



The Inn Dilemma

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Category: Romance

Description: The last thing I expected to do when I returned home after years away was fall for my brother's best friend.

Nova:

I left my small town four years ago and didn't look back. When I return with my tail between my legs after breaking up with my controlling yet commitment-fearing boyfriend, I'm surprised by the warmth I find at The Storybook Inn. The owner, Aunt Birdie, embraces me with open arms and gives me a place to stay when my dad turns me away. Unfortunately for me, Dad is more stubborn than ever. He still thinks my dream of becoming a great artist is too far-fetched to be possible and maybe it is. But if I've learned anything in this last year, it's that God's plans won't be thwarted. Something that proves true when God uses an accident at Storybook Inn to facilitate Aunt Birdie's dream.

Holt:

The Navy SEALs prepared me for a lot of things, but moving back to my small town with a well-meaning meddling aunt is not one of them. Aunt Birdie wastes no time playing matchmaker when she sends me to a cabin to fix an alleged leaky faucet without telling me it's inhabited by my best friend's gorgeous prodigal sister. Nova and I are both coming out of painful break-ups, a whirlwind romance is the last thing either of us wants. But falling for her is inevitable when she jumps in to renovate my family's legacy, The Storybook Inn, without hesitation. With every bike ride we go on, every room we renovate together, every accidental touch, I can't help but dive headfirst into the whirlwind anyway.

Until one "fake kiss" threatens to destroy us both.

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Chapter One

Nova

The lion taunts me with his pretentious eyes as if he's thinking, "I knew you'd be back to grovel."

It's been years since I've seen him, yet the foreboding feeling is as strong as ever. He is less imposing than Dad, but has the same intimidating glare. Tension wraps itself around my chest. It tightens into a vise grip the more my fingers curl around the brass ring in the lion's teeth. After a second of deliberation, I thump it against the front door.

I take a step back and inhale the crisp September air. As I release my breath, I remind myself that no matter what happens, I will be okay. It will all work out at some point, at some time, in some way.

Seconds that may as well be hours pass before Dad answers the door. Shock flickers in his eyes, but then his mask of cool indifference blankets his features. The suit his strong frame once filled out hangs off him. He's aged far more than I anticipated these last four years. His previously broad shoulders have shrunk, and his severe eyes don't hold the same intensity with the new dark bags beneath them.

Kent Price looks sick.

My throat tightens, but I swallow down my shame and whisper, "Hi, Daddy."

His nostrils flare and he looks at me as if I'm a stranger on his doorstep.

"Nova. What are you doing here?" Despite his frail appearance, his voice still commands respect.

Tears burn my eyes, but I hold them back like I've done for most of my twenty-three years. Kent Price sees crying as a sign of weakness.

"I've come home." My voice cracks.

He scoffs. "If you think this is still your home, you are sorely mistaken."

"But I'm your daughter."

Dad's lip curls in disgust. "I have no daughter."

I stumble back as if he just struck me. A pathetic whimper leaks through my lips. I pinch them tighter together.

He will not see me cry. I will not cry.

"You ceased to exist when you ran off with that Frenchman." He spits out the last word. Dad may have been right about Beau from the beginning, but I refuse to admit that to him now. Just like I've refused to admit to myself the similarities between the two men. They both had the same goal for me—to become their little trophy. Dad wanted me as his trophy daughter, Beau as his trophy girlfriend.

If it was anyone else, I could drop to my knees and beg my dad to forgive me. Tell him that he was right about Beau and I was an idiot for not listening to him. Most loving fathers would forgive, and we could move past this huge mistake. But showing that vulnerability would only intensify my father's disdain. Showing vulnerability

would put me right where he wants me and I'd be back to square one.

Despite the anger I harbor for Dad, I need this first step toward healing.

My spine is stiff and my head is held high while my heart slowly crumbles inside my chest.

"I won't waste anymore of your time," I say, infusing my words with more confidence than I feel.

Something flickers in his gaze, and I pray that by some miracle there's a crack in his cruel heart...but then he narrows his eyes and I know there's not. He takes a step back into the house and slams the door in my face.

I swallow the lump in my throat, then turn on my heel and head toward town. A few cars pass me, slowing down as if trying to figure out why someone is walking on the side of the road coming out of the 'ritzy' part of town.

The skies are a mix of gray and black. Thunder rumbles in warning of an incoming storm, and I pull my cardigan tightly around me. It's time I head back to Reese's apartment. She's been so kind to open her home to me and allow me to hide out while I worked up the courage to face Dad. I can't say I'm surprised he didn't welcome me home with open arms, but I expected a little more from my father. A little more of what? I don't know. Sympathy? Understanding? Forgiveness? Love?

When I was a little girl, Dad told me I was the apple of his eye. I was naive enough to believe him. He had been prepping my brother Chris to take over the family business for as long as I could remember. But I was the one he spoiled. He bought me fancy dresses and pretty jewelry to match. As I got older, I realized his spoiling me wasn't for my enjoyment but for his image. A big shot CEO couldn't be photographed with anything less than the picture-perfect family.

“I have no daughter.” His words ring in my ears as I head into town. I want to cry. I need to cry. It would alleviate some of the pain in my chest. Some of the pressure that’s slowly suffocating me. But I can’t. I haven’t cried in years. Tears are a weakness.

I have at least half a mile left to push down the pain and slip on the façade that tells the outside world I’m okay.

The chill in the air seeps through my layers of clothing and settles inside my bones.

I finally reach Main Street, and I head to Mountain Auto Repair where my friend, Reese, works. Her apartment is also above the garage and where I’m temporarily living with her. Reese offered it to me when she found me loitering at the library. When in doubt, books have always given me guidance on where to pivot in life. That day was no exception.

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Reese was one of my only true friends in high school. The money and status my family held meant nothing to her. She was my friend simply because she wanted to be.

And I abandoned her when my life got to be too much. I missed her grandmother's funeral and Reese's downward spiral into alcohol. I'm not saying things would have been different if I had been here for her back then, but that doesn't erase the guilt I feel. Even after all of that, she's remained loyal to our friendship. That's one huge blessing I've thanked God countless times for. Despite my mistakes, she's come through for me. She's the friend I've so desperately needed.

I stop in the shop to talk to her. Reese rolls out from under the car she's working on. Her grease-covered overalls come into view first, followed by her bandanna-covered head. Her gray eyes immediately take me in. As if she's trying to read my thoughts and find out how things went.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," she says, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Did you talk to your dad?" she asks.

"Yeah." My voice cracks.

Reese eyes me warily. "And did it...did it go well?"

"Not exactly."

“What happened?”

I scratch my chin with my sleeve-covered hand. “Dad told me he had no daughter and I no longer had a home there.”

Reese’s jaw drops. “He didn’t.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I look away.

Reese huffs. “Nova. Talk to me. What aren’t you telling me?”

I throw my hands up in the air in frustration. “I have no idea where to go from here in life or with my dad. I can’t say I expected him to welcome me home with open arms but...”

“You also didn’t expect him to turn you away,” Reese finishes for me.

“Exactly.”

“Well, I know it’s not much, but you’ll always have a place here with me.” She smiles. “We always talked about being roomies when we became adults.”

A smidgeon of tension leaves me as I’m reminded again of Reese’s genuine friendship. “This wasn’t exactly how I imagined becoming roommates would happen though.”

She gives me a sad smile then reaches out and grabs my shoulder. “I know. Me neither. But you’re welcome to stay for as long as you need to.”

“I appreciate that more than you know. But I think right now, what I need is to reintroduce myself to Rocosa...instead of keeping myself locked up in your

apartment.”

Reese’s eyebrows raise. “You’re finally ready for that?”

“No,” I answer honestly. “But I’ve hidden away long enough. I’m going to go for a walk, pray, and see what happens.” I laugh weakly. “Who knows maybe an answer will fall out of the sky.”

“Don’t hold your breath on that. But prayer is never a bad idea.”

“I know.” Before any more tension or guilt can build, I tell her, “I’ll be back later.”

After stepping onto the sidewalk and gathering my composure, I start my way down Main Street. I call my mom for the third time today, and like every other time, it rings until it goes to voicemail.

This time, I work up the courage to leave a message. “Hey, Mom, it’s...it’s Nova. I’m back and I’d really like to see you. Call me when you can.” My voice breaks, and I hitend.

I wander down the sidewalk, listening to the crunch of fallen leaves beneath my shoes. The roar of a motorcycle in the distance, causes my mind to wander to my brother. Christian used to take me for rides around Rocosa and sometimes even into Denver. In those fleeting drives, we were free from our father’s expectations and could enjoy just existing.

My fight with Christian has played in my mind like a nightmare on a reel for years. My words were so callous and brutal. I don’t expect him to ever forgive me. But I’ve missed my big brother. The continual roar of the motorcycle has me missing him more. Maybe it’s time for me to reach out to him. I stop on the sidewalk and pull out my phone. I type out his number from memory, but before clicking the call button, I

quickly delete all the numbers and lock my phone. I can't. Not yet. I can only handle one rejection today.

Before long, I come to the end of Main Street but don't stop until I'm through the iron fence and standing on the doorstep of the Storybook Inn. The place I used to find total solace. The red Victorian-style home is just as beautiful as I remember with its white shutters, rounded tower, and wraparound porch. I used to play in the tower, pretending to be a princess and making the guests laugh with my antics. After Holt came to live with Aunt Birdie and Uncle Walt, Mom would ask Aunt Birdie to babysit me. She may not be my aunt by blood, but she's like a surrogate aunt to every kid in town. Which is why everyone in Rocosa under the age of forty calls her Aunt Birdie.

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As I rap on the door, I pray Aunt Birdie will be quick to forgive and purposely forget what an idiot I was at nineteen. A door slams in the distance, probably one of the many cabin rentals the Storybook Inn has behind the main house. Not only does the main house have six guest bedrooms, but ten or more cabins where guests stay. Bigfamilies and out-of-state hunters are typically the people who rent them. There's a larger, more private cabin which is typically reserved by celebrities looking for an escape from the real world. Aunt Birdie ensures those guests have the privacy they desire.

