pulls away, straightening her spine.

“I’m warning you now,” she teases, breaking the tension like she doesn’t feel it. “I’m ruthless. Remember?”

I smirk, drawing my first card. “We’ll see about that.”

We fall into an easy rhythm, the game unfolding between playful taunts and accusations of cheating. “You are absolutely stacking the deck,” Emma accuses when I drop another Draw Four on her.

I lean back against the couch, watching her struggle to pick up her extra cards, and shrug. “You’re just mad because I’m winning.”

Her eyes narrow, but there’s a glint of mischief in them, a spark that makes my stomach tighten. “You’re lucky Buddy’s here, or I’d flip this table.”

Buddy lets out a lazy huff from his spot in the corner, thumping his tail like he agrees with her. I chuckle, but my laughter cuts short when she leans forward to slap down her next card, her hair falling over her shoulder in a cascade of soft waves. The scent of lavender reaches me, light, familiar, intoxicating. I grip my next card a little tighter, forcing myself to focus, but she’s too close.

She glances up through her lashes, grinning as she drops another card. Reverse.

I swallow hard. My brain tells me to look away, but my body? My body leans in, drawn to her warmth, the sound of her laugh, the way her fingers tap against the rug in

thought. She doesn't pull away.

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Her gaze lingers on mine, the teasing look slipping into something quieter, deeper. The game is forgotten, cards scattered between us. My pulse is hammering, my breath shallow. I could kiss her right now. I want to kiss her.

I don't even think. I just tilt forward, slow, testing. She doesn't move back. Her lips part slightly, her breath mingling with mine, and I swear I can feel the pull of her. It's magnetic, inevitable.

Just a little closer. Then, I place my lips gently on hers. A moan erupts from her as I savor the moment. I wrap my hand around the back of her neck to pull her closer.

Then, the shrill ring of my phone shatters the moment like a punch to the gut. Emma jerks back, blinking like she's been snapped from a spell, and my stomach twists at the loss of her warmth.

I exhale sharply, dragging a hand down my face. Good grief, this phone is going to drive me crazy. Grabbing it off the table, I glance at the screen. Nate. Of course.

Emma pushes to her feet before I can say anything. "I should check on some things for the clinic," she says, voice carefully even while her face is flush. My lips tingle all over, the need to continue kissing her overwhelming. "Good game."

She disappears into the kitchen before I can stop her. I stare after her, my phone still ringing in my hand, heart still racing.

What in heck am I doing?

## Chapter fifteen

Emma

Bryan's truck rumbles down the quiet Ocean Bay Road, the hum of the tires blend with the faint crackle of the radio. Buddy's snout juts out the passenger window, tongue lolling as the salty breeze ruffles his fur. Bryan tosses him a biscuit from the bag resting between us, humming off-key to some country song he probably doesn't even know the lyrics to.

I shake my head, amused. "You're gonna turn him into a menace." Bryan grins, eyes still on the road. "He's already a menace. Might as well feed into it."

Buddy lets out a happy bark, tail thumping against the door. I reach out and scratch behind his ears, my heart warming at his blissful expression.

The truck smells faintly of Bryan's signature scent that I shouldn't be so hyper-aware of. But after weeks of living together, of him softening toward me, of this truce we seem to have settled into, it's harder to ignore.

I lean back against the seat, forcing myself to focus on the grocery list crumpled on the dash. Eggs. Coffee. Milk. Dog treats. Simple enough. I was surprised when Bryan had offered to take me to the grocery store when my car refused to start. In his words it's a death trap and I shouldn't be driving it. If only everything else in my life felt this manageable.

The weight of my clinic plans presses at the edges of my mind. The site permits, the equipment costs, the meetings with vendors, there's still so much to do. And then there's the debt, with only an extra few days to pay it down. This was after so much pleading.

I push the thought aside. One thing at a time.

Bryan nudges the air vent, adjusting the flow, and his arm brushes against mine. A brief, unintentional touch, his calloused skin grazing my forearm, the warmth of him too close, too steady. My breath catches before I can stop it, a tiny hitch in my throat that I pray he doesn't notice.

He doesn't, thankfully, just keeps humming, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. I tell myself it's nothing. Just proximity. Just habit. Just Bryan.

"You're quiet," he says after a beat, flicking his gaze toward me. "Thinking up a battle plan for the store?"

I smirk, grateful for the distraction. "More like preparing for war. I know that grocery shopping with you and Buddy is a disaster waiting to happen."

He chuckles, low and easy. "You act like we don't have self-control."

I arch a brow. "Buddy's about to take over the pet aisle, and you'll somehow end up buying things that aren't even on the list."

Bryan feigns offense, pressing a hand to his chest and says: "You wound me, Em."

Em.

It's the first time he's said it in years. The casual way it slips out makes my heart trip over itself, a rush of warmth floods through me before I can stop it.

He doesn't even seem to realize. Or maybe he does, because he clears his throat a second later, shifting in his seat.

Just friends, I remind myself. We're just friends. My mind drifts back to his kisses, none of them felt like we were friends. The burning, the passion even though each kiss was just a minute or less.

Still, I can't ignore the shift in him. The way he's different from the man who first moved into that house with me cold, distant, pushing me away at every turn. This Bryan cares. He shows up. He doesn't just tolerate my presence anymore, he's in this.

He proves it again when he says, almost casually, "Got Liam making a supply run for your clinic."

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My head whips toward him. “What?”

Bryan shrugs like it’s not a big deal. “You mentioned needing stuff, so I called in a favor or two. Figured it’d help.”

The words hit somewhere deep, unexpected. My throat tightens. He thought about it. About me. He didn’t have to. But he did.

“Bryan...” I don’t know what to say.

He glances over, reading me too easily. “Don’t make it a thing, Em.” He pauses. “I just want to see you win.”

And just like that, my guard wobbles. I’ve spent so much time keeping a safe distance, reminding myself why I shouldn’t fall into this again. But the way he’s looking at me now, like he means it, like my dream matters to him makes it harder to hold the line.

I swallow past the sudden lump in my throat. “Thanks.”

He nods, like it’s nothing. Like it doesn’t mean everything. The tension eases as he pulls into the lot, parking near the entrance.

We finish getting all the groceries on the list. “Mall next?” he asks as he kills the engine, glancing toward Buddy, whose tail is already wagging at the sight of movement. “Figured we’d let him run wild in his kingdom.”



I huff out a laugh, shaking my head. “Let’s survive this first.”

Bryan grins, stepping out of the truck. “No promises.”

And as I follow him into the mall, I realize my own resolve is starting to waver because staying away from him is getting harder by the second.

The hum of Ocean Bay Mall wraps around me, a mix of chatter, clinking shopping carts, and the faint scent of cinnamon from the bakery down the hall. The pet store’s bright overhead lights shine down on shelves stacked high with treats, leashes, and enough chew toys to keep Buddy entertained for a lifetime.

Not that he needs help in that department. I tighten my grip on his leash as he tugs forward, sniffing at a row of gourmet dog biscuits like he’s some kind of connoisseur. Bryan, of course, encourages the mischief.

“Buddy, my man, you’ve got great taste,” he says, tossing a massive bone into the cart with an exaggerated flourish. “We’re going all out. Feast of kings.”

I snort, shaking my head as I grab a bag of kibble, mentally tallying the cost against the clinic funds. Strictly for the clinic. The debt is mine to figure out, but this? This is what I worked for.

“Hope you plan on paying for that ‘feast,’ you’re piling up for your good ‘ole boy” I mutter, scanning a few more items he’s tossing in for Buddy.

Bryan smirks. “You think I’d skimp on my boy?” He scratches behind Buddy’s ears, the affection in the simple act making something warm unfurl in my chest. It’s effortless for him, that mix of teasing and genuine care. The kind of guy I fell for once.

I push the thought down, turning my focus to the shelves in front of me. But from the other side of the aisle, I hear it. A whisper. A low murmur.

“Bryan and Emma,” Mrs. Carter’s familiar voice carries softly, but not softly enough. “They’re just meant to be, aren’t they?”

Jen hums in agreement. “Perfect pair. Always were.”

Perfect pair?

Heat floods my face, a nervous flutter kicking up in my chest. My fingers tighten around the shopping cart handle as the words settle, unwanted ... yet not entirely unpleasant. Meant to be. The thought shouldn’t affect me, not after everything, not when I’ve spent weeks reinforcing the wall between us.

But suddenly, that wall doesn’t feel so sturdy. Bryan, completely unaware of my spiralling, grabs a rubber ball and tosses it toward Buddy. “Catch, Bud!”

Buddy leaps, snatching the toy mid-air, tail wagging wildly. Bryan grins, full and easy, and something in my stomach twists. Oh, that smile.

It’s the same one he used to throw at me when we were teenagers, the one that always made me feel like the sun itself had turned in my direction. The kind of grin that disarmed, that made me believe. And I realize, with a quiet kind of panic, that I still feel it.

I try to shake it off, turning back to the cart, eyes down. Think about something else. Think about the clinic. But Bryan kneels beside Buddy, rubbing at his ears, laughing when the dog immediately licks his hand in return.

“Aw, come on, man.” He groans, wiping his hand on his jeans. “Could you at least

have given me a warning?”

I should ignore it. I should focus on anything but the way his touch is so gentle, so effortlessly warm, like the same boy I once knew. The same boy who had once kissed me on the back porch of my grandmother’s house and promised me the world.

I swallow hard. He’s not that boy anymore. And I’m not that girl. But there’s no denying it, the pull is still there. And it terrifies me.

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I start to take a step back, needing air, needing distance, but then Jen's voice rings out from behind us. "You two are a picture perfect!"

Bryan chuckles, glancing up at her with an easy smirk. "Buddy's the star here," he quips, rubbing the dog's head again.

But me? My throat tightens. Because it's not just Buddy they're talking about.

I force out a laugh, trying to brush it off, but my heart's still hammering as I grab the leash and start toward the checkout.

Bryan catches up, his gaze flicking toward me. "Are you okay?"

I nod too quickly. "Fine. Just... ready to go." He doesn't push, but I can feel his curiosity. The way his eyes linger. Like he knows something shifted.

And maybe, just maybe, he's right.

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I manage to get through the rest of the week without any major discussions with Bryan, both of us wrapped up in our own business world needs. The lamp flickers, casting long shadows across my bedroom walls. It smells like lavender and old paper in here; the quilt bunched around my legs keeping me warm against the cool ocean air drifting through the window. Buddy lets out a soft snore at my feet, twitching in his sleep, his paws kicking like he's chasing something in his dreams.

It does still make me smile that Buddy choses my room for his overnight sleeps. When I tease Bryan about it, he is so nonchalant. He won't give me the satisfaction of even considering looking sad or childishly envious. No, he just tells me he sends him in to protect me.

Right. Sure.

I run a finger over the scattered notes on my bed, clinic budgets, estimates, sponsorship breakdowns all marked with quick, neat scribbles. \$5,000. The number sits heavy in my mind, a constant reminder that no matter how much I try to move forward, some things still have a hold on me.

Sighing, I shove the papers aside and reach for a worn leather-bound book half-buried under the stack. Grandma's journal. The edges are soft from years of handling, the spine loose, the pages yellowed with time.

I don't know why I suddenly feel the need to open it now, but something about today, about Bryan's laughter in the mall, the way his presence feels less like an ache and more like something steady, has me flipping through the pages.

I skim over old entries, weather notes, garden updates, town gossip until one catches my eye. The date punches the air from my lungs. The day I left town.

My hands tighten on the book, my breath catching. The ink is slightly smudged, like she wrote it in a hurry or with shaking hands.

"I see it, clear as the tide coming in, those two are stitched together, no matter how much time and space stretch between them. Emma's leaving and my heart aches, but I know this isn't the end. Bryan's too much a part of her. Maybe time will teach them what I couldn't."

I swallow hard. She knew.

My fingers tremble as I trace the words. She saw it even when I couldn't when I told myself leaving was for the best, when I spent years convincing myself he'd forget, move on. But Bryan hadn't been the only one left behind. She had waited for me to come back. She had hoped. And now...

My mind flashes back to today ... Bryan's easy grin as he teased Buddy, the way he glanced at me like he was memorizing something he hadn't let himself look at in a long time. The way his

And worst of all, the way it felt like home again. I press the journal to my chest, heart racing. Is that what she wanted? For us to find our way back? Something cracks inside me, splintering through the walls I've built since coming home.

Because she's right. He is a part of me. And no matter how much I fight it, I feel it every time I catch his scent of that unmistakeable cedar, every time I catch him watching me like he's trying to understand this pull just as much as I am.

But what if I let myself believe in this and it all falls apart? The debt still lingers, a shadow curling around the edges of my thoughts, keeping me tethered to reality. There's not much left for personal spending. Not much left for me. The clinic needs to come first. My future must come first.