As the seconds tick by, my impatience and fear grow.

"Lord, please let Aunt Birdie forgive me and take me in, even if she accepts me only for the help I can provide here. I don't deserve it, but Lord, I'm begging for it anyway." The prayer is a soft whisper.

I blow out cleansing breath after cleansing breath as I wait.

The door swings open and Aunt Birdie greets me with, "Welcome..." then trails off as she takes me in. Her surprise transforms into a smile that chases away some of the chill in my bones. Without me saying a word, she pulls me into her arms, and I melt into her embrace. "Oh, my sweet girl has come home."

All the fears I've imagined at seeing disappointment in Aunt Birdie's eyes dissipate in that single moment. The tightness in my chest that I've felt since getting on the plane two weeks ago releases a smidgeon. I know if I finally let my tears fall, I'd feel so much better. But my dad's voice will forever echo in my head: "No child of mine will cry. Tears are a weakness, and no one with the Price name will be weak." A

shuddering breath leaves my lips. Emotions leak out of me, a mix of gratitude and shame. Pain and healing. Past and present.

Aunt Birdie holds me as I breathe through these emotions with my eyes squeezed tightly closed. She guides me into a private room—presumably her office. She squeezes me tighter and mutters, “You keep doing those deep breaths until you feel normal again.”

I do.

Once my breathing has returned to normal, she gives me a final squeeze, then pushes me back at arm’s length. “Now you look more like the girl I remember.”

I give her a half-hearted smile and cross my arms over my chest. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

She grips my shoulders tightly and forces me to look her in the face. “When you’re with me, you don’t apologize for showing emotion. Do you hear me?”

I mutter, “Yes, ma’am.”

She smiles and scans me from head to toe. “I thought Paris was full of carbs, sugar, and cheese, but you’re nothing but skin and bones. It’s time we put some meat on you!” The heaviness that’s been weighing me down lifts as she wraps her arm around my waist, guides us to the kitchen, and grabs me a bagel and coffee.

“My cook Emma makes incredible cinnamon raisin bagels that go beautifully with a fresh cup of coffee. Do you take it with cream and sugar or black?” Aunt Birdie asks.

“Black is fine.” My stomach growls in excitement. For the last two weeks, I’ve been surviving on plain toast and ramen noodles. My savings took a massive hit after I

bought my plane ticket, and I didn't want to eat any of Reese's food and mooch off her more than I already had to.

As I eat, Aunt Birdie asks, "Where are you staying?"

"Right now, with Reese."

"The two of you in that tiny apartment?" Aunt Birdie places a hand over her chest as if it's the most ludicrous thing she's ever heard.

"I don't have money for rent. So I've been accepting her charity."

She tsks at me. "No more. You're going to stay in the Dream Haven Cabin."

"You don't need to put me up here, let alone in one of your best cabins."

"I will hear nothing of that. My girl is home, and this is the first week in months that we're not fully booked. Almost like God set up this perfect timing." She wraps her arm around me and gives me another strong squeeze. "I have a few things I need to take care of, but you feel free to enjoy your carbs and get reacquainted with the place." Before leaving me alone in the kitchen, she kisses my forehead, and the feeling of being loved consumes me.

In mere minutes, the delicious bagel is gone, not a crumb left on my plate. I put it in the dishwasher, then roam into the den with my coffee, curling my fingers around the warm porcelain and sipping the delicious brew on the way.

The unchanged decor is a welcome comfort. The fireplace in the den provides warmth, and the peaceful popping of the flames in the background drowns out the jumbled thoughts ping-ponging through my head.

I set my coffee down on the side table and make my way over to the built-in bookcases flanking the fireplace. My fingers trace the book spines. There's a mix of newer and classic books. Two that stick out are *Neverending Mercy* and *Secrets, Lies, and Deadly Ties*. I've read and enjoyed both, so I pull them out and display them on top of the mantel. More people need to experience the powerful messages of faith and love between their pages.

I roam around the rest of the downstairs and see a woman in a white chef's jacket slip into the kitchen—the cook, Emma, I presume. The warmth of the house and Aunt Birdie's welcome help the chill in my bones completely fade away.

"There you are." Aunt Birdie flits into the dining room where I'm finishing my cup of coffee and wraps her arm around me, resting her head on my shoulder. "Oh, how I've missed you. We've all missed you. Holt is going to be thrilled when he finds out you're home."

My posture stiffens and my heart hammers at the sound of his name. Holt—my brother's best friend and the boy who got me through so many ups and downs through my childhood. Someone else I left behind without a backward glance when I thought I knew better than the people in my life.

"Is he home on a break?" I ask, slightly confused. Holt became a Navy SEAL after graduating high school. He excelled at the rigorous tests and training, almost as if being a SEAL was what he was born to do. As if it was in his blood. It was his dream to become a Navy SEAL, even as a kid. The last I talked to him about it, his plan was to stay in for the full twenty years before he could retire with all his benefits.

Aunt Birdie's face falls. "You didn't hear?"

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“No, hear what?”

“Holt was medically retired just over a year ago.” She guides me into the den, and we sit down on the couch.

“What happened?” I ask.

Aunt Birdie’s eyes fill with tears. “He almost died.” Her voice cracks. “There was an explosion at an orphanage. He and his team were able to save everyone, but Holt lost his eye in the process.”

I gasp and cover my mouth with both hands. “I had no idea.”

“I guess your brother didn’t tell you.”

My throat grows thick. “I haven’t talked to Chris since before I left.”

Aunt Birdie gives me a sad smile. It’s not judgmental or demeaning, but it still slices me open and reveals my selfish parts.

My nose tingles. To distract myself from the threat of tears, I take the final sip of coffee and rest the mug on the table.

“I’m sorry.” I sit perfectly still, allowing my eyes to fall closed as I breathe out the same phrase over and over again: “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Aunt Birdie tsks me, then wraps me in her arms. “You’re forgiven, sweet girl. I’m

just so happy you're home."

Home. It's a feeling more than a place. But right here, in this moment, with a woman I don't even share blood with, I feel at peace, I feel loved. I'm at home.

Chapter Two

Holt

The last thing I expected to find when popping into one of my aunt's cabin rentals was my best friend's prodigal sister sitting on the couch painting her toenails. But there Nova Price sits with a chocolate chip cookie hanging out of her mouth and her eyes narrowed in concentration. I can see a white earbud in her ear, which explains why she's still so focused on her task and hasn't seen her door is open. When Aunt Birdie sent me to the Dream Haven Cabin to do some minor repairs, she failed to mention the little squatter living here.

Chris hasn't brought Nova up in a while. All I know is that they had a huge falling out and she took off to Paris with some guy named Beau.

A strong wind causes the door to slam behind me, and Nova looks up toward the source of the sound. Toward me.

"Holt?" Nova mumbles around her cookie. She slides the whole thing into her mouth with the back of her hand and chews slowly as if her brain needs to catch up with what she's looking at. Her eyes go comically wide as she puts the brush into the polish, pulls out both earbuds, swallows the cookie, and jumps up. Before I know what's happening, she is barreling toward me and jumping into my arms.

"Nova." My arms go around her automatically. I lift her feet off the floor and swing her around. She clings to me for several long seconds, and I can't help but smile

down at the girl—now woman—who forever holds a piece of my heart.

She slides down and takes a few steps back, assessing me from head to toe. I do the same to her. She's wearing an oversized T-shirt that hangs off one of her shoulders and hits her mid-thigh, where a pair of tight shorts peeks out from below the hem.

“You. Got. Huge.” Nova pokes me in the chest, punctuating each word. Her gaze darts to my glass eye, and her smile falters before her sparkling eyes are back on the rest of my face. I don't see pity like I expect to—like I've found with pretty much anyone else. Instead, pride shines on her face.

I can't figure out exactly why she'd feel that way, so I focus on the question I planned to ask. “Don't get me wrong, it's great seeing you, but what are you doing here?” Aunt Birdie made no mention of anyone staying in the Dream Haven Cabin, let alone Nova Price, when she asked me to check out the leaky faucet. Thinking back, she did wear a mischievous smile. I assumed that smile was directed at Maya and Des who had just dropped off an order of Granny's Jams—a legacy Des continued after his grandma passed away.

Nova opens her arms wide. “Haven't you heard? The prodigal daughter has returned.” I want to ask why she's specifically at one of my aunt's cabins, but almost as if she can read my mind, she explains, “When I went home, my dad told me he has no daughter and made it clear I am no longer welcome there.” Her smile falters for a second before it's back in place, hiding the pain in her well-practiced way.

It takes me a few seconds to register her words. “Your dad kicked you out?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Technically? I mean, I was never in the house, so kicking me out doesn't really fit. I'm guessing Mom is in the city. She didn't answer her cell when I called and hasn't returned my voicemail yet.”

I grit my jaw and grunt, forcing the brewing anger away. Mr. Price has always been a strict father, especially with Nova, but this is pushing things too far. Not that I should be surprised by the audacity of the man after what he recently put Christian through. And Mrs. Price...well, I'm not sure what to think about her.

"You're his daughter." My voice comes out harsher than I mean it to.

She scoffs. "Like that's ever mattered." She looks at the floor, tapping her toes against the hardwood. "Mom has always thrown herself into work and anything that kept her away from Dad. It was as if I never mattered to anyone."

"You know you mattered to Christian." She tries to hide her slight smile. Stepping forward, I tip her chin up with my finger. "And me. Always me."

Sure, it hurt when Christian told me she ran off to Paris a few months after my dad's funeral and didn't give me or anyone else a heads-up. Immediately after Dad's death, Nova was there for me in a way I didn't expect. Showing sympathy without making me feel weak. Understanding me in a way no one else had. I would have done the same for her if she would have given me the chance. Instead, she allowed Paris guy to whisk her across the ocean abandoning everyone who cared. Including me.

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While serving in the SEALs, I wasn't the easiest to contact, but there's always email. Looking back, I guess I can see why she left without warning. For most of her life, she was cooped up in her father's gilded cage, unable to unleash her free spirit. Once she had the opportunity for freedom, she must have grasped it with both hands and literally ran with it.

She takes her time responding. "I don't deserve your loyalty." Her eyes fill with moisture, but in true Nova fashion, she wipes her eyes and blinks it away. She shakes her head as if ridding herself of the depressing conversation.

Before I can ask if her brother knows she's home, Nova grabs my hand and drags me over to the couch, forcing me to sit down, then shoves a cookie in my mouth. I look around as I chew the freshly baked chocolate chip cookie and smile at seeing the little touches of her all around the small cabin.

"How long have you been back?" I ask.

"At the Storybook Inn or in Rocosa?"

"Both," I answer.

She looks sheepish when she says, "The Storybook Inn, two days. In Rocosa, just over two weeks. Reese let me stay with her for a bit when I first got back."

"Des's sister? Weren't you two pretty close when you were in high school?"

"Yeah. She's been a good friend even after I left."

I nod. “Des and Reese are loyal to the very end.” Then I remember what she said about how long she’s been back. “Two weeks? Does your brother know you’re back?” I ask.

Her cheeks turn pink. “No. I can only handle one rejection at a time.”

“What do you mean?”

She gives me a look of disbelief. “Before I left, Chris and I had some pretty heated words. I said a lot that I regret, and I think he did too. But everything he said proved to be true. I don’t expect him to forgive me either.”

Her expression is heartbreaking, and I find myself making a statement I have no way of backing up. “Chris misses you, and he’ll be thrilled to know you’re home.”

She shrugs. “Maybe he will be. Maybe he won’t. Another day or week won’t make any difference either way. Now, where have you been hiding?”

I want to challenge her more, but it’s clear she needs this change of subject. “Out camping at the edge of the property, scouting the area for anything I can legally shoot with my bow.” That’s only part of why I was out there. I was also working on rebuilding a cabin that will one day be my home.

The time in nature also brought me closer to the Creator, who continued to put a new mission on my heart. But I don’t need to lay all of that out there right now. She has enough going on at the moment.

“Did you get anything?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

Nova leans back on the couch, propping her feet on the table, careful of the wet paint on her toes as she crosses her ankles.

“What else have you been up to since—” She looks at my glass eye, her gaze sweeping up and down the scar. She swallows. “Since coming home?”

I’m silent for a long moment. The difficult memories threaten to return at her question. But I manage to push them out of my head. That explosion could have been so much worse, and I thank God no lives were lost. Just my eye. My therapist warned me that what happened is now a part of me. I pray every day that I don’t let it become my identity.

Nova squeezes my arm. “Holt? You still with me?” The gentleness in her brown eyes and the softness of her hand on my arm does something funny to my chest.

“Yeah, just...” I trail off, swallowing the lump in my throat.

She shakes her head and pulls her hand away. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking when I asked.”

“No, no. It’s fine.” And it’s as fine as it can be for the circumstances. My therapist has helped, and of course spending time with God does too, but trying to move past the mission is something I will never fully get over. But I don’t say any of that. “I just work here with Aunt Birdie and help out around town when someone needs a handyman.”

Nova is silent for a minute, appearing to study my expression as if she’s trying to decide if that’s the whole story. It’s been years since I’ve seen her, yet she still seems to know my tells and shifts the mood and topic away from what she knows is painful for me.

She wiggles her eyebrows. “Oh, so you’re Rocosa’s Mr. Fix-It.”

I shrug. “I guess you could say that.”

“Is there finally a special lady in your life?”

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“There was.” My jaw clenches.

“Oh no. Not another open mouth, insert foot moment. If you don’t mind me asking, what happened? Anyone I know?” The question hangs in the air between us. When I don’t answer she breaks it up by punching her right fist into her left palm. “Need me to step in?”

At her attempt at being menacing, the hurt that still lingers from reminders of the breakup is replaced with humor. “Do you remember Claire, who graduated with me and Chris?”

A deep V forms between her brows. “Vaguely.”

“Well.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “I ran into her in Denver one day and we got to talking. While I was away, she’d send me letters and care packages. When I’d come home, I’d take her out, and as time went on, it got a little more serious. As soon as I was called overseas, instead of putting our relationship on pause like a normal person, I proposed.”

Nova blinks at me in what I assume is surprise. “Oh?” Her throat bobs with a swallow. “So...” She leaves the response open for me to finish.

“Claire visited me every day when I was shipped to a hospital back here after the explosion, but a few days after I was discharged, she ended things. Said she changed her mind about being married to a SEAL. That she just got swept up in the romance of it. She said being apart was easier than she expected, and it made her realize her love for me wasn’t marriage-worthy. Looking back, I can see that what we had was a

shallow, whirlwind romance and not true love.”

Nova rests her hand on mine, the silence that stretches between us comfortable.

“I don’t know what to say other than Claire is an idiot.” Nova squeezes my hand. “The right woman will come along and sweep you right off your feet.” She moves her other hand in an exaggerated sweeping gesture.

Raising my brow, I ask, “Isn’t it supposed to go the other way around?”

“Why can’t the woman do the feet sweeping?”

Before I can answer, there’s three knocks on the door in warning before Aunt Birdie swoops in. Whatever she was about to say appears to die on her lips as her eyes drop to Nova’s hand gripping mine. A slow smile spreads across her face. Nova quickly pulls her hand away as if she forgot she was touching me. Or maybe it was because she didn’t want to give anyone the wrong impression.

“It looks like the two of you have already gotten reacquainted,” Aunt Birdie says, giving her brows a brief wiggle. The mischief in her expression gives me the sneaking suspicion that this whole scenario was set up to be a matchmaking scheme.

“Thanks for letting me know someone was living here.” I give her a deadpan look.

Aunt Birdie doesn’t look one bit sorry. “I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“It was.” I look over at Nova, who sits up proudly with her shoulders pushed back.

“Well, I came here to drop off some towels, washcloths, and other odds and ends.” She sets down a large basket on the table next to the door. “I won’t keep you two any longer.” Aunt Birdie sends a wink my way, then whisks through the door and gently

closes it behind her.

When I face Nova, she's smiling after Aunt Birdie. "I missed her and her contagious joy." There's a look of longing in her eyes. "She helped me feel a little less awful about myself when she welcomed me back with open arms."

"You shouldn't feel awful about yourself at all." I place a comforting hand on her knee. "People make mistakes. And with how you grew up, I can understand why you left. I just wish you didn't cut everyone out of your life in the process."

She hangs her head. "I know. You have no idea how much I regret taking off like I did. My goal wasn't to hurt anyone, but that's exactly what I did. And I didn't even benefit from it. I made my situation worse." She shivers.

"So Beau wasn't the boyfriend you were hoping for?"

Nova scoffs. "Not at all. He put on a good show when we first met, acting as if he would love and cherish me like the heroes in the romance books I read. But that was a silly dream. Beau just wanted me for two things."

All the breath halts in my lungs. Parts of me want to know what those two things are. But a bigger part of me dreads hearing her answer. An unexpected surge of jealousy washes through me. Instead of focusing on the inappropriate emotion, I shift our conversation.

"Well, you're home now," I say. "And you look quite different from the girl you were before you left." I lift a strand of hair that came loose from her bun and let it fall back down. "The last time I saw you, you were a nineteen-year-old girl with short purple hair. Then, a few months later, your brother told me you moved to Paris with your French boyfriend." The few times I got to speak to Christian while I was away, he mostly talked about business with only a few mentions of his rebel sister. He was

clearly irritated by his sister's spontaneity. Christian never explicitly told me, but I got the sneaking suspicion that he and his younger sister had a falling out before she left.

She gives me a gentle smile. "Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking with that purple hair."

"It wasn't awful, but I much prefer this honey blonde on you." I didn't mean to let those words out, and I feel the tips of my ears heat.

Nova bites her lip and looks away shyly. "I'd like to keep myself natural from now on." She plays with the hem of her T-shirt. "And I'm trying to become the woman God created me to be."

"From where I'm standing, you're moving in the right direction."

She looks up, her focus shifting between my good eye and my glass eye. "You don't know me anymore, so I don't think you can confidently tell me that, no matter how encouraging it is."

"You've always been tenacious, never giving up until you achieve your goal."

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A light pink tinges her cheeks as she looks down. It's then that I realize one of my hands is still on her knee and my thumb is rubbing circles. I pull back.

“Well, thank you.”

“You're welcome.” It's time to pivot this conversation again. “So all the church services your mom took you to finally stuck?”

“I mean, she took us, but it never really made sense to me at the time.” She shrugs. “It didn't sink in until I talked with Beau's assistant, Elise, who shared the gospel with me at the art gallery.”

“So that's when you left?”

“After Elise started meeting with me for Bible study, I told her the whole story about my family. In a loving way, she told me it was time for me to come home and try to make things right.” A shaky breath leaves her lips. She takes a deep breath before finishing. “It took me a few weeks, but I bought a plane ticket, packed my bags, and came home.”

“You just up and lefthim?”

“Yep. I left a note on the kitchen table. He tracked me down at the airport before I got through security and told me I was making the biggest mistake of my life. That no one else would be able to give me all that he had.” She scoffs. “I wasted so much time on him. It's just my luck I'd choose a guy who only saw me as arm candy. But I'm done with that. I'm attempting to rebuild the bridges I've burned, trying to make

amends and eat crow when needed. Unfortunately, Daddy Dearest has no interest in forgiving me.”

Interesting that she uses the same name for Kent Price—Daddy Dearest—as Christian. To most of the outside world, the Prices are the poster children for the picture-perfect family. But anyone who’s spent time behind their closed doors knows what a mess their situation really is.