But... what if he's part of it? My phone dings, shattering my thoughts. My stomach lurches as I grab it off the nightstand, pulse hammering in my ears. Another debt text? Another reminder of what's still holding me down?

I fumble with the screen, but it stays dark. My fingers tighten around the phone just as a knock sounds at the door.

“Emma?” Bryan’s voice. Low. Steady. Close.

I freeze; the journal still pressed against me. Do I open the door? I squeeze my eyes shut, willing my heartbeat to slow.

Because I know, if I do, if I let him in even an inch more, there’s no turning back.

Chapter sixteen

Bryan

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

The next day I find myself working at the house again. It's a good thing that I have such a terrific staff at the office, because I know that all the work needs are getting done and that I'd be called for anything serious.

The hammer's steady in my grip, tapping against the last shelf as I fasten it into place. The soft creak of wood settling fills the space, blending with the faint rush of waves outside. Sunlight filters through the window, casting warm stripes across the cushions I just arranged.

I step back, surveying the reading nook. Emma's spot. It used to be her escape, a tiny space tucked into the upstairs hall, nestled between the window and built-in bookshelves. I'd find her here as a kid, curled up with some novel too thick for her small hands, completely lost in whatever world she'd wandered into.

She always wanted it back. And now she has it. The fresh coat of paint brightens the alcove, and the new cushions are inviting. I even dusted the shelves, she'll notice, she notices everything. A smirk tugs at my lips. She's gonna love this. I don't even know why I'm doing this. The sane part of me can't figure out what it is that draws me to her without reservation.

Buddy's paws tap against the floor downstairs, then a car rumbles into the driveway. I shift to the window, glancing down. Emma.

She's alone, stepping out of my truck, arms wrapped around a bag from the supply store.

Something in my chest tightens. I hear her footsteps, light, sure, nearing. My heart



pounds as I move back, resting my hands on my hips just as she rounds the corner.

She stops dead. Her breath catches. Her fingers tighten around the bag. Her eyes shift past me.

“The nook...” she exhales, stepping closer, eyes shining as they sweep over the space. “You finished it.”

She sets the bag down, barely aware of it, drawn in by the transformation. She comes up the steps and reaches out, brushing her fingertips along the wooden shelf, tracing the fresh coat of white paint.

Her awe hits me in the gut. I shrug, forcing nonchalance, even as something deep inside me wants to soak in this moment, wants her to see what this means. “Thought you’d want it back.”

She turns to me, her eyes wide, something soft and unreadable in them. For a second, I swear she sees right through me. Sees the truth I haven’t said out loud.

Then she smiles. And goodness, that smile. Something shifts between us, like the air thickens, pulling us closer before we even realize we’ve moved. She steps in, just a fraction, close enough that I catch the faintest hint of the freshness clinging to her. Her voice is quiet, almost hesitant. “Thank you, Bryan, really.”

We stay staring at each other. My heart beating fast. I don’t even think about it.

I lean in. Her breath hitches, her lips part just slightly an invitation, a hesitation, both at once. I could kiss her. Right now.

The space between us is nothing, barely a breath. My chest tightens, every muscle locked between the pull of just do it and the fear that she’ll step away again. Then she

does.

A quick, sharp inhale, and she pulls back, almost too fast, turning slightly so all I get is the brush of her hair as she tucks it behind her ear. She won't look at me. Not yet. But her cheeks are flushed, her fingers still grazing the shelf like she needs something to hold onto.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to step back, to loosen my hands that suddenly want to fist in frustration. Not into me? No. That's not it.

The way she reacted, the way she wouldn't meet my gaze, the way her pulse fluttered at her throat before she turned away, it's not that she doesn't feel it.

She does. She just doesn't know what to do with it. So, I let it go. For now.

She finally exhales, shifting her weight, then presses a palm to the wooden surface and murmurs, "It's perfect."

Her voice is steady, but when she turns back, just slightly, just enough to catch my eye there's something lingering there. Something she wants to say. Something she's not ready to say. Yet.

I nod, rubbing a hand along my jaw, keeping my tone even. "Good."

She lingers for another second before scooping up her bag and walking away. I don't stop her. I don't have to. Because now I know.

She'll be back.

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The engine hums low as I pull onto a gravel path, tires crunching over loose stones. The lot is empty, grass overgrown, a faded FOR LEASE sign hanging crooked on the fence. It's not much yet. Nate recommended this place, and I can see the reason. It is in the center of the town, just the perfect place for a good clinic.

Emma shifts in the passenger seat, staring through the windshield, hands gripping the edge of her hoodie sleeves. The space is hers to dream on, hers to build. And goodness, does she deserve it. I cut the engine.

She steps out, slow at first, taking it in. "It needs a lot of work," she murmurs, pacing a few feet ahead, eyes scanning like she's piecing it together. Then, under her breath, "But it's really good..."

I shove my hands into my pockets, watching her. "I think so too."

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We go around the building. There isn't much to see. I'll have to discuss with Nate on bringing it back to life. We return to my car. She stops. Turns. Her lips part slightly, and for a second, she just looks at me.

Like she's seeing something she wasn't expecting. Her fingers flex at her sides, and I swear she's about to say something but then Buddy jumps out from the back seat, leash tangling around my legs, and the moment shatters.

I clear my throat. "C'mon. Let's get ice cream at Warren's."

The bell above the door jingles as we step inside. The place is the same as it's always been ... sticky booths, posters of sundaes that haven't been updated in a decade, a line of kids smudging the glass display with tiny fingers.

Emma grins. "Mint chip, right?" I smirk. "Rocky road?"

She nods like she never left. Like we never lost those years between us. Minutes later, we're back outside, ice cream cones in hand, Buddy tugging at his leash, sniffing for dropped crumbs.

Emma takes a slow lick of her mint chip, then flicks her gaze up at me, all innocent mischief. "You have a little something..."

Before I can react, she smears a stripe of green across my nose. I freeze.

Her giggle light, breathless wraps around me like a hook, sharp and sudden, tugging me under.

I wipe my nose, giving her a look. “Oh, you’re gonna regret that.” She shrieks as I reach for her, stepping back too fast. “Bryan, don’t...”

Too late. I swipe a streak of chocolate against her cheek, and she gasps, touching her face in horror. “You’re dead.” She lunges, laughing, and we’re twelve again, sixteen again, seventeen and stealing time. Buddy barks, jumping between us, his tail wagging like this is the best day of his life.

And maybe it is. For me too. Emma’s got ice cream dripping down her wrist, her cheeks flushed pink from the chase. Her smirk is pure trouble as she lifts her cone threateningly. “One more step, and this is going in your hair.”

I hold up my hands, feigning surrender. “Truce?” She squints. “Hmm. Say I’m the best.”

I step closer, dropping my voice low. “You already know you are.”

Her breath catches, her fingers flex around her cone, and the moment shifts, softens. Her gaze flickers down to my mouth, just for a second.

It’s instinct to close the space, to lean in. She turns, bolting for the bench. “Race you!”

I blink, thrown off for half a second before I take off after her, chasing the sound of her laughter.

She trips. I catch her. My arm wraps around her waist, steadying her before she can fall, her body pressed against mine, her breath warm against my collarbone.

Neither of us moves. The world around us slows, just us, just this. Her hands grip my arms lightly, fingers curling like she wants to hold on but doesn’t know if she should.

I don't let go. Not yet. She tilts her head back, eyes flicking up, and I swear she's daring me to just do it. To just close the space.

But as I move, she straightens, adjusting her hoodie, pretending her pulse isn't hammering as hard as mine. "You okay?" she asks, breathless.

I exhale, running a hand through my hair. No. Not even close. But I smirk, because that's what we do. "You're a menace."

She laughs softly, and I'd chase that sound to the end of the earth. We sit down, ice cream melting between us, breath still uneven from running, from almost ... I glance at her, and she's looking at me like she's seeing something she wasn't ready to see.

Maybe it's the same thing I'm finally ready to say. As her phone buzzes, she stiffens, blinking down at the screen.

She mutters, "One sec," stepping just far enough away that I can't hear.

My stomach tightens. I watch her, the way she tucks her hair behind her ear, the way her brows furrow, the way her lips press together in something between worry and resolve.

I shouldn't care. I do. I force myself to focus on Buddy, scratching behind his ears, but my mind is already racing.

Who is she talking to? And why does it feel like she's slipping away again?

She turns back, her smile softer, controlled, guarded again. "All good."

She sits, taking another bite of her ice cream like nothing happened. I nod, slow. But something in me is unsettling.

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I can't keep waiting. Not when I almost lost her once.

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The night air is crisp, the ocean a steady hum beyond the cliffs. I lean against the porch railing, beer bottle in hand, watching the waves crash below. The lantern above swings lazily, casting a dim glow, flickering like the thoughts racing through my head.

Emma.

I scrub a hand down my jaw, exhaling hard. She's everywhere. In the scent of lavender still clinging to my hoodie from the car ride, in the way my pulse kicked up when she smeared ice cream on my nose, in the echo of her laughter, light, unguarded, the kind I haven't heard from her in years. What in blue blazes am I doing?

This was supposed to be nothing. Just three months, a legal technicality, a house we'd both leave behind. But now? Now I'm fixing reading nooks just to see her eyes light up. I'm choosing to spend time with her, looking for excuses to keep her close.

And the worst part? I don't want to stop. I tilt the bottle to my lips, but it's empty. Figures.

Just as I push off the railing, the door creaks behind me. Footsteps are soft, familiar. I don't need to turn to know it's her. "Couldn't sleep?" I ask, my voice rougher than I expect.

Emma steps closer, stopping just a few feet away. She's back in one of those oversized sweatshirts, sleeves covering her hands, hair loose over her shoulders. The sight hits me harder than it should.

"Long day," she murmurs, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Figured some fresh air might help."

I nod, watching her from the corner of my eye as she steps up beside me, resting her arms on the railing. The silence stretches, but it's not uncomfortable. Just... charged.

She exhales slowly, staring at the waves. "The clinic spot felt real today," she says, almost to herself. "Like it's actually happening."

It is happening. And she's making it happen. "You're gonna do it," I tell her, meaning every word. "You'll build that clinic, and it'll be exactly what this town needs."

She glances at me, something soft flashing in her eyes. "You really think so?"

I huff out a quiet laugh. "Emma, I've never seen you fight for something harder. You're already making it happen."

Her lips curve, but there's something behind her expression. Something hesitant. And I hate that she still doubts herself. That she doesn't see what I see. The wind shifts, and I swear the space between us shrinks.

Too close. Not close enough. I swallow, gripping the railing tighter. The air is thick, heavy with something, but neither of us moves.

After a beat, she sighs. "I should go inside. Big day tomorrow."



I nod, but when she turns, something in me reacts before I can stop it. “Emma.”

She pauses. I don’t know what I was about to say. Maybe stay. Maybe I miss you. Maybe something I can’t take back.

She turns back slightly, waiting. I exhale, shaking my head. “Goodnight.”

A flicker of something unreadable crosses her face, but she nods. “Goodnight, Bryan.”

And just like that, she’s gone, the door clicking softly behind her.

I stay outside long after she’s gone, staring at the waves, pulse pounding, wonder what is holding me back; wondering if I’m just too afraid of how she’ll react. Or maybe this is nothing and I’m imagining these moments mean something.

No, Bryan. This isn’t nothing. It never was.

## Chapter seventeen

Emma

The weight of everything presses against my chest as I sit curled on the porch swing, staring into the horizon. The ocean stretches endless before me, waves rolling and crashing, a steady hum that usually calms me but not tonight.

Not when my phone buzzed an hour ago with yet another message. A polite but firm reminder: of the money I’m supposed to pay. Two weeks. That’s it.

I press my fingers to my temples, exhaling slowly, but the tightness in my chest doesn’t fade. It’s like a clock ticking down, a pressure I can’t shake, even when I

should be happy. The fundraiser was a success, the clinic is finally within reach, and yet...

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A voice breaks my thoughts. “Are you doing okay?”

I jolt, hand flying to my chest. Bryan stands just inside the doorway, arms crossed, his sharp gaze scanning my face. I hadn’t even heard him come in.

I swallow, forcing a smile. “Yeah, fine.”

His brow furrows. He doesn’t believe me. “Emma.” His voice is quiet, steady. He steps onto the porch, closing the distance between us. “You sure?”

“I said I’m fine.” I try to keep my tone light, casual, but it comes out clipped, too sharp.

Something flickers in his eyes. Disappointment? He shifts his weight, and for a second, I think he’s going to push, dig like he always does when he senses I’m not telling the full truth. But he doesn’t. Instead, he nods.

He turns to leave, but then pauses, one hand on the wooden post of the porch. His voice is softer when he speaks again. “Can I ask you something?”

I hesitate. “Sure.”

He exhales, looking out at the ocean for a beat before turning his gaze back to me. “Why did you leave?”