“He hasn’t forgiven you yet. He’ll come around,” I say with finality, even if I don’t have a shred of evidence confirming that statement.

She shrugs. “I hope you’re right. But anyway, Beau and I are done, and I’m taking a dating sabbatical for the foreseeable future.”

“Why a dating sabbatical?” I ask.

She looks at me as if I asked her the dumbest question ever. “Let’s just say Beau was the straw that broke the camel’s back after a long string of poor boyfriend picks.”

Nova never had good taste in guys from what I remember. It seemed like she was always jumping from guy to guy, searching for love in all the wrong places. Now that she’s come to Christ, my prayer for her is that she finds her worth in Him and not a man—or even herself.

“So now I’m back home.” Her eyes drop to where she fiddles with her hands in her lap. “Well, not home-home.”

I reach forward and grip her shoulder. “You’re welcome to stay here as long as you want.”

Nova appears to compose herself, then looks up at me. “Thanks. Aunt Birdie taking

me in was a huge weight off my shoulders. I love Reese and appreciate what she did for me more than I can say. But she needs her space just like I need mine. Besides, I'm already enjoying working here."

My brows draw together. "You're working here?"

She perks up. "Yeah, in exchange for room and board, I'll be helping around the inn with whatever needs done. Cleaning bedrooms, bathrooms, getting cabins ready for guests. Anything she needs."

"We have plenty of staff to do all that. I don't know why she'd ask you?—"

"She didn't. I told her I'd be working around the place to earn my keep. Dad never let me get a job in high school, not even to work at his company, and neither did Beau. I want to feel useful. Do things to help others. Earn my place here."

Now I understand it. "That's fair. Even though you've always been useful and absolutely no earning is needed when it comes to this place."

Nova gives me an irritated look. "I refuse to just sit around and do nothing. I know people think I'm some pampered princess, but that's not who I want to be. Not before and definitely not now."

"I never thought that about you."

She looks down and picks at a thread on her shirt. "Well, you're one of the only people who doesn't. Even Chris thinks—" Nova stops herself from finishing.

I hook my finger beneath her chin and tip her face up. "Even Chris thinks what?"

She turns her head away, and I drop my hand from her face.

“Chris hates me. And he’s going to hate me even more now.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I abandoned him and ignored all his calls. Dad will never forgive me, and neither will Chris.”

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I grit my jaw. I can't speak for Kent, but I know Christian will be happy Nova has finally come home. There may be some lingering anger, especially with everything going on with their dad, but Chris will forgive her.

"Nova," I say gently.

"What?" she asks.

"Things with Chris may be uncomfortable at first, but your brother has missed you. He's a lot more forgiving than your dad. And Roxy, his new wife, is great, and so is her nephew, Axel. You practically have a whole new family waiting for you. Including a broody teenage boy."

She blows out a slow puff of air. "I'm not ready, Holt. Let me live in this private little bubble for a few more days. I promise I'll talk to him when I'm ready." The vulnerability in her words has any further protests dying on my lips.

Nova wants to be more—to do more—than what the previous men in her life expected her to be. I saw it even when we were kids, but now I understand it. Now the purpose of our relationship has been made clear.

Lord, give me wisdom to help her and be the friend she needs.

Chapter Three

Nova, Age 16

I have my phone tucked between my ear and shoulder as I thumb through my jewelry choices and answer Mom's endless questions.

"Are you wearing the dress I laid out for you? Our stylist picked it out specifically for this event. You know how your father is."

I also know how Mom is.

"Yes, I promise I'm wearing it right now." I look at my outfit in my full-length mirror. It's a frilly dress with an asymmetric hem in a charcoal black. Mom has also set out strappy sandals to match. As I do a little twirl, I say, "It's actually really cute."

"Actually cute?" she asks with a scoffing laugh.

Even though Mom does have great style, it's more for a forty-something-year-old woman, not a sixteen-year-old girl. I can't count the times one of my dad's business associates thought I was much older because of the clothes Mom's stylist picked out for me. Christian just needs to wear a classic suit and seamlessly fit in with all age groups.

"It's something I'd pick out for myself."

I let my eyes wander around my elegant room. Some girls may think white walls are boring, but white is a classic color. Little pops of Tiffany blue picture frames hold photographs of the queen of elegance, Audrey Hepburn. The frames tie in with the throw pillows on my bed. My bedroom is one of the few areas of my life where I can be the real me. When I turned thirteen, Mom surprised me with a full room makeover and gave me full creative control. This room has become my sanctuary from the madness of life as a Price.

"And the other dresses? Do you realize how much money I've spent on your

clothes?”

The irritation in Mom’s voice pulls me back to our phone call. My chest feels too tight. I shouldn’t have said anything, but I was so surprised by the outfit that my words got away from me.

“No, no, no. Truly, I’m so grateful for everything you and Dad have bought me.” My eyes once again scan my room, moving from my desk with my brand-new laptop to the wall of bookshelves full of my favorite childhood books, classic literature, and contemporary romances.

“Well, maybe you should get a job and start buying your own clothes,” she snaps.

The thought excites me. “I could.” But then Dad’s words come back to me: “Your mother doesn’t have to work. She works just to defy me. Women were designed to be at home, take care of the house, and provide whatever their husbands need.”

Mom chuckles. “You know I don’t mean it. Your father would never hear of it.” The disdain in Mom’s voice is palpable.

“I know,” I say sadly.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Just be sure you get to the Denver Performing Arts Center before five.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Without even a goodbye, she hangs up. And I hang my head.

I give myself a hard look in the mirror. My face is already made. I can’t cry and ruin the work I put into my makeup. Besides, by the time I get to the events center, Mom

will have completely brushed off our entire conversation. There's no need for me to wallow either.

Picking up my phone, I send a text to Zack, my flavor of the week, as an act of rebellion.

Me: Meet me at Big Blue in thirty minutes.

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Zack: I'll be waiting, princess.

I grimace at the nickname but push aside the irritation it brings. Zack may not be the brightest crayon in the box, but he knows how to kiss. And making out with my current boyfriend feels like the perfect way to numb myself before pretending to be the trophy daughter Dad and Mom expect me to be.

I check my face in my handheld mirror, dab on lip gloss to replace what Zack's lips smeared, then adjust my dress. Closing my eyes, I steal my spine and strengthen my composure.

It's showtime.

The event center's opulence shouldn't be overwhelming after attending countless other events here, but each time I step into one, I'm floored by the amount of time, money, and energy people put into these things. The room's ceiling reminds me of checkered waves, but has been decorated with red and white linens draped out from the center that match the tablecloths. The linens join together at the chandelier in the center of the room. Each table is decorated with a gorgeous arrangement of flowers in a crystal vase.

"There she is," Dad says, his perfect teeth gleaming under the atmospheric lights. He pulls me into a firm embrace and whispers into my ear, "Be on your best behavior tonight. There's a client I'd like to land, and I expect you to impress his son to help me out." To an outsider, he must look like a doting father who loves his little girl. But his words only confirm what I've already known: I'm an asset he thinks he can manipulate with money and things.

“Yes, Dad.” I nod, forcing my smile back in place.

He takes me around the room, introducing me to new business associates. I kindly greet the ones I’ve already met, all while weaving the little details I memorized about them into our stiff conversations. They each seem impressed with my memory, and Dad preens at their praise.

“Wow, Kent, she is absolutely stunning.”

“Your daughter is gorgeous.”

“So polite and sweet.”

Compliments ping-pong around me. To a normal girl, they’d be flattering. To me, they confirm my status as a Stepford daughter.

Mom eventually joins us, bringing with her the only person who could make this event a little less terrible.

“Look who’s home visiting!”

It’s Holt, my brother’s best friend and the hero of my childhood.

“Nova!” Holt opens his arms wide and gives me the first genuine hug I’ve felt since he last visited. After releasing me, he grips my shoulders and pushes me back to look me up and down. “I can’t believe how much you’ve grown up!”

“I could say the same of you.” I poke his harder-than-stone bicep. The Navy SEALs are no joke.

He gives me one of his genuine smiles.

“Well, now that this little reunion is taken care of,” Dad says, looking extra annoyed. He grabs my arm and tugs me away. “I think it’s time I introduce you to Justin Waldorf.”

I give Holt an apologetic look and allow my dad to bring me over to a guy who appears to be a year or two older than me. The moment his eyes land on me, appreciation fills his expression.

Dad claps him on the back. “Justin, I’m so glad you could make it. I’d like you to meet my daughter, Nova. Nova, this is Justin Waldorf. His dad owns Waldorf Enterprises.”

Justin takes my outstretched hand and kisses it. I’d find him attractive if it weren’t for the fact that my dad set this whole thing in motion. He’s tall, appears to be athletically built under his suit, and has blond hair, blue eyes, and a perfect smile. I look over Justin’s shoulder and catch Dad’s look of expectation. He’s probably writing our prenup as we speak.

“So nice to meet you. Dad has told me a lot about you,” I say, fitting my flirty smile on my lips.

Dad pecks my forehead and whispers, “Make this count” before leaving to mingle with the other guests. Mom stands dutifully by his side, her head held high, and a terrible realization hits me. That could be my future.

My smile slips.

“Hey, you okay?” Justin asks, stepping closer and placing his hand at the small of my back.

My gaze flits to his. “Oh yeah, sorry. It’s been a long day.”

His eyes wander down to my chest and then the rest of me. Unease slithers beneath my skin.

“Why don’t you and I move somewhere more private so you can tell me all about it?” His voice takes on a sympathetic yet seductive edge. It’s an odd combination.

“I think we can talk perfectly fine right here.” I point to a spot on the marble floor we’re standing on.

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“You play the part of a good girl well. But I know that deep down there’s something a little more reckless waiting to be unleashed.” Justin licks his lips.