My breath catches. Of all the things he could have asked. I glance down, fingers twisting in my lap, and the familiar ache resurfaces. The memories are sharp, late

nights, my father's empty promises, the weight of bills piling up while he gambled away every last dime. Leaving Ocean Bay wasn't just about escaping debt, it was about escaping humiliation.

"Never mind. I asked," he says as he turns to walk away.

"I had to," I murmur, staring at my hands. He stops midway but doesn't turn to face me.

"My dad... after my mom died, he wasn't the same. He started with drinking, then gambling but I wasn't aware because I was young when mom died. The gambling got worse by the time I was old enough to understand and found out. The debts..." I swallow. My throat tight. "They weren't going away, and it was all crashing down. My dad decided we should leave, and I thought if I left, I could fix it. Alone."

Bryan stays silent, listening, his presence solid beside me. I force myself to meet his gaze. "I didn't want to drag you into it. You had your whole life ahead of you. I thought..." I let out a breath, shaking my head. "I thought leaving would protect you. Leaving would help me get out of the mess my father created. I was humiliated. I was too young to understand how much I would hurt my grandmother, how much I would hurt you."

A muscle in his jaw tics. He rubs the back of his neck, gaze dropping for a second before locking back onto mine. "Oh, Emma." His voice is low, almost pained. "You didn't have to go through that alone."

I don't answer. Because back then, I thought I did.

Bryan exhales sharply, stepping closer, his frustration simmering beneath his controlled tone. "I get it, okay? I do. But I wish you would've trusted me. I could've helped you." He wraps his arms around me in a way that encompasses me in that

long-lost love.

I blink, emotions tangling inside me. "I know," I whisper. "I just... I didn't know how to let you. You were a teenager, too. You had a lot to deal with. Being an orphan at an early age wasn't easy for you, and you had your sister Liz to watch over. I just wanted you to be happy without me creating a mess."

"You should have told me. You were never a mess to me. How couldn't you realize you're the one who made me complete?"

"I'm sorry,"

"It hurts me to think that back then you didn't even think of us. Of what we shared. Didn't our time mean anything to you?"

"It was the best time of my life Bryan, it honestly was."

"Then why? Why did you break my heart by leaving? Why didn't you think of our love?"

My eyes burn with tears hearing the pain in his voice. He sounds broken. And knowing I was the reason caused an ache inside me.

"It was for the best. Trust me you have no idea how deep the debt was. Even now I'm still dealing with it. I came back to town hoping for a fresh start. An opportunity to choose myself, my dreams. I'm sorry I hurt you, and I understand you will never forgive me for that..." But he interrupts.

"Shhhh...I forgave you a long time ago. I should hate you but surprisingly I don't. In fact, I don't want to think of the awful time that you must have gone through. It breaks my heart that I couldn't help."

"Yes, it was a hard time. I worked a bunch of jobs while still trying to finish my education. Grandma helped as much as she could which made all the difference in the world. And the longer I was away, the more humiliated and embarrassed I became, if that makes any sense.

I found out later that my dad realized that leaving town was his only option because of the overwhelming debts he had here. I thought he would change but it got worse, and he got involved with some bad people."

Taking a deep breath, I say words that have been trapped inside of me, and until this moment never spoken aloud. I whisper: "Bryan, I believe the hit and run that killed my father wasn't an accident,"

"What?" he shouts as he leans back to look into my face. "Oh Em, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry you have held such pain inside, and all alone." His arms tighten, and the space between us shifts, the air suddenly charged, heavy with things unspoken. His green eyes soften, flickering over my face like he's seeing me differently now, like he's trying to piece together the girl I was and the woman standing before him.

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A long moment stretches, and then he moves, slowly, testing. His fingers brush my arm, and I shiver at the warmth that spreads through me. Then his lips are on mine.

The world stills.

It's not like before: hurried or hesitant. This is deliberate. Slow. Deep. His fingers skim up my arm, curling at my waist, and I melt against him, letting myself feel everything I've been trying to push away. Our kiss deepens and from my head to my toes I feel the warmth, the love ... the joy returning to my life.

It's terrifying how easy it is to lose myself in him. And then I remember, I can't. I pull back, breathless, my hands still clutching his shirt. "Bryan... is this a mistake?"

His hands linger at my waist, his gaze searching mine. Then, softly, "No. It never was."

I swallow, heart hammering. "Then what is this?"

He exhales, fingers tightening slightly against my back. "I'm tired of pretending. Of fighting this." He shakes his head. "Emma, I don't want to keep pushing you away. And I can't handle you pushing me away anymore. I just want this "us" whatever it is. We'll take it a step at a time. No pressure."

I stare at him, emotions warring inside me. Part of me wants this, to let go, to believe in the possibility of us again. But another part of me is terrified. Because if I let myself fall, I might not recover if he decides to walk away.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. Bryan’s thumb brushes against my side, reassuring, patient. “Then we go slow.” I let out a shaky breath, staring at the man I’ve loved and lost and somehow found again.

And for the first time in a long time... I think I want to take the risk.

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The scent of fresh coffee and something sweet drifts into my room, pulling me from sleep. My mind drifts back to the previous night, a smile spreading on my lips at the thought. I believe we have gotten the closure we both needed.

My eyes flutter open, blinking against the morning light. The house is quiet except for the occasional creak of the floorboards and the faint sound of... pans? I sit up, frowning. That’s not right.

I live with Bryan Kingston: a man whose idea of cooking involves grilled steak and takeout menus. Well, that’s as far as I remember him as a teenager.

I push the covers off, shoving my hair back as I swing my legs over the side of the bed. Maybe I’m still dreaming. Maybe Stella stopped by early and...

A low hum deep, familiar reaches my ears. My stomach dips.

Bryan? I freeze for a second before padding out of my room, curiosity tightening my chest. When I step into the kitchen, I stop dead.

Bryan is at the stove, flipping a pancake with the kind of practiced ease that makes me question every assumption I’ve ever had about him. He’s barefoot, clad in navy-blue sweatpants that hug his frame too well. His sleeves are pushed up, forearms flexing slightly as he moves, a towel slung over his shoulder.



He looks... comfortable. Like he belongs here. The thought unnerves me. The table is already set with a spread of pancakes, eggs, bacon, and fresh fruit that sits in the center, next to two steaming mugs of coffee.

I blink. Hard. “You... cooked?”

Bryan turns at my voice, smirking like he’s been waiting for me to walk in and be stunned into silence.

“Morning, sweetheart.”

I scowl. “Don’t ‘sweetheart’ me. What’s going on?”

He chuckles, turning back to the stove. “Relax. I didn’t poison anything, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I fold my arms, watching him carefully. “Since when do you cook?”

He slides the last pancake onto the plate and finally faces me fully, leaning back against the counter. “Since I had someone who I wanted to cook for.”

My stomach tightens. There it is. That undercurrent in his voice, the thing I keep trying to ignore.

I clear my throat, pushing past the way my pulse just jumped. “And that someone is...?”

His eyes gleam with something unreadable. “Who do you think?”

I look away, heart thudding as I focus on the table instead. I won’t read into this. I can’t.

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I settle into a chair, still half-suspicious, and pick up my fork. “Alright, fine. But if this is some elaborate scheme to make me drop my guard, it’s not working.”

Bryan sits across from me, sipping his coffee like he’s completely at ease, like he hasn’t just sent my heart into a sprint. “You wound me, Em.”

I scoff but take a bite of the pancake. Fluffy. Buttery. Sweet. Holy cow, it’s good.

I chew slowly, conscious of his gaze on me, and then begrudgingly say, “Okay. Not bad.”

Bryan smirks. “I’ll take that as high praise.” We fall into an easy rhythm, eating and talking about things that don’t have to do with what this could mean. And yet, every time our hands brush when we reach for something, or our gazes linger just a second too long, it’s there.

The pull. The reminder that this isn’t just friendship anymore.

I should put the wall back between us. I should remind myself that I’m still unsure about all of this. But as Bryan watches me with that easy smile, as he leans back in his chair, completely at home in a space that once felt too big for just me... well.

I wonder if maybe, just maybe, this is exactly what I need.

Then he leans forward, elbows on the table, eyes locked on mine. “This was just part one.”

I frown. "Part one of what?"

His lips twitch. "You'll find out this evening."

I narrow my eyes at him, skepticism clawing at the edges of my curiosity. "What kind of surprise?" Bryan only grins. "You'll see."

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The first thing I see when we pull up to the marina is the boat. Sleek, white with navy-blue trim, bobbing gently with the rhythm of the tide. The water glistens under the late afternoon sun, waves rolling lazily toward the horizon. Seagulls call in the distance, their cries carried by the salty breeze, and for a second, I just stare.

"What is this?" I ask, turning toward Bryan, my heart already hammering.

He leans against the truck, arms folded, a small, knowing smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. He looks ridiculously good like this, effortless, like he belongs here among the waves and sun-drenched docks.

"You remember back how you used to talk about sailing?" he asks. "How we'd sit on the pier, watching the boats and you'd say..."

"One day, we'll have our own," I finish in a whisper, the memory washing over me like the tide.

Bryan's eyes soften. "I never forgot. As a matter of fact, it inspired me to buy this boat some years back." "You did what?" she shouts.

"Yeah, I know it's stupid. I mean you broke up with me and all, but somehow maybe a part of me was still holding on to you."

A lump forms in my throat, my fingers gripping the edge of my sundress as I glance back at the boat. The idea of this, of him remembering something so small yet so significant does something to me. I shake my head, trying to rein it in. “I don’t know, Bryan. I haven’t...”

He steps closer, the warmth of his body just inches away, his voice low, coaxing. “Trust me.”

Those two words. So simple, yet they hold so much weight. I lift my gaze to his, green eyes steady, waiting.

I should say no. I should keep the wall up. But what am I kidding myself? The sea has always been our place. And right now, looking at him, standing on the dock with the ocean stretched wide behind him, I want to step back into that world.

Before I can change my mind, I nod. Bryan grins, a real one, full and bright. He takes my hand, the warmth of his fingers wrapping around mine, and leads me onto the boat.

The wind picks up as we sail out of the marina, the hum of the motor fading into the sound of waves slapping against the hull. The world slows down out here, the coastline shrinking in the distance, the only company the endless stretch of sky and water.

I breathe it in. The sea air, the sun against my skin, the weight of the past easing just a little.

Bryan stands at the helm, steering with ease, like he’s done this a thousand times before. I watch him, the relaxed grip of his hands, the way the wind ruffles his hair, the golden glow of sunlight brushing his jawline.

He's beautiful. The thought startles me. I turn away, focusing on the waves, but the warmth spreading through my chest lingers.

"You're quiet," Bryan says, his voice breaking through the moment.

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I glance at him, hesitating. “I just... I didn’t expect this.”

He tilts his head. “Didn’t expect what?”

Didn’t expect you to remember. Didn’t expect to feel like this again. I shake my head, offering a small smile instead. “Nothing. It’s just... nice.”

Bryan watches me for a second longer, something unreadable flickering in his eyes, but he doesn’t push. Instead, he motions to the cushioned deck, where a picnic basket sits waiting.

“Come on,” he says. “Figured we could eat before I throw you overboard.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You wouldn’t dare.”

His smirk turns wicked. “Wouldn’t I?”

We settle on the deck, the gentle rocking of the boat a steady rhythm beneath us. The spread is simple, fresh fruit, sandwiches, lemonade but it feels like everything. We eat, talk, fall into something that feels dangerously close to what we used to be.

“I can’t believe you still drink lemonade,” Bryan says, watching as I take a sip. I raise a brow. “What’s wrong with lemonade?”

“Nothing.” He leans back, arms propped behind him, his gaze fixed on me. “It’s just... you haven’t changed as much as I thought you might.”

The words send a flutter through my chest, my fingers tightening around the glass. I glance at him, at the easy way he watches me, like I'm something familiar. Like I never left. "I have changed," I say softly, more to myself than to him.

Bryan's expression shifts, something thoughtful settling into his features. "Maybe. But the parts that matter? They're still here."

His voice wraps around me, and for a moment, I don't know what to do with the warmth spreading through me. So, I do the one thing I know won't let me think too hard.

I stand. Bryan blinks. "What are you...?"

Before he can finish, I kick off my sandals, step onto the edge of the boat ... And jump.

Cold. Bitter cold.

The ocean swallows me, cool and endless, pulling me under before I push myself back up, gasping. Bryan's voice is somewhere above me, a mix of shock and laughter.

I wipe water from my eyes, grinning. "What? You looked like you needed to cool off, so I took the first leap."

His smirk turns sharp. Dangerous. "You're asking for it, Em."

Before I can react, he's peeling off his shirt, stepping to the edge, and ...

Splash. A second later, he surfaces, close. Too close.

Water glistens on his skin, dripping from his hair, rolling down the strong lines of his shoulders. His eyes lock onto mine, and the playful tension shifts, becomes something heavier.