I take a step back, and that unease from earlier returns and sets off alarm bells. I turn my head in search of anyone who can help me escape this downward spiral of a situation, but instead of taking the hint, Justin grabs my wrist and tugs me forward. A slow song starts playing over the speakers, and he pulls me flush against him as we sway to the music.

“I’m not really a dancer,” I say with a little laugh.

“You seem to move perfectly fine to me,” he whispers in my ear, leading us deeper into the dance floor where couples are gathering. “You know, I’ve seen you at these functions for a while now, but am glad I finally got to meet you. It always felt like you were off-limits, though. I was pleasantly surprised when your dad introduced us.”

“I’m-I’m flattered,” I lie. “But I should probably get back?—”

He pulls me tighter against him and cuts me off. “Uh uh uh, you’re not going anywhere.”

I pinch my eyes closed as his hand drifts lower, my throat tightening with tension. I mentally curse Dad for putting me in this situation. There’s always an ulterior motive with him, and even though he wouldn’t approve of me going somewhere private with Justin or of the guy’s wandering hands, he would want me to dance with Justin to keep him happy.

Two more years, I tell myself. Just two more years until I can escape this gilded prison and forge my own path. I don't know if I'll go off to college or do something else, but this isn't the life I want for myself. I can do more. Be more.

Just as hope starts to fill my chest, Justin practically purrs in my ear, "You look so good in this dress." His hand slides further down my back. "I bet you'd look even better?—"

Before he can finish his thought or his hand can drift any lower, he's pulled away and a familiar deep voice asks, "Mind if I cut in?"

Christian expertly twirls me out of Justin's grip and narrows his eyes at Justin.

"Who are you?" Justin scowls.

"Her brother," Christian answers.

Holt swoops in from out of nowhere. "Let's go for a little walk." Holt's tone leaves no room for argument as he throws an arm around Justin's shoulder. Without a fight, the creep nods his agreement.

The moment Justin is out of sight, I release the breath I had been holding. Chris and I step off the dance floor, and he places his hands gently on my shoulders.

Looking down at me with an expression full of concern, he asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I mutter.

"What was he saying to you?"

"Nothing I haven't heard from a dozen other guys."

By his expression, Chris gets it. Dad has been setting him up with women whose parents will benefit the business since he could drive. I have to assume Chris is as repulsed by it as I am. But just like everything else, we need to prioritize the business and keep Dad happy.

“You’re more than their comments. You know that, right?”

I nod.

Chris cracks his knuckles and stretches his neck from side to side. “And I’m always here if you need me to beat the guy up.”

I give him as real a smile as I can muster, only partially believing him.

After Mom and Dad are sleeping soundly in their separate rooms, I wander into the living room, where I find Chris and Holt drinking my sweet tea out of mugs and watching a Rocky movie.

I hover in the doorway, trying to decide between retreating to my room and diving into one of my books or asking if I can stay and watch Sylvester Stallone at the peak of his career.

Holt notices me first.

“Hey, Nova. Want to come finish the movie with us?” he asks.

Leaning against the doorway casually, I say, “I thought you two would be at Chris’s apartment by now.”

Christian shrugs. “Sometimes it’s nice to just be home. Besides, my carpets are getting shampooed and my floors polished.”

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Holt gives me a lopsided smile and pats the cushion between him and Chris. “Come sit. Like old times.”

Chris takes a swig of his tea and shakes his head, but I don’t miss the smile on his lips.

“If it’s really okay?”

“Of course it is,” Chris says.

I head over to them, plopping on the couch cushion between my brother and his best friend. This couch is one of the few comfortable pieces of furniture in this house. It’s where Chris and I have spent countless nights playing board games, watching movies, or just unwinding after a strenuous day of existing as a member of the Price family.

Before Rocky defeats Ivan Drago and shares his speech on overcoming impossible odds, Chris is sound asleep. His head lolls to the side. The credits are playing on the screen, leaving the room in blissful silence.

“What’s going on with you?” Holt asks me.

“Not much. Trying to survive my last two years of high school before maybe going to college.”

“Maybe college?” Holt asks.

I nod.

Holt narrows his eyes. “Why?”

I purse my lips to the side. “I don’t know. College isn’t for me. Chris is earning enough degrees for the both of us.” I try to laugh, but it dies on my lips with the look Holt is giving me.

“If you don’t want to go to college—and for the record, I don’t judge you if you don’t—what is it you want to do?”

The black screen of the credits dims the low lightseven further yet I can still see his gaze locked on me, intense, curious, sincere.

I bite my lip and turn my head, feeling shy in front of Holt Graves for the first time.

“I want to be a painter.”

I peek over and see his eyebrows shoot up. Most people who know me know I love to paint, though very few know it’s what I want to do with my life. Mom may work at an art gallery, but there’s a difference between running one and having your paintings sold from its walls.

Holt looks thoughtful before he says, “Aunt Birdie still has a bunch of your paintings.”

“Really?” I sit up in excitement.

Holt chuckles. “You have a lifetime fan in her.”

I can’t help but smile at that tidbit of information. Sure, Aunt Birdie may not be an art connoisseur, but she does have some of the most beautiful paintings hanging on the walls of the Storybook Inn. Paintings that have been passed down generations.

“What else is going on with you?” Holt asks as if he can see right through me. As if he somehow knows the unspoken fear lingering inside my heart.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Holt sinks deeper into the couch. “I overheard your dad talking to you about that Justin kid. You seemed less than enthused to meet him. Yet when you were over there, you wore a fake smile and pretended to act interested.”

“Wow, I’m flattered that you seem so invested in my life.”

Holt’s Adam apple bobs. “I may be away from Rocosa most of the time, but I’ll always care about my favorite Price siblings and want what’s best for them.”

“I appreciate that but can’t say the same for my parents. Dad wants what’s best for him and Mom wants what makes her look best. I don’t have a chance to forge my own path. Not unless I run away.” I give an awkward laugh.

Holt scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah, I think it’s safe to say the same for Chris.”

“It’s weird, but I feel worse for him than I do myself. At least I can sneak around with whatever boys I want. Chris never had that luxury. Dad always had his girlfriends picked out based on what would be best for the company, and since Chris will be the one taking over as CEO, I know he wants to do what keeps Dad happy.” I roll my eyes.

“Boyfriends?” Holt leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “As in plural?”

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I try not to smirk. “Hey, the guys know I’m not in it for the long haul.”

Holt’s expression changes from amused to annoyed.

“What if the right guy comes along? I mean, it’s not likely that you’ll find him at your age, but you never know.”

“I’ve already accepted that I’ll be in a loveless marriage someday just like Mom and Dad. The Price kids aren’t humans to be loved but bartering tools to be used for business.”

Holt looks at me sadly but says nothing. He knows everything I’ve said is true. There’s no point in arguing with me. Just like there’s no point in arguing with Dad.

Chapter Four

Nova

My footsteps echo in the open room of Mom’s Denver art gallery. The room is painted an eggshell white with white marble floors making it the perfect canvas to showcase the eclectic art pieces dotting the walls.

As I study a painting of a purple sky and rolling hills, out of my periphery, I see someone coming out of a door at the back of the gallery. I turn and find Mom practically gliding toward me with her arms open wide, waiting for a reunion hug.

“Darling, you look wonderful.” She embraces me and kisses both of my cheeks

before gripping my shoulders and taking me in up close.

She eyes my outfit with approval. I'm wearing a short sleeve cranberry dress paired with a matching flannel and dress boots. The temperatures have dropped considerably since I arrived in Denver, and the high is only supposed to be sixty today.

I take the few seconds I have to soak her in. She's barely aged since I left home, and her hair is expertly dyed to her natural dark blonde, keeping the gray strands covered. As usual, her makeup is flawless, enhancing her best features and nothing more. The contrast between her and Dad is jolting. Is there more to his changes than age?

"You look amazing, Mom." I do my best to choke back the emotions that have refused to leave since first laying eyes on her coming toward me.

She primps her hair and waves me off. "Oh, you're just saying that."

I smile at her antics and am both grateful and concerned that there isn't an ounce of tension between us. When will the other shoe finally drop? And when it does, will I be able to survive it?

The only tease of tension was when she didn't return my voicemail for several days. When she finally called me back, I apologized for all I put her through. It took less than two minutes for her to pretend like it had all been forgotten. As if I never left. It's not what I expected, but probably should have anticipated. Mom has always dusted things under the rug instead of facing them head-on. It's probably why her and Dad's marriage has been hanging on by a string for as long as I can remember. If they just talked through their problems, they could overcome the hurdles they face instead of locking them all away inside.

She claps her hands together, successfully pulling me out of my spiraling thoughts. "So, how about brunch? I know this fabulous place within walking distance that

serves the best crepes and bacon.”

“Sounds perfect.”

The next several days consist of me waking up early, reading my Bible, going to lunch with Mom, and coming back to the Storybook Inn and working either in the kitchen with Emma or cleaning up around the main house. Aunt Birdie and I have dinner each night out on the covered back porch even when it rains. She has space heaters on either side of the table, keeping us warm on these chilly autumn nights.

I don’t mind the monotony, and I love feeling useful, but Holt has been MIA. Even though we only live a sidewalk away, we’ve been like two ships passing in the night. He’s been away from the inn more than he’s been at it, so I don’t even get to chat with him between tasks. He’s never back in time for dinner, and according to Aunt Birdie, when he returns for the evening, he scarfs down each meal as if it’s his last and then goes straight to bed.

Holt has always been a huge part of my life—with the exception of when I was in Paris—but there’s something about being around him now that we’re both all grown up that has excitement pulsing through me even when he’s nowhere near me. It’s unexpected yet makes sense since it’s been years since I last saw him.

He’s kept himself busy, and it’s making me wonder if he’s trying to avoid me. He looks at me differently than he used to. Similarly, but not exactly like so many other men who have asked me out. There’s no lust, just...adoration, maybe? Appreciation? Either way, it’s different, and I like it.