The world narrows. It's just us. The ocean wrapping around us, the quiet between waves, the pulse pounding in my throat. Bryan's gaze dips to my lips, then back up.

I feel myself sway toward him, and his smile is the last thing I see as his mouth closes over mine. Delicious. That's all I can think of. Delicious. As my arms wrap around his neck the only thing that I can imagine at this moment is never having to let go. His hold on me is so much more than physical. I feel like our souls are intertwined, that our hearts are beating as one.

Then a splash right between us makes me shriek. Buddy. Of course. He paddles toward us, tongue lolling, completely oblivious to whatever just happened.

Bryan groans, running a hand through his hair as he glares at the dog. "You have the worst timing, you know that?"

I laugh because what else can I do? As we swim back to the boat and as Bryan helps me up, his hands linger around my waist and that magical smile wraps me in a different kind of warmth.

I know we're not done. Not even close. As the sun begins to set, I feel lighter. Less afraid. Less guarded.

I recognize that Bryan is the most important part of my world. So why fight this?

Chapter eighteen



## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

Bryan

For the first time in years, I feel free. It's an unfamiliar sensation; one I didn't even realize I was missing until now.

The past few days have been good. Not just in the way things sometimes are when life settles into something tolerable, but in the way that Emma makes everything feel different.

Lighter. Brighter. Like I can breathe again.

I lean back in my office chair, the city skyline stretching beyond the glass, but my mind isn't here. It's drifting to the way Emma had laughed when she'd shoved ice cream in my face, the teasing glint in her eyes when she accused me of cheating at Uno, the way she had felt against me in the water, skin warm beneath my touch, eyes wide, lips parting.

I exhale sharply, raking a hand through my hair. I don't know how I got to this point, but I don't want it to end.

The phone in my hand lights up as I press the button, and I barely think before I type out a message.

Bryan:I want to remind a certain someone how I completely dominated that ice cream fight the other night.

Three dots appear. Then...

Emma:Dominated? Bryan, you were a sticky, mint-chocolate mess. I won that war, hands down.

I grin, tapping out my response.

Bryan:Debatable. Maybe we need a rematch.

Emma:You wish. Anyway, I have an actual life outside of embarrassing you.

Bryan:I'm not buying it. Where are you, sweet Miss Em?

Emma:If you must know, I'm at the fair. Stella dragged me out and then bailed on me. But I must admit, it's kind of nice just walking around.

I pause, heart ticking up. The annual Ocean Bay fair.

The same one we went to when I was seventeen, where I tried to win her that massive stuffed bear and ended up with nothing but a bruised ego and a plastic keychain.

She'd teased me for weeks.

Bryan:You're at the fair? Without me?

Emma:Some of us enjoy life, Mr. Workaholic.

I smirk. Knowing just how to make my day interesting. I push back from my desk, grab my phone, and head for the door. I think I'll leave my car here so I can ride with Em however she is getting home.

By the time my Uber pulls into the lot, the fairground is alive with twinkling lights and laughter. The scent of kettle corn and fried dough waifs through the air, mingling

with the distant echoes of carnival music and the hum of the Ferris wheel turning against the night sky.

I scan the crowd, searching. Then, I see her.

Emma stands by a ring toss booth, her head thrown back in laughter, the glow of carnival lights dancing in her eyes. She's in a simple sundress, hair loose around her shoulders, and I swear the air shifts and pulls me right toward her. Like it always does.

I move toward her, slipping through the crowd, and just as she turns, I step behind her, close enough that she feels me.

“Look who I found,” I murmur near her ear.

Emma jumps, spinning around, eyes wide. “Bryan! You're...”

“Here?” I smirk.

Her expression shifts from shock to amusement. “You seriously drove all the way here?”

I shrug. “Couldn't have you having all the fun without me.”

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She narrows her eyes. “You mean, you couldn’t stand the idea of me winning all the carnival games without you.”

Busted.

I glance at the stuffed panda in her arms and nod toward the game booth behind her. “Did you win that?” Emma scoffs. “Excuse you, I won it fair and square.”

“Hmm.” I glance at the rows of prizes behind the counter, then back at her. “Still not the biggest one, though.”

Her lips curve. “Are you really about to embarrass yourself again?”

I smirk. “Watch and learn.”

I hand the booth attendant a few bills and line up my first shot. Emma watches, arms crossed around her panda, amusement clear in her expression.

“This is going to be tragic,” she whispers.

I focus, roll the ball in my hands, and let it fly. It misses.

Emma bursts out laughing. I exhale sharply, shake my head, and try again.

Another miss. Now she’s grinning wide. “Okay, okay, I have to record this.”

I shoot her a flat look. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

She tilts her head. “You did say you wanted a rematch.”

Challenge flares in my chest. Fine.

“If I win,” I say, picking up the next ball, “you have to go on the Ferris wheel with me.”

Emma blinks. “That’s your grand wager?”

I nod. “Unless you’re scared.”

She rolls her eyes, but the pink in her cheeks tells a different story. “You’re not going to win,” she mutters.

I smirk. “We’ll see.”

I aim. Throw. The ball lands perfectly. The bell rings loud. Emma stares.

I turn to the attendant. “Biggest prize.”

He nods, reaching up for the massive stuffed lion that hangs near the top.

When I turn back, Emma’s still staring. “That... was luck,” she says.

I smirk. “Guess you’re riding with me.”

The seat rocks slightly as the Ferris wheel starts to ascend, taking us higher, the town shrinking below.

Emma sits beside me, her “new” stuffed lion wedged between us, and for a moment, we just watch the lights twinkle below.

Then she turns, eyes searching. “Why did you come here tonight?” The question isn’t light.

I glance at her, at the way the glow of the fair reflects in her eyes, and my chest tightens.

Because I missed you. Because I can’t stay away. Because when I’m not around you, I feel like something’s missing.

Instead, I say, “You dared me.”

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Emma lets out a breathy laugh. “That’s all it takes?”

I shake my head, slow. “No. But it was a good excuse.”

The wheel reaches its peak, the world stretching wide beneath us. Emma looks down, then back at me. “I forgot how beautiful this is.”

I don’t take my eyes off her. “Yeah,” I say, voice low. “It is.”

She catches it. The shift. The pull. And when I reach for her hand, threading my fingers through hers, she doesn’t let go.

For a moment, neither of us speak. The world is quiet, the only sound our breathing, the distant hum of the fair below.

Then she turns, eyes soft, uncertain, searching. I lean in. Slow, again giving her the chance to pull back.

She doesn’t. The kiss is soft, hesitant at first. Then warmer, fuller like the first drop of rain after a drought.

When we pull apart, her eyes search mine. She whispers, “Bryan... what are we doing?” I tighten my grip on her hand. “Enjoying the moment.”

She exhales, nods. And as the Ferris wheel begins its descent, I know I don’t ever want to let her go again.

The night air is crisp, carrying the scent of fried dough and sea salt as we walk away from the fair, our fingers loosely tangled. Emma's skin is warm against mine, her laughter still echoing from the last ride we took. I don't want this night to end.

She nudges me with her shoulder, tilting her head up at me. "You're smiling a lot tonight," she muses, her eyes teasing.

I smirk. "Blame it on the Ferris wheel. Or the fact that I just proved I'm the reigning champion."

She scoffs. "You cheated."

I tug her closer as we walk. "And yet, you still have that stuffed lion in your arms while I carry this measly little panda."

Her arms curl around the plush toy, and a small, almost shy smile tugs at her lips. She's so beautiful when she does that. That soft kind of smile, the one she used to give me when we were teens and tangled in each other's world. The one I've caught glimpses of again these past few weeks and I'll do anything to keep it on her face.

The street is quieter now, most of the fairgoers heading home. We pass the warm glow of a small shop window and something catches my eye. The old gift shop.

I slow, pulling her toward it. "Let's go in." Emma hesitates. "Bryan..."

I squeeze her hand. "Come on. I haven't been in here in years."

She exhales, shaking her head but letting me lead her in. The door chimes, and immediately the familiar scent of aged wood and vanilla candles greets us. Shelves line the walls, stocked with everything from seashell jewelry to hand-carved trinkets.



An elderly woman looks up from behind the counter. “Well, look who the tide washed in.”

Emma grins. “Hi, Mrs. Dawson.” Mrs. Dawson beams, giving me a once-over. “Bryan Kingston, I never thought I’d see you in here again. And with Emma Greene, no less.” She winks. “Feels like the good old days.”

Emma’s cheeks pinken, but I just smirk. “We’re reliving our youth.”

“About time,” Mrs. Dawson muses, turning back to her book.

I glance around, my gaze landing on a small display of seashell pendants. I pick up a delicate silver chain with a blue sea glass pendant, holding it up. “This reminds me of you.”

Emma’s eyes soften. “Because?” I step closer, tilting my head as I brush a strand of hair behind her ear. “You always used to collect sea glass. You said they were pieces of the ocean’s heart.”

Surprise flickers in her gaze. “You remember that?”

I chuckle, fingering the pendant. Of course, I do.

Mrs. Dawson clears her throat from behind the counter. “Young man, are you buying that for the lady, or are you going to stand there staring at her all night?”

Emma huffs a laugh, shaking her head. “You don’t have to ...” I ignore her, pulling out my wallet. “I want to.”

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She watches as I pay, her gaze unreadable, but there's something in her eyes that makes my chest tighten. When I clasp the necklace around her neck, my fingers graze the back of her neck, and she shivers.

She feels it, too. She swallows, brushing her fingers over the pendant. "Thank you."

I take her hand again, leading her back out onto the street. "Come on. Are you still hungry?"

She exhales a soft laugh. "Depends. Where are we going?"

When I tell her it's the best seafood spot in town, she arches a brow. "That's a bold claim."

"Trust me."

We walk hand in hand toward The Wharf, a small seafood shack perched on the edge of the bay. The scent of grilled shrimp and butter fills the air as we step onto the deck, the water stretching endlessly before us. Lanterns flicker, and a few locals wave as we settle into a table near the railing.

Emma leans forward, resting her chin on her hand. "I admit, this place is charming. It's been redecorated since the "old" days."

"Told you," I tease, flagging down a waiter. "Two orders of grilled shrimp tacos, extra lime."

Emma grins. “You remember my order.”

I smirk, sipping my beer. “I remember everything.”

The breeze lifts her hair, and in the golden glow of the lanterns, she looks breathtaking. As we eat, she watches the waves, her voice softer when she speaks. “The past few weeks...” She pauses, swirling her drink with her straw. “They’ve been some of the best of my life.”

Something warm and fierce flares in my chest. “Yeah?”

She nods, then hesitates, biting her lip. “The other best time of my life was before I left town.”

The words hit me like a wave. I set my fork down, studying her. “Emma...”

She shakes her head, looking down at her plate. “I guess I just ... I don’t know. I wasn’t sure if it was okay to say that out loud.”

I reach across the table, my fingers brushing over hers. “It’s more than okay to say it.”

She looks up, and for a moment, we’re seventeen again. Just a boy and a girl who never stopped belonging to each other. The moment stretches, deepens. The hum of the ocean, the glow of the lanterns ... it’s just background noise to the pull between us.

I squeeze her hand, voice rough. “For what it’s worth, it was the best time of my life, too.”

She exhales shakily, nodding. The waiter interrupts, dropping the check, and we both

lean back, breaking the spell. But the tension lingers, thick and undeniable.

As we leave, Emma fingers the pendant around her neck, her steps a little lighter. She doesn't say anything, but she doesn't have to. Tonight was a memory, a moment.

And maybe, just maybe, it's the start of something neither of us can ignore anymore.

## Chapter nineteen

Emma

The sound of the waves is a soothing, familiar rhythm, a melody that has played in the background of my life for as long as I can remember. The sand is cool beneath my bare feet as I walk along the shore, my heart light, my chest warm. Bryan is ahead of me, his strong frame silhouetted against the evening sky, the last hints of the sun painting the horizon in hues of orange and deep blue.

The past few days really have been some of the best of my life. I meant it when I told him that. There's no pretending anymore. I'm falling in love with Bryan Kingston all over again.

I watch as he stretches his arms above his head, his toned body catching the glow of the fading sunlight. He's unfairly handsome. The swim trunks sit low on his hips, his broad chest on full display, tanned from the hours we've spent outside working on the house together.

And it's dangerous how easy it is for me to admire him. Bryan catches me staring and smirks. "Like what you see?"

I roll my eyes, pretending I'm unaffected. "I was just thinking how slow you are. Are we swimming or not?"

He arches a brow, tilting his head. “Oh, it’s like that?”

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I grin and take off running toward the water, the cool waves licking at my ankles before I fully dive in. The rush of saltwater engulfs me, refreshing and exhilarating. When I come up for air, Bryan is right beside me, shaking water from his hair.

He splashes me, and I gasp. “Oh, you did not just do that.”

He grins, his eyes gleaming. “What are you gonna do about it?”

Challenge accepted. I splash him back, and soon we’re caught in a playful war, laughing between the waves as we chase, splash, and tease each other. I haven’t felt this free in years. It’s like the girl I used to be, the one who once belonged to the boy in front of me.

Bryan lunges, grabbing me around the waist, his fingers digging into my sides as he tickles me mercilessly. I shriek, trying to squirm away, but he’s strong, holding me easily, his laughter mixing with mine.

“Say that you surrender,” he taunts.

“Never!” I gasp between giggles.

He grins wickedly. “Your choice.” And with that, he spins me, pulling me under with him.

The water rushes around us, and for a moment, everything is quiet except for the heartbeat in my ears. When we surface, I’m pressed against him, his arms still around me, his skin warm despite the coolness of the water.

And suddenly, the playful moment shifts into something else. His gaze locks on mine, his green eyes darkening. I can feel the heat radiating off him, the tension thick between us.

I swallow hard. “We should probably get out now,” I murmur, my voice unsteady.

Bryan’s eyes linger on my lips before he finally nods, releasing me. “Yeah. Bonfire time.”

By the time the fire is crackling, the ocean breeze is cooler, making me grateful for the oversized hoodie I threw on after drying off. Bryan crouches near the fire, his strong hands stacking the last few logs, making sure the flames stay steady.

I sit cross-legged on a blanket, pulling out the marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate.

“I see you came well prepared,” he muses, plopping down beside me.

“I take my s’mores seriously,” I say, unwrapping the chocolate. “And besides, this was always your favorite part, remember?”

Bryan leans back on his elbows, tilting his head toward the sky. “I remember everything, Em.”

My stomach flips at his words. We fall into a comfortable silence, the only sound the crackling fire and the rhythmic waves against the shore. The stars are scattered across the sky like diamonds, twinkling just as brightly as I remember from when we were kids.

“I forgot how beautiful this was,” I murmur, staring up at the night sky.

Bryan looks over at me. “You used to love stargazing ... used to say they were tiny holes in the universe letting heaven shine through.”

I smile softly, warmth spreading in my chest. “You remember that?” He shifts closer, his voice lower now. “Of course.”

I turn to him, but he’s already looking at me, his gaze intense, his expression unreadable.

“You always loved watching the stars, Bryan,” I say quietly. “Why?”

He exhales, rubbing the back of his neck. “Because they remind me of you.”

My breath catches.

“I mean it,” he says, his voice raw. “Every time I looked up, I thought of you.”

The weight of his words settles deep in my chest, and before I can stop myself, I reach up, cupping his face, my thumb tracing his jaw. And there’s the pull that neither of us can fight anymore.

And then his lips are on mine. The kiss is slow, deliberate, consuming. His hand slides up, tangling in my hair, tilting my head so he can deepen it. I sigh against his mouth, surrendering to the warmth of him, the way his fingers skim the curve of my spine, leaving a trail of heat.

He kisses me like he’s been waiting for this forever, craving it. And I kiss him back the same way.

I don’t know how long we stay like this, lost in the firelight, in each other. When we finally pull apart, his forehead rests against mine, his breath warm, uneven.



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“Emma,” he murmurs. I swallow hard, my heart racing. I’m in love with him. All over again. And that terrifies me.

I pull back slightly, searching his face. “This... this isn’t just the moment, right?”

His eyes darken, his grip on me tightening slightly. “None of them were just moments, Em.”

My chest constricts. “Bryan, can this ...”

He shakes his head, brushing a strand of damp hair behind my ear. “No more running,” he murmurs. “No more overthinking. Just us.”

I hesitate. Not because I don’t want this, but because I want it too much. His lips press into a small smile, his thumb grazing my cheek. “Let’s just take it a day at a time.”

And somehow, that’s enough. I exhale, letting my body relax into his. He wraps an arm around me, pulling me against his chest, and we sit like that, watching the fire burn low, the ocean a steady heartbeat in the background.

Falling for Bryan Kingston all over again might be the scariest thing I’ve ever done. But as I sit here, wrapped in his arms, it doesn’t feel like a mistake.

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The past few days have been nothing short of bliss. It’s the kind of happiness that

seeps into my bones, the kind I never thought I'd feel again. Between working tirelessly on the clinic and spending time with Bryan, my life has taken on a new rhythm one filled with warmth, with laughter, with moments that feel stolen from a dream.

And now, as I sit in the passenger seat of Bryan's truck, watching him drive with one hand on the wheel and the other resting casually on his thigh, I can't help but smile at him.

Bryan notices. Of course, he does. He smirks, glancing at me before focusing back on the road. "You're staring, Em."

I roll my eyes, crossing my arms. "Am not."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Liar. You totally were."

I bite my lip, trying and failing not to grin. Because he's right. I was staring.

Bryan Kingston is ridiculously handsome. The way his eyes glint in the afternoon sun, the way his muscles flex subtly whenever he shifts gears, the ease with which he laughs and teases me. It's dangerous how effortlessly he pulls me in.

I exhale, shaking my head. "Fine, maybe I was."

He raises a brow. "Oh? And why is that?"

I hesitate, then say, completely honest for once, "Because I'm grateful."

His expression softens. "For what?"

I look at him, really look at him, and let the words spill out. "For everything," I say,

voice steady. “For making me feel happy again. For supporting my dreams. For just... being here.”

Bryan’s fingers tighten around the steering wheel briefly before he reaches over, grabbing my hand in his. A jolt of warmth shoots up my arm, my pulse quickening at the contact.

“You deserve that,” he murmurs. “And more.”

My chest tightens, and I grip his hand a little firmer, letting myself savor the moment, the sincerity in his words.

Outside, the sun dips lower, painting the sky in streaks of gold and pink. The radio hums in the background, one of our favorite country songs playing softly. When the chorus comes, we both start singing, completely off-tune, laughing between the lyrics.

This is what happiness feels like. For the first time in a long time, I feel weightless. I feel alive.

As we drive further up the winding road, something seems familiar. Nostalgic.

The turns, the curves, it all clicks into place. I know exactly where we’re going. My heart clenches. The cliffside viewpoint.

It’s the place we always went to as teenagers whenever we wanted to be alone. Where we had our first kiss.

The truck slows as Bryan pulls up to the small dirt lot near the edge. The ocean stretches endlessly before us, waves crashing against the rocky cliffs far below. The view is just as breathtaking as I remember if not more.

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*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:13 am*

I step out, inhaling deeply. Salty air, crisp and cool, fills my lungs. The sky is painted in watercolor hues, blending into the horizon like a masterpiece.

Bryan rounds the truck, stopping beside me. I glance at him, my throat tightening at the quiet intensity in his gaze. I swallow, blinking back the sudden sting of tears. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper.

Bryan wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his warmth. “It is.”

I don’t know if he’s talking about the view or something else. Maybe us.

We stand there for a long moment, just breathing it in. As I take in the endless expanse of blue, the town below, the winding roads that led us here, I realize something. He’s been coming here without me.

I turn to him. “You’ve been enjoying this view all alone since I left.” Bryan’s jaw tightens slightly, his thumb brushing absentmindedly over my shoulder. “Not really.”

I frown, looking up at him. “What do you mean?”

He exhales, looking out toward the horizon. “I only came here after you left because I hoped you’d show up, not to enjoy the view.” The confession knocks the air from my lungs.

I stare at him, my heart aching at the thought of him sitting here alone, waiting. I whisper, “Bryan...”

He shakes his head, offering me a small, sad smile. “It’s in the past.” But it doesn’t feel like the past. Not when the weight of it still lingers in his eyes.

“I am so sorry,” I murmur. Because I am. Because he had waited for something that never came.

His fingers tighten slightly on my shoulder, a quiet reassurance. “You don’t have to be.”

Maybe not. But I still am. We climb to the highest point, just like we used to, sitting on the large flat rock where the view is most panoramic. Everything looks so small from up here. The entire town stretches below us, the twinkling lights of shops flickering on as dusk settles in.

Bryan pulls out his phone. “We should take a picture.”

I smirk. “A picture? Since when do you care about documenting things?”

His lips twitch. “Since now.”

I roll my eyes but lean into him anyway, his arm wrapping around my waist as he snaps a photo. I glance at the screen when he shows me. The sunset glows behind us, his face is turned slightly toward mine, as if he’s looking at me instead of the camera.

My chest clenches. I suddenly don’t want this night to end. Ever. We sit there, watching the town below, the ocean stretching infinitely, the sky darkening above us. Bryan presses a soft kiss to my temple, his lips lingering. My eyes flutter shut.

This man. This moment. It feels too perfect.

My fingers grip the hem of my sweater, my thoughts running wild. I could get used to

this. To him. The realization is both exhilarating and terrifying.

And when Bryan tightens his hold on me, exhaling like he doesn't want to leave either, I know we're thinking the same thing.

## Chapter twenty

Bryan

The ball curves too far right. I mutter a curse under my breath, tightening my grip on the club as I watch my putt roll off target, landing nowhere near where I need it to be.

"That's a darned shame," Liam chuckles, leaning on his club. "Your game's slipping, man."

"More like his focus," Nate smirks, tipping back the last of his sports drink. "He's lost in Emma-land."

Liam grins. "Yeah, you've been off all day, Kingston. What, you leave your brain at home with your girl?"

I roll my eyes, but there's no real heat behind it. "She's not my girl."

As much as I'm enjoying the moment with Emma, there is still a part of me that is scared. I'm scared because I know if she decides we aren't worth it or if she just leaves, I might not recover. I might not be able to pick myself up like I did before. So, the best thing is to hold back. Even though my heart doesn't seem to agree.

Nate snorts. "Sure, buddy. Tell that to your pathetic excuse of a putt."

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They're messing with me, but they're not wrong. Emma is in my head. She's been in my head for weeks now.

I take a deep breath, trying to clear my thoughts as I step back from the green. The salty breeze from the ocean carries over the fairway, rustling through the neatly trimmed grass, but it does nothing to ease the tension coiling in my chest.

Ever since her confession about the debts, about why she left all those years ago, I haven't been able to shake it. The thought of her bearing that weight alone, struggling in silence, makes me feel something I don't want to name. It's a mix of frustration and regret.

She should have told me. But what gets me most? I should have seen it before she ever left. I grip my club tighter.

"Man, you're really gone, huh?" Nate nudges me with his elbow. "I can see it. It's over for you. You're done fighting this."

I exhale through my nose, rubbing the back of my neck. What's the point in denying it? He's right. I am done fighting it.

My mind flashes back to that night, when she finally told me the truth. The way she looked at me, eyes filled with hesitation, vulnerability, regret. The way it hit me like a freight train, realizing how much pain she'd carried alone.

And then, the kisses. The way she feels in my arms. The way she trembles against me, like she isn't sure if she should let herself believe in us again.

"Yeah," I mutter, running a hand over my jaw. "I'm done fighting it. I still like her,"

Liam whistles low. "Well now. He finally admits it."

Nate grins. "Took you long enough. Thought you'd keep playing the broody, emotionally constipated billionaire act forever."

"Shut up," I grumble, shaking my head. "I still don't know where this is going. So, I'll still say there is nothing."

Nate shrugs, lining up his next shot. "Doesn't matter. She's in your head, and you're in hers. That's enough to start."

His words hit harder than I expect. Start. Can we? Can we actually start again?

I glance at my phone, tempted to send her a message, just to check in. Just to hear from her. To see if she's thinking about me as much as I'm thinking about her.

Before I can, Nate speaks up again. "So, about the clinic, how's that going?"

That snaps me out of my thoughts. "She likes the place you recommended."

"Yeah?" Nate lines up his shot, then pauses. "If she wants any input on renovations, let me know. I'll help out."

Liam nods. "Same. If she needs anything, I got her."

That hits differently. Emma doesn't have to do this alone anymore. Not this time. I nod, pocketing my ball. "I'll tell her."

My mind drifts back to her, there is one more thing I still need to do.



"Also, Liam I need a favor. Can we talk about it once we're done with the game?"

We move onto the next hole, but my mind isn't on the game anymore. It's on her. On us.

The past few weeks with Emma have been some of the best of my life. And suddenly, the idea of rebuilding what we had not just the house, not just the clinic, but us? It doesn't seem impossible anymore.

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The wrench slips in my sweaty grip. I huff out a breath, adjusting my stance as I tighten the last bolt on the swing's frame. The metal creaks slightly before settling into place, sturdy, polished, perfect.

I step back, wiping my forehead with the back of my hand, heart pounding harder than it should. For her.

The thought settles deep in my chest, heavier than expected but right. This isn't just a restoration project. This swing, it's us. A piece of the past I'm not willing to let fade.

I run my fingers over the wood, memories creeping in. Emma at fifteen, hair windblown as she laughed, feet kicking off the ground. I used to push her higher, teasing that one day she'd launch into the sky.