“Welcome, ladies,” the restaurant’s doorman greets us, pulling me back to the present. Mom slides her arm through mine as we step through the door of what she claims to be her favorite restaurant. We haven’t been here yet since they’ve been booked until today.

“You are going to love this place. Their pancakes are just divine,” Mom says.

A lanky man in a tailored suit walks toward us, and his smile grows as he approaches. I grip Mom’s arm tighter as unease slithers down my spine.

“Amanda.” The man leans forward and places a kiss on Mom’s cheek, right next to her lips, lingering there a second too long.

My back goes ramrod straight.

“Trevor, I’d like you to meet my daughter, Nova. Nova, this is my...”—she visibly swallows—“my work friend Trevor.”

His smile widens. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Nova. Your mom has told me so much about you.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I mumble under my breath. Trevor must not hear my words or care that I’m even standing here with the way he looks at Mom. His eyes are full of an insatiable hunger as he looks at her.

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When Mom and Trevor share a long and tender look, anger fills my chest.

Mom and Dad have had a strained relationship since I was a little kid, sleeping in different rooms and interacting as if they're roommates and not a couple who's been married for almost thirty-five years. But I never expected either of them to stray from their vows, vows that Trevor is attempting to infringe on.

The hostess leads Mom, Trevor, and me to a table at the very center of the room.

Once we're seated, Mom rests her hand on mine and whispers, "I wanted to make sure we had the best mountain views." She motions with her head toward the two-story window that boasts an absolutely gorgeous view of the Rockies behind Denver's cityscape.

I give her my perfected fake smile. The hostess takes our drink orders and assures us our waiter will be with us shortly. Unable to stomach the way Trevor looks at Mom, my attention continually drifts around the restaurant.

"Are you all right, daughter mine?" Mom asks with a teasing lilt to the nickname, forcing me to focus on her and Trevor.

"Sorry, I'm still trying to get back on mountain time." I look up from my menu to give Mom a placating smile. I've actually been back on mountain time for a week now, but I need some excuse other than "I can't stand seeing how Trevor stares at you" to tell her.

"Understandable," Trevor says. "I remember being on assignment in Europe and

struggling to adjust to the time change.”

“You were in the military?” I ask, shocked that this suit wearing business professional would have served time overseas.

He puts his hands up in a defensive gesture. “Oh no. Just for work.”

I do my best to smooth my expression into one of curiosity and not irritation. For some reason, it annoys me that he worded it how he did. Maybe it’s because I know a true hero, and this guy screams high maintenance and not selfless duty.

“That makes sense,” I lie and give him a fake smile.

Our waiter places our drinks on the table. Mom ordered some fancy latte, Trevor a Frappuccino, and me a dark roast coffee, black.

There’s a welcome stretch of silence after the waiter takes our orders and leaves, and I take the moment to sip my coffee. I almost groan at its absolutely delicious taste.

Trevor scoots his chair closer to Mom and leans forward, invading more of her space. My heart begs her to pull away, but other parts of me want her to be happy. And if a beta male who flatters her left and right makes her happy, then maybe I should just let it go. Even as I tell myself that, the thought doesn’t sit right with me.

Despite his obvious flirting, Mom handles herself as the lady she’s always been. It’s a fact I’m coming to find minimal comfort in.

Trevor turns from Mom to me. “So, tell me everything about your time in Paris.”

Memories flicker to life in the recesses of my mind, and I fight the urge to cringe at who I was when I was dating Beau. In some strange twist of fate, I turned into the

woman Dad always pushed me to be while dating Beau. A woman who sat silently and looked pretty. An ornament for Beau's arm at functions and someone to come home to after a long day at work. My days were spent going to the gym or a Pilates class, getting my nails done, and interacting with Beau's friends' wives and girlfriends. In those four years, I became a mindless Stepford girlfriend who did little else than warm his bed. I try my best to not squirm in my seat at the thought.

"Were there lots of parties and trips to the Eiffel Tower?" Trevor asks when I've remained silent for too long.

Mom nudges me under the table with her foot, and I slide on my practiced smile. "Tons. I couldn't get enough of the sights, nightlife, or boutiques."

He leans back in his chair and peppers me with more questions. It feels as though I'm being interrogated for information and not enjoying a lovely brunch with Mom and her friend. After I've cautiously answered each of his questions, I excuse myself to the ladies' room to escape for a few moments.

Once I take some time to calm myself and say a few silent prayers for guidance, I start my trek back to the dreaded table. Before I make it to the dining room, I hear a deep baritone voice call my name, and I can't stop the smile that takes over my face.

"Holt!" I almost shout as he walks toward me.

His expression fills me with warmth. But I do my best to ignore it when he raises a teasing eyebrow over his good eye. "Nice get-up." He motions to the long sleeve gold wrap dress Mom insisted I wear, almost as if she wanted me to match this restaurant's color scheme. She even showed up at my cabin with it in a garment bag. I couldn't tell her no. Even if it is a little much for my taste.

I place a hand on my hip. "Listen, just because all you've seen me in since I've come

home is yoga pants and T-shirts doesn't mean I don't still care about fashion."

He smirks and shakes his head. "I wasn't making fun. You look nice." There's an uncharacteristic shyness in his expression now, and that warmth from earlier intensifies. And this time, it's harder to fight down or ignore.

"Well, thanks," I say, trying for nonchalance. "So do you." I motion to his flannel over his plain white T-shirt and backward ball cap. He looks completely out of place in this restaurant, yet doesn't appear fazed by it. It's like he knows he doesn't fit in, yet doesn't care. He never compromises who he truly is for the sake of expectations. I've always admired and envied that about him. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Picking up some pastries for Aunt Birdie." He leans forward and whispers conspiratorially, "You didn't hear that from me."

It's my turn to smirk. "Hear what?" I wink, and he gives me one of his real smiles. "Well, I better get back in there." I hook a thumb over my shoulder in Mom and Trevor's direction. "I guess I'll maybe see you around."

Holt's good eye flashes with something strange...regret, longing maybe?

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“Yeah.” He backs up slowly, almost reluctantly, as he heads for the exit. Before I can turn to go back to my table, he says, “What are you doing tonight?” He scratches the back of his neck with his free hand. “Maybe we can go for a ride or something.”

His request catches me completely off guard, yet I find myself quickly agreeing, “Yeah, that sounds good.”

“No need for the formal attire though.” He gives me another quick up and down with a smirk on his face before he turns and leaves.

I step through my door, slide off my pumps, and head to my room, where I peel my dress off and put on my favorite leggings and Phantom Echoes T-shirt. I wash all my makeup off and relish the feel of the moisturizer gliding against my skin.

When Beau and I went anywhere, I was expected to dress in the finest clothes money could buy and have picture-perfect makeup. Not unlike growing up under the heavy thumb of Kent Price and his sky-high expectations.

I grit my jaw, forcing myself to push down the hostility I still carry for both men. Jesus tells us to forgive, that we need to, but it’s not easy. Dad never once told me he was proud of me. And even when I won awards for my paintings, he told me it was a fruitless venture and I should stop wasting my time. Even when I wooed the right guys to benefit his business, all I got was a stiff smile.

Then Beau stepped in and breathed life into my dream, only to slowly drain it out over our time as a couple. He promised he’d connect me with top agents in the business. Instead of following through with that promise, he used me as arm candy at

all his work functions so he would look good in front of his colleagues. I thought since he was part owner of an art gallery, I'd have an in. But I didn't.

Instead of allowing myself to travel further down the rabbit hole of my past yet again, I grab my Bible off the coffee table and plop down on my cozy couch. I drape my afghan over my shoulders and open my Bible.

I'm only able to read two chapters before there's a knock at my door. When I swing it open, Holt stands there radiating his raw, unfiltered masculinity, and something flutters in my chest.

"Hey!" I say a little too enthusiastically.

There's a chill to the air as the wind picks up and raps against the cabin. I gesture for him to come in, and he closes the door behind him.

"Hey yourself." Holt looks me up and down more slowly than at the restaurant. "You ready?"

"Sure am!" I answer brightly.

He raises an eyebrow, the scar in his left eyebrow becoming more prominent. "In that?" He motions to my outfit, then tucks his hands into his dark-wash jeans.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I look down at myself. "We're going for a drive."

"Not in my truck."

"An ATV?" I ask.

“My bike.”

That’s when I notice his leather jacket.

“Oh.” I look around as if I can make a leather jacket for myself appear out of nowhere. But as I should have expected, no leather jacket appears out of thin air. Instead, I grab my jean jacket on the coat tree and lift a finger. “Give me two seconds; there’s one more thing I need.” I toss the jacket to Holt, knowing he’ll catch it.

I head over to my trunk, where I dig through junk until I find what I’ve been looking for. “Aha!”

“What?” Holt asks from the entryway.

“This!” I hold up my sleek black and white helmet and soak in the look of shock on his face. “What? Did you forget I used to ride around with Chris all the time? The only way Mom let me go was if I wore a helmet.” I slide it on. “See? It still fits.” I battle to try and get it off, but Holt grabs the top, pulls it off with ease, and sets it on my entryway table before helping me into my jacket.

I grab my helmet and lock the door behind me. His bike is parked in the mini gravel driveway next to his cabin. It’s a sleek black paint job and looks freshly polished. I didn’t notice it when I came home, so he either walked it out of the shed or I was too engrossed in my reading to notice the purr of the engine.

Holt slides on his own helmet and flips his visor up. I meet his eyes, looking between his good eye and the glass one. An intense, undeniable wave of attraction zips down my spine.

Oh boy, am I in trouble.

Chapter Five

Holt

Nova's eyes light up as she looks at me. I wish I knew if her reaction is because of me or my bike. But for the sake of my emotions and potential damaging false hope, I tell myself it's because of the bike. I'm sure her excitement is due to not being on anything with as much power as my bike since she rode around with Chris.

She walks over to my motorcycle and slowly runs her hands across the handlebars. I plead temporary insanity when my eyes drop to the gentle sway of her hips as she makes her way around it. I bottle up the undeniable attraction I feel for her and remind myself this is Nova Price, the girl I always looked out for. But she's all grown up and far more beautiful than she has any business being. It's painfully impossible to ignore.

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“Let’s go!” Nova releases a girlish squeal, pulling me out of my lapse in sanity.

Her gaze sweeps between me and my bike. It’s like I can see the tension slowly drain out of her as she unleashes her contagious smile. Before I can prepare myself, she throws her hands in the air and waves them all around like an inflatable tube-man drawing in customers at a used car lot. I can’t hold back my laugh at her absolutely ridiculous and purely Nova response. Her essence is already drawing me in, and I remind myself once more that she is freshly out of a breakup. Even more importantly, she’s taking a dating sabbatical, and I respect her too much to push her into something she’s not ready for. Especially knowing her history.

“She’s a beauty. I can’t wait to hit the open road with her.” Nova slides on her helmet.

Nova has never been afraid of anything—something that annoyed her father and brother—but it’s something I’ve always admired about her.

Nova taps her foot impatiently. “Come on!”

“All right, I’ll get on first and you’ll just swing your leg around and grip me around my waist.”

She flips up her visor, then puts her hands on her hips. “I know what to do, Holt. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“I don’t plan on bucking you off. So hopefully this will be less of a rodeo and more of a joy ride.” I throw one leg over the bike, then reach a hand out to help Nova.

“It will be!” She takes my hand and places her other on my shoulder to balance herself as she gets on.

Once we’re settled, I flip down my visor, crank the key, and we’re off. It’s a beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky.

We can’t really talk over the sound of my bike. Maybe I should install the comms the guys and I have in her helmet. It would be far easier to ignore the rightness of how all of this feels if I could carry on a conversation with her instead of focusing on how perfect her body feels pressed against mine as she clings to me.

I’ve missed her. The thought hits me like a freight train. She may be my best friend’s younger sister, but she’s been my friend too. Nova is the girl I looked out for when needed. The girl who’d tag along when Christian allowed it.

I’ve never seen Nova as a little sister. Our relationship was different. She was SuperNova, a silly nickname I gave her one night when she, Chris, and I camped out under the stars in their backyard. Nova has always been someone unique and special to me.

Her one arm releases me, and she taps my shoulder before pointing at a mule deer up on the cliff to our right. It makes me smile how something I see almost every day excites Nova so much. Even though she’s like a chameleon, able to adapt to wherever she is, I know she’s a country girl through and through. This is where she’s meant to be.

We’re coming up on the overlook I haven’t stopped at in years. I slow down and pull off into the little nook on the side of the road. Nova jumps off the back of my bike the second I’m parked and sets her helmet on the seat. I follow suit, walking behind her to the overlook.

“I never want to forget this view or take this beauty for granted again,” Nova says. Her fingers curl around the metal bars, and she stands on her tiptoes, as if she’s searching for something.

Coming to stand beside her, I say, “Yeah. I didn’t truly appreciate Colorado until after I came back home. We live among so much beauty here.” Then I stare at her profile, and her eyes meet mine for a single moment. A sensation that’s only grown stronger since being around Nova courses through me.

A soft smile plays on her lips as she turns back to take in the sight in a brief, pensive silence. “I missed this.”

“Me too,” I mutter, my eyes still on her.

For long minutes, we stare at the wide expanse of mountains and forest. This vast wilderness strikes me with awe every time I stop and actually smell the pine trees. To see the intentional, intricate details of everything on this earth.

For so many years, I questioned the validity of a Creator God. Dad taught me that we forged our own destiny, made our own way, and could only rely on ourselves to survive. He never even gave me a false sense of security that he was looking out for me the years I grew up with him in my life. I practically raised myself until I turned twelve and he dropped me off to live with Uncle Walt and Aunt Birdie to do what “he was born to do,” which was apparently drive trucks.

It took years for me to see it, but Aunt Birdie and Uncle Walter showed me what unconditional love was. They took me to church, where I learned about Jesus. And when they brought me into their home without thought or delay, they showed me Jesus. It just took me until my early twenties to realize it and appreciate the sacrifices they made.

Nova pulls me from my reverie when she squeals, “Look! There’s a moose!”

“Where?” I ask, leaning forward and scanning the trees for any sign of antlers. It could be a cow—a female moose—but I don’t think Nova would be as excited for that.

She motions me to come closer and points. I still can’t see it, so I step behind her to get a better view. Her breath hitches, and I don’t miss the way her arm trembles when I rest my hand on the bar next to her waist.

“Right there,” she says breathlessly. I finally see it.

It’s a bull moose with an impressive rack.

“That’s a legal one, too,” I note, taking a step back. “It would look mighty fine hanging over my mantel.”

She doesn’t remove her attention from the moose but reaches behind and swats at me. “We’re here to appreciate nature, to soak in its majesty, not hunt.”

“I don’t think you’d have that attitude if you were eating my moose burgers.”

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Nova turns her head and looks up at me, wrinkling her nose. “Those do not sound good.”

“Don’t knock it till you try it.”

She rolls her eyes, then takes out her phone. “Come here.” She motions with her hand, and when I step beside her, she wraps her arm around my waist. Instinctively, my arm goes around her shoulders. We both smile at her screen, and she snaps a few pictures.

Her face is flawless except for the minor scar on her right eyebrow she got on the playground when she was nine. Chris and I were on our bikes passing the playground when I watched an older boy push Nova off the slide. He laughed as he slid down it. Chris and I both threw our bikes on the grass and stormed over. I went to Nova and Chris went to the boy, lifting him by the shirt and threatening to give him a bloody nose.

Nova’s eyes filled with tears, but she didn’t let them fall. I took off my flannel and wiped the dirt from her forehead. Even as she saw the blood mixed with dirt on my shirt, she swallowed her pain and fear. It was that moment that made me realize her strength.

When we brought her home, Kent was furious. Not at the unjust situation, but that his daughter was bloody. As if it was her fault that she was bleeding. He said he didn’t have time for it and had to get to an important business meeting. Mrs. Price was stuck at work and didn’t answer any of Christian’s calls. So I stepped in and told him Aunt Birdie would take her to the hospital and we’d all look after her.

The three of us walked to the end of town to the Storybook Inn, and the moment Aunt Birdie saw us, she dropped what she was doing to take us to the emergency room. Nova only needed two stitches, and when she came out into the waiting room, a smile was on her face as if it wasn't even an inconvenience. A smile that convinced even me it was real.

"You all right?" Nova asks, touching my arm.

My gaze drops from her scar to her eyes. "Yeah." I clear my throat. "Send that to me, will you?"

"Of course!" She takes down my number, then shoots the photo over in a text.

As she does, I say, "I was just thinking about when you got this scar." I gently stroke the mark with my thumb.

"You became my hero that day." She smiles gently and tucks her phone in her pocket.

"Chris was the one who almost beat that punk to a pulp."

"But you were the one who wiped away my pain." She visibly swallows. "It was the first time, but not the last."

Her eyes search mine for a long minute, and my eyes involuntarily drop to her mouth. Her lips part, and the action makes me suddenly ache to kiss her.

I shake my head and blink free of those crazy desires. This is Nova. Nova Price. My best friend's little sister and the woman who just got out of a relationship and is on a dating sabbatical.

My phone rings, and I dig it out of my pocket. As if he knows I was having these thoughts, Chris's name flashes on the screen.

I clear my throat before answering. "Hey, Chris. What's up?"

Nova's eyes widen and she motions wildly, shakes her head, and mouths, "He still doesn't know I'm home."

I rub my free hand down my face.

"Holt?" Chris must have said something while I was focused on Nova's frantic movements.

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Where are you?"

"At the overlook off route six," I answer, trying to keep it as generic as possible without sounding like I'm hiding something— like that I'm with his little sister and the new emotions brewing in me at the mere sight of her.

Nova leans next to me, presumably so she can hear her brother, and I catch a whiff of her warm vanilla scent.

"Clear Creek Canyon?" he asks.

Nova stiffens beside me.

"Yeah, that's the one." My voice cracks.

"Mind if Roxy and I come meet you? She wants to go for a ride out that way."

Nova releases an odd mix of a grunt and cough.

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“Holt? Was that you?”

“No, probably just the sounds of nature.”

“Okay...” Chris says slowly. “So can we join you? Will you be there a little longer?”

I look over at Nova, who’s mouthing “no” and shaking her head vehemently.

“Actually, I was just getting ready to head back. I need to feed the pups and let them out to run for a while.”

“Then we’ll come over to your place,” Chris says, apparently bent on seeing me.

Nova face palms.

“Uh, sure. Sounds good. I’ll be home in an hour or so. I planned on taking the scenic route home.”

“All right, we’ll see you then.”

I hang up, tuck my phone back in my pocket, and drag my gaze to Nova’s. “Can you please tell me why Christian still doesn’t know you’re home?”

She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and looks everywhere but at me.

“How about you tell me what’s going on?” I say, leaning against the rail and crossing my arms.

She lifts a slender shoulder, then drops it. “I don’t know. I joked about being the prodigal daughter, but after Dad didn’t exactly welcome me home with open arms, I’ve been afraid I’ll get the same reception from Chris. And, I mean, he’s married now. Married!”

“And sort of has a kid, too.”

Her eyes go wide. “What?”

“Yeah, he adopted Roxy’s nephew, Axel, a couple months ago. Chris has taken over as a sort of stepdad.”

Nova stumbles back a step. “Wow.” She turns and faces away from me, and I can tell she needs this time to process. “I’ve missed so much.”

Her whisper barely carries over the distance between us. When her shoulders tremble, I can’t hold myself back. Gently, I grab her and slowly turn her toward me.

“I screwed up; I never should have left.” She covers her face with her hands.

I pull her hands down. “You’re back now. Make that be what matters.”