"You'll always catch me," she'd said once, grinning at me like I was her whole world. I squeeze my eyes shut for a second.

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I let her go once. But not again. The garden's thriving now, roses in bloom, pathways cleared, everything rebuilt just like the house. Just like her trust. And now, this.

Buddy sniffs around, his tail wagging as he barks toward the house. My cue that Emma will be back soon. I scrub a hand over my jaw, inhaling deep. This is more than just a swing. She'll know what it means, what I mean.

I check my watch. Dinner. I've been planning it all day. Her favorite, lemon-garlic shrimp with creamy pasta, fresh sourdough on the side, and a bottle of white wine. I don't cook often but tonight needs to be special.

And not just dinner. A movie night. Here.

I head to the storage shed, pulling out the old projector and a white sheet. We used to do this all the time as teenagers, sneaking out late to watch films under the stars. The setup isn't hard, a string of fairy lights from the porch, a few blankets, a low table for the food.

By the time the sun dips lower, everything's in place. Soft glow from the lights, the swing perfectly framed, our favorite movie cued up on the screen. All that's left now is her.

I hear her car pulling up, followed by the telltale sound of Buddy's paws on the front steps. My heart kicks up. Here we go.

She calls for me, her voice drifting through the house, and I call back, "Backyard!"

Seconds later, Buddy barrels toward me first, tail wagging furiously as he goes straight for the bowl of food I set out for him. Then Emma steps through the back door and everything stops.

Her eyes widen as she takes in the swing first, then the candlelit dinner, the soft glow of the projector. She's stunned, lips parting slightly, eyes darting between me and everything I set up.

"You did all of this?" she breathes. I shrug, trying to keep it casual, but my pulse is hammering. "Thought you deserved a night off."

She takes slow steps forward, fingers grazing the swing. "You fixed it?"

"Our spot, right?"

Her fingers tighten around the chains, and when she looks up at me, her eyes are soft, searching. There's something unreadable there, something I wish I could decode. Then she does something that makes my chest ache. She smiles.

A real smile, one that reaches her eyes, one that reminds me of before.

She whispers my name, and before I can think twice, I reach for her, pulling her into a hug.

She tenses for half a second, then melts against me, her arms looping around my back, her face pressing into my chest. My arms tighten, my fingers pressing into the small of her back, holding her there. Oh yes, she fits. She fits perfectly.

I can feel her heartbeat against mine, her fragrance wrapping around me, her breath feathering against my skin. It's the kind of hug that says more than words ever could.

I'm here. I see you. I feel this too.

When she finally pulls back, it's slow, reluctant, even. Her fingers linger on my shirt before she steps away. "This means a lot," she murmurs.

I swallow hard. "I meant it to."

For a moment, she just looks at me, eyes darting across my face like she's searching for something, for proof this is real.

I don't push. Instead, I gesture to the table. "Sit. Let's eat before the movie starts."

Her lips twitch at that, a ghost of amusement flickering in her gaze. "A whole movie night too?"

I grin. "Go big or go home, right?"

She laughs, light, soft, beautiful. Then she takes a seat, and I follow. We eat, and it's easy.

She teases me for going all out. I tease her for taking tiny sips of her wine like she's trying to make it last forever. Buddy lays between us, quiet for once, only perking up when Emma sneaks him a bite of shrimp.

Then the movie starts, and somewhere between the opening credits and the first act, she leans against me. I freeze.

Not because I don't want it, but because I want it so much it terrifies me. She shifts slightly, like she's testing the weight of it, the feel of being this close to me. My arm is resting along the back of the swing, and after a few beats, I let my fingers drift just barely brushing her shoulder.

She doesn't pull away. Instead, she relaxes, her breath slowing, her warmth seeping into me. Minutes pass, and all I can focus on is her.

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The way her lips part slightly as she watches the screen, the way her fingers absently stroke Buddy's fur, the way she trusts me enough to lean into me like this. This is real.

And I don't want it to end. But I also don't want to ruin it by saying the wrong thing. So, I do nothing but sit there, memorizing this moment.

By the time the movie ends, she's quiet, tracing circles on Buddy's back, her gaze distant. I don't know what she's thinking, but I do know she's not ready to say it yet.

That's okay. Because I'll wait. For her. For us. For whatever this is turning into.

### Chapter twenty-one

Emma

The rhythmic scrape of sandpaper against wood fills the quiet, the repetitive motion grounding me. I push forward, smoothing out the surface of Grandma's old coffee table, the one she always wanted to refinish but never got the chance to. The scent of sawdust and salt lingers in the air, mixing with the fresh paint fumes from the bookshelves Bryan finished last night.

The house is almost done. It's strange. The thing that once felt like a burden, this unfinished place, these renovations now feel like a homecoming. A way to close the past and step into something new. Or maybe, step into something familiar.

I exhale, forcing the thought aside just as Stella strides in, a clipboard in hand and her

usual no-nonsense energy crackling around her.

"Okay, so for the clinic..." she begins, scanning her notes. "We need to finalize the shelving and decide if we're going custom or ordering pre-built. Also, the exam table situation, do we go adjustable or basic?"

I nod, wiping my forehead with the back of my wrist. "Adjustable would be better in the long run. Might as well..."

The words vanish from my lips as Bryan walks through. He barely does anything, just passes through the open archway, toolbelt slung low on his hips, his white T-shirt slightly damp from whatever he's been working on outside.

He nods in our direction, absently adjusting a strap on his belt as he heads toward the kitchen. I can't stop staring. The way his jeans fit just right, how his forearms flex as he tugs at the strap, the easy, confident way he moves like he belongs here like he's always belonged here.

My heart gives an embarrassing little skip. I should look away. I should focus on Stella's list, the clinic, the renovations. I don't. I track him until he disappears, my stomach twisting in ways I don't want to acknowledge.

"Busted."

I blink, snapping out of my daze, and whip my gaze back to Stella, who's grinning.

"What?" I ask, too quickly.

Her smirk deepens. "Caught you staring."

I scoff, heat crawling up my neck. "I was zoning out."

Stella folds her arms, still grinning like she just won something. “Oh sure. Zoning out, directly at Bryan. Who, by the way, is ridiculously good-looking and completely obsessed with you.”

I grip the sandpaper too tight. “He’s not...”

“Oh, he is. And more importantly...” She tilts her head, eyes gleaming with mischief. “You’re into him. Again.”

I shake my head, returning my focus to the table, sanding furiously. “I am not.”

“Emma.” Stella’s voice turns knowing, softer. “You can lie to yourself all you want, but I see it. And he does too.”

I clench my jaw, my hands tightening around the sander as I work faster, more forceful than necessary. Because she’s right. I feel it.

This past month has been... effortless. Bryan is everywhere, helping with the house, with the clinic, pulling me into stolen moments that make my heart stumble. The boat, the fair, the cliffside, the swing, each memory layers over the past like a patch sewn into something worn and loved.

But love? I don’t know if I can name it that yet. I don’t know if I’m ready. Because in just a few weeks, this ends.

The renovations will be done. The three-month agreement will be over. I’ll have my clinic, my future, my independence. And Bryan? He was never part of the plan.

"Emma." Stella nudges my foot with hers, voice softer now. "What are you so afraid of?"



I stop sanding. My fingers loosen around the paper, my pulse loud. The answer presses against my ribs, a whisper I don't want to admit. Because if I let myself love him again... and he's the one who leaves this time... I won't recover.

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I clear my throat, forcing a lightness into my voice that I don't feel. "I'm just focused on the clinic right now. That's all."

Stella sighs, unconvinced but merciful enough to let it drop. "Fine. Stay in denial. But when he kisses you again and you don't pull away? Don't say I didn't tell you so."

She winks, then turns back to the clipboard, talking about shelving options like she didn't just crack me wide open.

I nod along, but my mind is elsewhere on Bryan's voice drifting from the kitchen, on the way my heart kicked when he looked at me, on the way Stella's words cling like salt to my skin.

She's right. I am falling for him again. And I don't know what to do about it.

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The living room glows golden with the fading afternoon sun, stretching long, warm streaks across the wooden floor. Buddy thumps his tail lazily against the couch, completely unbothered by the world, and for a moment, everything is still. Peaceful.

And then Bryan walks in, a mischievous grin tugging at his lips. I raise a brow immediately, already suspicious. "What?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he drops a box onto the coffee table with a loose ribbon tied around it.

“Got you something,” he says, nodding toward it.

I blink, glancing at the package, then back at him. Bryan isn’t the random gift-giving type. Sure, he’s been sweet unbelievably so these past few weeks but this? It feels different. Intentional.

I hesitate. “What is this?”

He shrugs, too casual. “Open it and see.”

A part of me wants to refuse. Because accepting gifts from Bryan feels dangerous. Feels like giving in to something I’m still terrified to name. But curiosity gets the better of me, and I carefully pull the ribbon free, lifting the lid. Soft blue fabric spills over my fingers.

My breath catches as I lift the dress from the box, light, elegant, beautiful. A pair of matching heels sit underneath, delicate but practical enough that I won’t break my neck wearing them.

“Bryan... I can’t accept this.” My voice wavers as I shake my head. “This is too much.”

His eyes soften. “It’s not too much. It’s part of the night. Please?”

There’s something about the way he says it, something almost nervous in his tone that has me faltering. This isn’t just a dress. It’s an invitation, into whatever tonight is supposed to be.

And I want to know what that is. I exhale, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Where are we going?”

His smirk returns. “You’ll see. Just trust me.”

Those words undo me. Because for the first time in years, I do. So, I swallow my hesitation, grab the box, and head upstairs.

By the time I emerge, the dress hugs me perfectly. It’s like it was made for me, skimming just above my knees, floating like something out of a dream. I barely recognize myself in the mirror, and for the first time in a long time, I feel beautiful.

When I step back into the living room, Bryan’s eyes widen and I think I see his jaw drop, just a bit.

His gaze sweeps over me, slow, appreciative, and my skin heats under the attention. He doesn’t say anything at first, just takes me in, and when he finally steps forward, offering his arm, my heart stumbles.

“Shall we?”

I almost laugh at his formality, but I slip my hand into the crook of his arm anyway, ignoring the flutter in my stomach when my fingers graze solid muscle.

Bryan, for his part, looks unbelievable. A crisp button-up stretches across broad shoulders, his usual scruff neatly trimmed. His hair is combed back, but still messy enough to be undeniably him. And the scent of cedar and something subtly sweet clings to him, pulling me in before I can stop myself.

As we step out onto the porch, I let the words slip before I can stop them. “You clean up nice.”

He smirks, eyes flicking to me. “I was about to say the same thing.”

When the car finally pulls up to the restaurant, my breath catches.

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Maryville Ristorante.

I stare as Bryan parks, the warm glow of twinkling lights spilling out from the rustic, charming place that had once been our dream date spot when we were kids. Back then, it had been just a fantasy, a place we imagined going to someday. And now, we're here.

I turn to Bryan, stunned. "You remembered this too?" His expression softens. "Of course, I did."

I don't know what to say to that. Because it means something. It means a lot. That after all these years, through everything, he still remembers literally everything. It is like I never left.

The restaurant is cozy, intimate. A checkered tablecloth stretches across our candlelit table, soft music drifting through the air. Wine glows in delicate glasses, the flickering candlelight catching in Bryan's green eyes as he watches me from across the table.

It feels easy. Natural. Dangerously right.

We talk about the renovations, the clinic, Buddy's latest antics. And then, somewhere between the laughter and the wine, the conversation shifts.

Bryan lifts his glass, eyes warm, steady. "To us."

The words send a shiver down my spine. I hesitate before lifting mine, my voice

barely above a whisper. “To us.” The glasses clink, the sound small, but in this moment, it feels deafening.

Then, before I can think too hard, before I can let the fear creep in, I speak. “I used to wonder, you know. What we would have been. If I had stayed.”

Bryan watches me carefully. He sets his glass down, fingers grazing the stem in thoughtful silence. Then, he nods. “Me too. Every day.”

My heart twists. Every day? “But I’m glad we have this now,” I add. “Glad we’re getting a second chance.”

He only smiles in response. I wonder if it's all in my head that we are starting something again. I exhale, my pulse thudding in my ears. Because this moment, this night it’s feels right and that's all that matters.

Our hands brush on the table. The touch lingers. And for the first time, I let it. There is nothing better than enjoying the moment. Bryan makes sure of that.

## Chapter twenty-two

Bryan

The morning light spills through the kitchen window, stretching across the counter like liquid gold. The coffee machine hums, filling the air with its familiar scent, and Buddy’s tail windmills against the floor as he watches me with expectant eyes.

I barely register any of it. Because right now, all I can think about is the small velvet box burning a hole in my pocket.

I turn it over between my fingers, my pulse ticking up a notch. It’s not an extravagant

gift, nothing flashy or overdone. Just something that reminded me of her.

A silver necklace. A daisy pendant. Our flower.

I exhale, bracing myself as I hear her footsteps padding down the stairs. A second later, Emma appears in the doorway, stretching with a yawn, still sleepy, still stunning. Her sweater hangs off one shoulder, hair loose from sleep, and she rubs at her eyes before giving me a soft, sleepy smile.

“Morning.”

Her voice is hushed, familiar. A warmth spreads through my chest, something unshakable, something I don’t want to lose.

She moves toward the counter, reaching for a mug, when I catch her wrist gently, stopping her. “Hold up. Got something for you.”

Emma blinks, then tilts her head, curious. “More?” I nod, pulling out the small box and placing it in her palm. She stares at it for a second, as if trying to process the weight of it. Then, carefully, she lifts the lid.

Her breath catches. “Oh, Bryan...”

It’s barely above a whisper, but it hits me hard. She brushes her fingers over the pendant, the delicate silver daisy resting against the velvet. Something flickers in her expression, something soft, something raw.

Emma exhales a small, shaky laugh, then meets my gaze. Her eyes shine, bright and warm, pulling me in like they always do. She turns slightly, gathering her hair over one shoulder, an unspoken invitation.



I step behind her, undoing the clasp. My fingers graze her neck as I fasten it, and the moment stretches, too close, too much. Her breath shudders, just a little, as the metal settles against her collarbone.

She touches it gently. "It's beautiful." I clear my throat, stepping back, suddenly feeling way too exposed. "Thought you'd like it."

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She turns, smiling up at me. “I love it.”

And just like that, everything feels right. Emma takes a sip of coffee, still toying with the pendant. “I’ve been thinking about something.” I watch her over my own mug. “Yeah?”

She exhales, setting her cup down. “The name for the clinic. I was thinking... Gracie’s Animal Haven.” My brows lift. “After grandma?”

She nods. “It feels right. She was the reason I came back. The reason we... well, everything.” She hesitates, then shrugs, “It just makes sense.”

For a moment, I just look at her. Because darned if that doesn’t feel just right. “I love it.” Her shoulders relax, as if she was waiting for my approval. “Yeah?”

I nod, dead serious. “She’d be proud of you, Em.”

Something flickers behind her eyes, something unspoken, and then she steps forward. Just one step, small, hesitant but I feel it. She reaches out, fingers brushing my wrist.

“Thank you. For everything.”

I almost say something. Almost. But before I can, she pulls away, taking another sip of coffee.

“I’ve got clinic arrangements today. Paperwork, supplies, all of that. Stella’s meeting me later.”

I nod, shifting, needing to focus on something other than how badly I want to kiss her again. “Sounds good. Let me know if you need anything.” Emma smiles, squeezing my arm just for a second before heading toward the door. “See you later, Bry.”

She leaves, the scent of lavender and coffee lingering in the air. I stand in the kitchen for a long moment, staring at the empty space she left behind.

I’m deep. Too deep. And then, reality crashes in.

I sigh, dragging a hand through my hair as I head to my office, flipping open my laptop. Emails flood the screen. A reminder from Coleman Financial, numbers blaring in bold.

And then, my stomach sinks. Three months. Almost up. And Emma...

I stare at the screen, at the deadlines, at the reality of what’s coming, and my grip tightens around my coffee mug. I don’t want her gone.

The thought hits me so hard it nearly knocks the breath from my lungs. I can’t lose this. Lose her. Not again. But how do I tell her that?

I close my laptop, rubbing a hand over my jaw, staring at the necklace box still sitting on the desk. Time’s running out.

And for the first time in years, I don’t have a darn clue what to do next.

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The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across the backyard, the breeze rolling in thick with the scent of the ocean. Buddy sits beside me, head resting on his paws, while Liam lounges back in a chair, beer in hand, a knowing smirk plastered on his

face. He came to talk to me about an account he wants me to work on.

Emma's in town with Stella, which means the house is eerily quiet. Too quiet. It's been hours since she left, and it feels like more. I miss her already.

I take another sip of my beer, staring out at the waves. "So," he starts, dragging out the word. "Have you sorted things out?"

I don't look at him. "What things?"

He lets out a low chuckle, shaking his head. "Come on, man. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. "If this is about Emma..."

"It is about Emma," Liam interrupts, setting his beer down. "And the fact that in exactly two days, your little 'three months' deal is up."

I stiffen but keep my face impassive. He is right. I dread this ending because I don't know what it means for us.

Liam smirks, clearly enjoying this too much. "What's the plan? Gonna keep pretending you're not completely gone for her?"

I scoff, rolling the bottle between my fingers. "You're ridiculous."

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“Am I?” He tilts his head. “Because from what I hear, people keep seeing you two together around town. And I don’t think you’re just being friendly.”

I shake my head. “I don't know what you're talking about.” Liam snorts. “Right. What about paying off all her debts without telling her?”

I freeze. My grip tightens around the beer bottle, and I finally turn to him. “How do you know about that?”

Liam leans back, smug. “I was the one who helped you investigate her debts in the first place, remember? I know exactly what you did.”

I grind my jaw, forcing myself to keep my expression neutral. “I'm just trying to help. I mean, making her happy is the least I can do.”

"So let me get this straight, you are doing everything you've been doing because you pity her,"

I don't answer him because he knows it's not that. Liam watches me for a beat, then lets out a low whistle. “Man. You really are in deep.”

I glare at him. “She’s been through enough, Liam. She didn’t deserve to face all she did.”

Liam just shakes his head, laughing under his breath. “You really think I’m buying this? That you paid off her debts and that you've been around town acting all lovey because you feel pity for her.”

“I was just...you know ...”

“What? Being nice?” Liam lifts a brow. “Dude, you don’t do everything you’ve been doing because you’re being nice. You did it because you love her.”

I go silent. The words hit like a gut punch, like something I already know but haven’t let myself admit.

Liam sees it too. “Yeah,” he mutters. “That’s what I thought.”

I shake my head, exhaling sharply. “It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not,” Liam counters. “It’s really simple, dummy. You love her. And you’re scared.”

I swallow hard, staring at the waves. Because he’s right.

I am scared. Scared that no matter how much I love her, it won’t be enough to make her stay. Scared that if I let myself believe this is real, she’ll slip through my fingers all over again.

Liam sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Look, I get it. She left once. And it messed you up.”

I clench my jaw. “You have no idea.” “I do,” he says simply. “Remember Bryan, I was there, and I’ve always been here for you. And I get why you’re hesitating. But let me ask you something, Bryan. Does keeping her at arm’s length make you feel better?”

I don’t answer. Because no. No, it doesn’t. Liam leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You think you’re protecting yourself, but all you’re doing is screwing this

up before it even has a chance.”

I let out a slow breath, my chest tight. Liam shakes his head. “You can lie to yourself all you want. But at the end of the day, everything you’ve done? You’re not just helping her, Bryan.”

He pauses, then says it. The truth I don’t want to face. “You’re in love with her. And you have been for a long darn time.”

I press my lips together, my throat dry. Because yeah. I am. And suddenly, I don’t know why I’ve been fighting it.

The sound of Liam’s truck fades into the distance some minutes later, but his words still ring in my ears. You’re in love with her. And you have been for a long darn time.

I scrub a hand down my face, exhaling hard. He’s right. I know it, deep in my bones. There’s no use fighting it anymore.

I need to tell her. I HAVE to tell her.

But as I step back into the house, something feels... off. Buddy isn’t by the door to greet me. Instead, there’s the sound of movement hurried, rushed coming from upstairs. My stomach clenches.

I take the stairs two at a time, pulse kicking up. The second I step into the doorway of her room, I freeze. Emma is standing by the bed, packing.

A half-zipped duffel bag sits open, clothes hastily thrown inside. She moves frantically, stuffing a sweater in, then a pair of jeans, her fingers shaking.

“Emma?” My voice comes out rough, uncertain.

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She doesn't look at me. Doesn't even hesitate. I step forward. "What are you doing?"

She keeps packing, her movements sharp. "Leaving."

The word slams into me like a punch to the gut. I frown, stepping closer. "What? Why?"

She laughs, but there's no humor in it. Just something brittle, broken. "You don't have to pretend, Bryan. I heard you."

My breath catches. "Heard what?"

Finally, she looks up. And the pain in her eyes knocks the air from my lungs. She swallows hard, jaw clenched. "Your conversation with Liam."

Everything inside me goes cold. Oh no.

She turns back to the bag, stuffing in another shirt. "I get it now," she mutters, voice tight. "The past few weeks? They were just you playing hero. The great Bryan Lawson swooping in to fix my pathetic little life."

"Emma, no..."

She lets out a shaky breath, hands gripping the edge of the bag. "You cleared my debts. Made sure I was taken care of. Made me feel things. Must feel really good, huh? Playing with my feelings like that huh?"



Her voice cracks on the last word, and it just guts me.

“That’s not what this is.” My voice is firm, desperate. “Emma, please, just listen,”

She shakes her head violently. “I am not your charity case, Bryan!”

Her voice rises, her breath coming fast and uneven. I can see it, the storm brewing inside her, the way she’s fighting not to break right in front of me.

I take a step closer, reaching for her. “I never saw you that way.”

She flinches back. “I don't think so.”

I stop cold. Her eyes flash. “I can't believe you, Bryan. All these weeks they meant nothing. Why on earth did you remind me of things when I'm just some project to you? Why didn't you tell me about paying off my debts? It was because I was a pity project to you!”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Because the truth? I didn’t tell her. It was not because I saw her as some problem to fix, but because I didn’t want her to feel obligated. Because I didn’t want her to push me away.

But looking at her now, at the way she’s crumbling right in front of me, I realize I already lost her.

She shakes her head, scoffing. “Right. That’s what I thought.”

“Emma, please.” My voice is hoarse now. I step closer again, hands open, pleading. “The past few weeks meant everything to me. You mean everything to me.”

She looks at me then, really looks, and for the briefest second, I think, hope...that she

might believe me. But then her expression hardens.

She turns back to the bag, zipping it up in one swift motion. “I’ll pay you back,” she says, voice eerily calm. “Every cent.”

“Emma...”

She yanks the bag off the bed and strides past me, her shoulder brushing mine. I twist, following her as she heads for the stairs.

“Emma, don’t do this,” I beg. My chest feels like it’s caving in.

She doesn’t stop. Doesn’t look back. Buddy whines from the corner, ears pinned back, watching her like he knows something’s wrong.

She reaches the front door. Hand on the knob. I can’t let her go. I step forward, desperate. “Emma, please.”

Her shoulders tense. For half a second, she hesitates. Then she pulls the door open, steps out, and lets it slam shut behind her. Leaving me standing there, hands clenched, heart pounding.

Gone. Again.

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It's been two days since she left. Forty-eight hours. Two thousand, eight hundred, and eighty minutes. And every single one has been horrible.

I can't think straight. Can't focus. Every time I close my eyes, I see her walking out that door, hear the finality of it slamming behind her. I wake up expecting to hear her moving around the house, brewing coffee, humming under her breath. But there's nothing. Just silence. The house feels wrong without her.

Buddy keeps pacing the living room, ears twitching at every little noise, waiting for her to come back. He whines by the door sometimes, as if he thinks she's just running late. I get it, because I've been doing the same thing.

I thought maybe, just maybe she just needed time to cool off ... that I'd wake up, and she'd be back, and we'd talk this through like we should've in the first place.

But she's not coming back. Not unless I do something.

I slam my hands against the kitchen counter, jaw clenched, frustration boiling in my veins. I messed up. Not by paying off her debts, that was never about pity. I'd do it again in a heartbeat if it meant taking even a fraction of the weight off her shoulders.

No, my mistake was not telling her. My mistake was letting my fear, fear of losing her, fear of wanting too much get in the way of the truth.

And now? Now she thinks she meant nothing to me. That the past few weeks were

some kind of favor. I let her believe I didn't love her. And that?

A knock at the door yanks me out of my thoughts. I don't have the patience for company, but when I swing the door open and see Nate standing there, smug, arms crossed. I let out a heavy breath and step aside to let him in.

"Figured you'd be sulking," he says, dropping onto the couch like he owns the place. "Looks like I was right."

I scowl and growl. "What do you want?"

He shrugs. "Just checking in. You know, since you look like you've been hit by a truck."

Liam says you haven't been answering your calls."

I roll my eyes, moving to the fridge and grabbing a beer. I pop the cap, but it just sits in my hand, untouched.

Nate watches me for a beat, then leans forward. "So? You gonna tell me what's up with you?"

I exhale sharply, raking a hand through my hair. "She thought I've been acting different with her because I pity her, and that my feelings aren't genuine..." My voice trails off.

Nate whistles low. "Oh no."

"Yeah." I take a slow sip, the beer bitter on my tongue. "She wouldn't even let me explain. Just packed her bags and left."

“And you let her?”

I blink, frowning. “What on earth was I supposed to do? She wouldn’t listen.” Nate shakes his head, laughing under his breath. “Man. You really don’t get it, do you?”

My jaw clenches. “Get what?”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “You let her walk away. Again.”

I stiffen. “You didn’t fight for her before,” Nate continues. “And look where it got you. You let your fear and your pride get in the way. And guess what? You’re doing the same thing now.”

My grip tightens around the bottle. “That’s not...”

“You love her.” His voice is steady, certain. “So why on earth are you sitting here instead of proving it to her?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. Because I know he’s right.

I scrub a hand down my face, exhaling hard. “She’s convinced I don’t care. That everything I did was just to make myself feel better.”

“Then make her believe otherwise.” I glance at him. He shrugs. “You want her back? Prove it.”

The words settle deep in my chest, pushing past the doubt, past the fear that’s been gnawing at me for years. I do love her. And I’ll be damned if I lose her again. I set the beer down with a thud and push off the counter. “I need to fix this.”

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Nate grins, standing. “Now we’re talking.”

I pace the room, my mind racing. “I need to show her.”

And then it hits me. I know exactly what I have to do. I grab my keys, determination settling in my bones. This time, I won’t let her walk away.

Not without a fight.

Chapter twenty-three

Emma

The walls of Stella’s guest room feel like they’re closing in. Three days. Three days of trying to pretend I’m fine. Three days of waking up with swollen eyes, forcing myself to eat whatever Stella puts in front of me, and swallowing back the ache that threatens to spill over every time I think about him.

I was so stupid. So unbelievably stupid. I should’ve known better. I should’ve protected myself from the start. He never promised me anything. He never once said this was real. That we were real.

I let myself believe in something that was never there. I stare at the ceiling, my fingers gripping the blanket tight as I try to ignore the lump in my throat.

I had been so relieved when the calls from the debt collectors stopped, thinking maybe they felt sorry for me. Silly me, they are all ruthless. So why would they have

pitied me out of the blue? I was finally happy to be catching a break that I didn't think much of it.

Turns out, the break had come from Bryan. Bryan.

The man who had looked me in the eyes, touched me like I was his, kissed me like he meant it, all while knowing I was just a project to him. Because to him, that's all I was. A problem to fix. A mistake he wouldn't make again.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to push back the fresh wave of pain that hits me square in the chest. I should be grateful, right? My debts are gone. I don't have to worry anymore. But I would rather owe every cent to the devil himself than know Bryan cleared them out of pity.

A knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts. I don't even need to look up to know it's Stella. She's been hovering, watching me like I'm going to shatter at any second. I drag in a breath and sit up as she pokes her head inside.

"Hey," she says gently, stepping in and closing the door behind her. "How're you doing?"

I let out a hollow laugh. "Like I just got punched in the chest. Repeatedly."

She sighs, crossing the room and flopping down on the bed beside me. "Yeah...figured."

Silence stretches between us. She waits, probably hoping I'll break down and spill everything, but I can't.

I won't. Finally, she nudges my arm. "Listen, I know you're hurting, but you need to go get your other things."

I shake my head immediately. “I can’t.”

“Emma.”

“No, seriously, I can’t. I can’t walk back into that house and...” My voice wobbles. “And see everything we had. I just...I can’t.”

Stella lets out a breath and grabs my hand, squeezing it. “I get it. I do. But you’re gonna need to face it at some point. You need to rest of your stuff, and if it helps, I’ll go with you.”

I bite my lip, my chest tightening. I don’t want to go back. I don’t want to step into that house and see the life I thought we were building together, only to be reminded that it was all built on lies.

But what choice do I have? I can’t hide here forever. I exhale slowly, pressing my fingers to my temples. “Fine,” I murmur. “But only if you come with me.” Stella grins. “Obviously.”

I nod, trying to steady myself, but my heart is already racing. Because whether I’m ready or not, I’m about to walk back into his world.

And I don’t know if I’ll survive it.

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I shouldn’t be this uneasy. It’s just a house. Just walls and floors and memories I’m going to shove into a box and leave behind. I should be eager to get this over with, to walk in, grab my things, and never step foot here again.

But as Stella practically bounces beside me in the passenger seat, something gnaws at



my gut.

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She's too excited. I shoot her a glance. "You're awfully cheerful for someone about to help me pack up my shattered hopes and dreams."

She blinks, feigning innocence. "What? I can't be excited to see the house one last time?"

I narrow my eyes. "No, because you hate packing. You once paid a teenager in snacks to move your stuff when you switched apartments."

Stella presses her lips together like she's trying very hard not to laugh. "Okay, first, that kid was entrepreneurial. And second, I just want to see the garden one last time."

I let out a sharp sigh, shaking my head. "Stella, I just want to get this over with."

She pouts dramatically. "Come on, Em, it'll take two seconds. Just a quick peek, then you can doom-walk through the house all you want."

I groan, rubbing my forehead. "Fine. Two seconds." She beams. "Perfect."

We pull into the driveway, and my stomach tightens as I stare at the house. The past few weeks play in my mind like a cruel highlight reel, laughter in the kitchen, lazy mornings on the swing, him kissing me under the stars.

I force myself to look away. That's not my life anymore. I step out, my fingers twitching as I brace myself. But before I can head for the front door, Stella grabs my arm. "Garden first." She tugs me toward the side path, practically dragging me along.

I huff. “You are way too invested in flowers.”

She just hums, but there's something in her eyes. Anticipation? And that gnawing feeling in my gut twists harder.

I round the corner then freeze. My breath stutters. The garden is glowing.

Fairy lights wind through the trees, casting soft golden halos over the freshly trimmed hedges and carefully arranged flowers. Roses, daisies, violets, all in full bloom, their petals catching the light. A gentle summer breeze carries their scents, and the sight knocks the air from my lungs.

And then... Bryan.

Standing in the middle of it all, hands in his pockets, looking at me like I'm the only thing that's ever mattered. Buddy sits at his feet, wagging his tail happily, like he's in on this too.

I whirl to Stella, except she's gone. Of course she is. This was never about the garden.

I swallow hard, pulse hammering as I look back at Bryan. My voice barely scrapes out. “What is this?”

He takes a slow step forward, the golden light catching the soft edges of his face. He looks nervous. Nervous. Bryan never does nervous.

“This is me making things right.”

I cross my arms over my chest, shoving down the way my heart aches at the sight of him. “You can't fix this with lights and flowers.”

His jaw tightens. “I know.” He steps closer. “But I can try.”

I exhale sharply, my emotions still raw. “Why, Bryan? Because you feel bad? Because I was your charity case, and you didn’t want to see me struggle?”

He flinches. “No. Please stop that.” His voice is rough, almost desperate. “You were never a pity project, Em.”

Tears sting my eyes, but I shake my head. “Then why?”

He doesn’t hesitate.

“Because I love you.”

The words punch through me. My breath catches, my world tilting as he moves even closer, his hands curling into fists like he’s afraid I’ll run.

“I love you,” he repeats, voice steady now. “I have from the moment you walked back into this house. Maybe I never stopped loving you. But I was scared, scared of losing you again, scared that if I let myself fall, you’d leave, and I wouldn’t survive it a second time.”

He exhales sharply, his gaze locking onto mine, raw, open, unguarded. “So yeah, I did things wrong. But none of it, none of it was because I pitied you. I just...” He drags a hand through his hair. “I just wanted to take care of you. The way I should’ve back then. I wanted to love you. I wanted us to work again.”

Tears spill over before I can stop them. My throat is so tight I can barely breathe. “You should’ve told me.”

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“I know.” He steps closer, his voice dropping, pleading. “I should’ve done a lot of things differently. But I can’t change the past, Emma. All I can do is tell you the truth now.” He swallows.

“I don’t want this house without you. I don’t want anything without you. You’re my home, Emma, and I’ll spend every day proving to you that you were never...” His voice shakes, his eyes shining with something that wrecks me. “Never a mistake.”

I break. A sob slips out before I can stop it.

Because I thought this was all nothing to him. That I had meant nothing. But hearing this, seeing it on his face it destroys me.

I press my hands over my face, trying to breathe, trying to absorb it.

His hands cup my face, gentle, trembling. “Stay,” he whispers. “Please.”

I shatter. I launch myself at him, my arms locking around his neck as I kiss him.

It’s desperate and messy, a collision of pain and love and relief. His hands grip my waist, pulling me closer, like he never wants to let go.

I don’t think he will. I don’t think I will either. We break apart, breathing hard, foreheads pressed together.

Bryan brushes his thumb over my cheek, soft, reverent. “Say it,” he whispers. “If you still feel it, say it.”

My chest clenches. My heart pounds. I close my eyes, exhaling.

"I love you, Bryan. I'm sorry for leaving again, and for not fighting for us. I was scared because I had fallen in love with you and it maybe didn't mean anything to you,"

His breath shudders. "Oh, Emma. That's not true. The past few weeks have been the best of my life. And the past two days have been horrible for me."

"Same here."

"I need you to promise me one thing."

"Whatever you want."

"I need you to always believe in us. Always fight for our love. I don't want you to ever give it up at a slightest chance."

"I promise Bryan. I'm sorry and I'm telling you that I'll never give up on us again. I love you."

"I love you more."

And then he's kissing me again, like he'll never stop.

And I don't want him to.

Ever.

Epilogue

Bryan

The smell of fresh paint and clean linen fills the air, mingling with the scent of flowers sent by half the town. Voices hum around me, friends, family, people from all over Ocean Bay all here for Emma.

For her dream. I glance at her from across the clinic's bright, open space. She's laughing with Stella, Claire, and Pearl near the front desk, her smile blinding.

This clinic. This moment. She built this from nothing but a dream and sheer willpower. And she did it without even realizing how much she's rebuilt me in the process.

My fingers tighten around the next small velvet box in my pocket, my heart hammering. I'm not a nervous guy. Not in business, not in life. But this, this has my pulse thrumming like a drum.

Bryan's sister Liz steps up onto the small podium at the front of the room, microphone in hand and smiling wide. "Alright, alright, settle down, everyone!"

The chatter dies down, laughter tapering off. Liz beams, rubbing her big belly. "We're here for something huge today. And that's NOT my belly, drawing laughs. As you all know, our favorite vet has fought like crazy to bring this clinic to life." A chorus of cheers erupts.

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Emma shakes her head, blushing, and looking overwhelmed in the best way. Liz continues, “And we all know this wouldn’t have happened without her drive, her stubbornness,” she winks at Emma, “and the people who believed in her. Pearl, Claire, Stella you ladies were and are her rock.”

Pearl, soft but fierce, waves her hand. “You say that like we’re leaving. We’ll still be here, bossing her around.”

Laughter ripples through the room. Claire nods. “Couldn’t be prouder of you, sweetheart.”

Emma snuffles, touched, before turning to Stella, who is smirking like she knows something I don’t like.

Stella grabs the mic from Liz. “Actually, I think there’s one more person who deserves a moment.”

Emma blinks. “What?” And before she can react, I move. I step forward, pulling the velvet box from my pocket.

And then I drop to one knee. The entire room gasps. Emma freezes.

The world shrinks, it’s just me and her, standing in the middle of her dream, our home, our future. I flip the box open, revealing the silver ring inside, a single diamond, simple, timeless, like her.

Emma covers her mouth, eyes wide, glassy with unshed tears. I swallow, forcing the



words out past the lump in my throat.

“Emma Greene...” My voice is steady. “I’ve loved you since I didn’t fully understand what love is. I loved you then, I love you now, and I know I’ll love you for the rest of my life.”

She sobs. I smile, my voice now full of certainty. “So, if you’ll have me, I’d like to spend forever proving it to you.”

A beat of silence. Then...

She nods frantically, laughing through her tears. “Yes. Oh yes, yes.”

The room erupts. Cheers, claps, laughter, but all I hear is her. I slide the ring onto her finger, then stand, pulling her into my arms, kissing her like she’s my whole world. Because she is.

She pulls back, giggling. “You really did this at my clinic opening?” I smirk. “Had to make sure you couldn’t run this time.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Idiot.”

Pearl dabs her eyes dramatically. “Oh, this is better than a soap opera.” Claire smiles, proud. “Took you long enough.” And Stella? She just smirks, arms crossed. “Told you so.”

Emma turns to her, gaping. “You knew?”

Stella grins. “Sweetheart, we all did. Even Buddy.” Buddy barks, tail wagging, and the whole room laughs.

Then Nate whistles, stepping up with Liam at his side. “Darn, you really went for it,

huh?”

Liam claps my back, smirking. “Guess I won’t have to watch you sulk anymore.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t stop smiling. Nate raises his beer. “To Bryan and Emma. About time.”

Liz wipes a tear, nudging Emma. “Welcome to the family, for real, this time.”

Emma beams, holding onto me tighter. And as I look at her, this incredible, stubborn, beautiful woman standing beside me.

I know I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

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