Her pretty brown eyes implore mine. “How?”

“You take it one day at a time.”

Chapter Six

Nova

My heart pounds in my ears as we pull up to Holt’s cabin. Chris and who I assume is

Roxy are sitting on the rockers on Holt's porch.

My entire being screams at me to keep my helmet firmly planted on my head and slink into my cabin, but I don't think I can get away from it. Not with the recognition in Christian's expression as he stares at my helmet.

"So who is this?" he asks, casually walking toward us. The slight tightness of his jaw would probably not alert anyone else to his distrust, but even years apart, I believe I can still read my brother.

The woman I assume is Roxy cautiously looks between the three of us.

"I didn't know you were seeing someone new," Christian says, then narrows his eyes and cocks his head to the side as he stares at me. "That helmet looks familiar."

Gritting my teeth, I slowly pull my helmet from my head, keeping my eyes closed as the cooling air meets my skin.

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“Nova?!” Christian practically shouts.

I grimace and force myself to peel my eyes open. “Hey, Chris.”

He looks from me to Holt, then back to me. In my peripheral vision, I catch a look of confusion on Roxy’s face.

“When did you get home?” His tone is accusatory.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “A couple weeks ago.”

He stares at me and blinks. Minor chirps and rustles fill the otherwise silent pause.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you. I’m Roxy,” the woman says, breaking the silence as she reaches her hand out to grip mine.

“Christian’s wife. Right?”

Roxy’s eyes sparkle when she looks up at my brother. “Yep.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say awkwardly.

Apparently, that small introduction was enough for my brother to start his interrogation. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home? How did you afford your flight? Where’s Beau?” He says my ex’s name like it leaves a nasty taste in his mouth. Same, brother, same.

“I broke up with him.” A shiver courses through me. If it’s from the cold or the empty memories with Beau, I can’t say.

“Let’s take this inside,” Holt suggests, walking over and unlocking his door.

We all follow him inside, and he closes the door behind us.

Before I realize what’s happening, two black blurs barrel toward me and I have a single breath to brace for impact. One furball places their paws on my chest and almost pushes me over, and as I barely hold on to my balance, the smaller of the two yips and jumps at my feet.

“Tootsie, down!” Holt says in a firm voice that has my spine stiffening. He sounds so demanding compared to his usual lightness.

At the command, the Doberman drops to all four paws and sits, staring up at me.

“Nova, meet Titan and Tootsie.” Holt motions to the Doberman and miniature pinscher respectively, and I can’t help but burst out laughing.

“Titan is the little one and Tootsie is the moose?”

“Tootsie was originally named Athena, but Aunt Birdie gave her that nickname when she started sucking on a Tootsie Roll toy,” Holt explains.

Christian and Roxy drop to their haunches, and both dogs rush over to them, their tiny clipped tails wagging at the speed of light. My brother and his new wife stand, and the dogs trot over to their bowls in the kitchen. Holt dumps in their food portions and freshens their water. The exchange is a momentary reprieve from the tension between me and my brother.

“I’m going to grab a few logs and get the fire going. It will give you three a few minutes to...catch up.” Holt looks between me, Chris, and Roxy.

Chris doesn’t wait for the door to close behind Holt before he lays into me. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home? Why didn’t you even respond to a single text or call? Why did you really leave?” Emotions flood his face at the last question.

I grit my jaw, swallow my pride, and answer honestly. “I wanted to do life on my own terms. Not Dad’s. So Iran off with Beau, who promised to give me a platform in Paris for my paintings.”

“Did you get what you were looking for?” Chris asks in a cautious tone, tucking his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels.

I release a humorless laugh. “Not even close. Beau was even more controlling than Dad.”

Roxy remains silent, shifting her attention between Chris and me. As much as I’d love to have this conversation in private, away from a girl who is my new sister-in-law but mostly a stranger, I decide to stick it out. She’ll find out one way or another. I rub my arm as a way to ground myself to this moment and bolster my courage to keep on the path of honesty.

Chris notices, and I can practically see the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “Did he hurt you?”

I shake my head. “No. Nothing like that.” I close my eyes, release the hold on my arm, and pinch the bridge of my nose. Dropping my hand, I say, “Look, I know I messed up, and I’m sorry. Really.” I choke on the last word and look into my brother’s face, willing every ounce of sincerity in my body to seep into my expression.

He remains silent, my heart cracks open at his expression. An expression that doesn't hide the pain I inflicted. I take that as my cue to leave.

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“I’m gonna go,” I say, my voice coming out in barely a whisper.

Heaviness infiltrates my chest the moment I turn. I step outside, inhaling the crisp mountain air, and head for my cabin. Before I even set foot on the sidewalk, a large hand wraps around my arm.

“Where are you going?” Holt asks.

Motioning with my head toward my cabin, I say, “Home.”

Holt shakes his head. “No. You’re hanging out with me, your brother, and Roxy.”

A feeling of defeat invades me. Not wanting my brother to hear me, I speak in a low voice. “Chris doesn’t want anything to do with me. He’s never going to forgive me for leaving. And I don’t blame him.”

Holt searches my eyes for a minute, and unspoken understanding passes between us. He nods, then bends down to pick up the load of logs. “Come inside. We’re going to work through this.”

I shake my head. “Not tonight.”

He looks more determined than ever.

“Please?” I beg. “I can’t.” Hanging my head, I mumble, “I can’t do this right now.”

I can hear the moment his determination cracks in his sigh. He releases my arm, and I

go home.

* * *

I wipe my sweaty palms down my pants before raising my fist to knock. It only takes a moment before a teenage boy greets me at the door.

His eyes narrow as he takes me in. “Yeah?” he asks.

“Hi.” I lift my hand in an awkward wave. “I’m Nova; you must be Axel.”

He looks over his shoulder. “Rox? There’s a girl with a space name at the door.”

“I’m Christian’s sister,” I explain, and he turns back to face me.

“Are you the one who abandoned everyone to move to Paris with a guy you barely knew?”

My face heats so hard I’m sure Axel can feel its warmth. “Unfortunately, yes, that’s me.”

Roxy comes to the door before any more awkwardness can pass between me and the teenage boy.

“Hey,” she greets me kindly.

“Hi, Roxy.” I wrap my arms around myself and pull my cardigan tighter. “Is Christian home?”

She looks at me sadly. “No, sorry. He went into the office.”

“Like father, like son,” I mutter under my breath.

“Hey,” she says with a sigh. “Look, I don’t know what your relationship with Christian is like, but I can tell you with absolute certainty he is nothing like your father.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that Dad was always at work. I want Chris to enjoy his life.” I do my best to make myself clear so she doesn’t assume I think the worst of my brother.

She crosses her arms and leans against the doorframe. Axel’s gaze bounces between us. “He’s learning how to,” she says.

I look into my new sister-in-law’s eyes. “Good. I’m glad.” And I mean that. I want Christian to have a life outside of work and for him to be happy even if business isn’t booming. I change the subject to the matter at hand. “I just came over to eat crow. Try and beg for my brother’s forgiveness.”

Roxy’s expression softens. “He’s already forgiven you.”

“Really?” I ask.

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She smiles and nods. “He’s more happy that you’re finally home than angry that you left. Why don’t you come in? He shouldn’t be gone too much longer. It’d be nice to get to know my sister-in-law.”

“I’d like that.”

Axel leads the way into the apartment, and I love seeing the feminine touches all around. We sit and talk for a few minutes before keys jingle just outside the door and Christian steps inside. He greets Roxy with a kiss, then turns a steely expression on me.

“Nova.” He pushes his glasses up his nose and gives me a cold stare.

“Hi.”

We engage in a stare-off, neither one of us apparently knowing what to say. Words were never either of our strong suits when it came to fights. After a few hours, we’d just pretend like whatever happened never happened and moved on with our lives. Voices were never raised. Tattles were never told.

“Axel and I will give you two privacy.” Roxy and her nephew walk into another room.

There’s a long, awkward pause.

The fight Chris and I had right before I left haunts me. It plays like a reel through my head.

“You’re just like Dad. You don’t care about anyone but yourself. It’s pathetic that you can’t even be your own person. You’re his carbon copy, so obsessed with the business that you let all your other relationships fail.”

He leveled his gaze on me. Hurt flashed in his eyes. “At least I have some direction with my life. All you do is flit around from guy to guy like a little...” He didn’t finish the sentence, but I knew exactly what he was about to say.

A mix of anger and shame burned beneath my skin. “Maybe before, but Beau is different. He’s going to make me into a famous painter. Or at least someone other than an asset or trophy to flaunt around. I’m so tired of pretending to be something I’m not. I’m leaving no matter what you say to become who I’m supposed to be.”

Christian’s expression softened, and he took a step toward me. He reached out, but before his hand landed on my shoulder, he let it drop. “Don’t do this. You’re going to regret it.”

“I won’t.”

“You will. And you will grow to hate yourself for abandoning all of us.”

“The only thing I hate is allowing Dad to bend me to his will. And it’s pathetic that you don’t put a stop to it when he does the same thing to you.”

Christian drew his lips into a firm line. The tenderness in his eyes was replaced with pure disdain. “I’d rather achieve something with my life. Dad is right—your dreams of being a painter are obnoxious and childish.”

He turned and walked away before the look of guilt in his eyes told me he was sorry for the words he’d spit out. Before I could take back all the ugly things I said to him too.

“Nova,” Chris says, pulling me out of the memory of a fight that has haunted me for years.

“I’m sorry. Truly sorry I left the way I did. That I got rid of my old number and never called or texted you even though I knew your number by heart. I’m sorry for all the ugly things I said before I left. And I’m sorry I’ve been a selfish brat for the last four years.” Emotion fills my throat until it feels as though it could suffocate me. “I missed you.” I blow out a breath of regret. “You and Dad were both right about Beau. He only had his best interests in mind. He never showed my paintings to the people he promised me he’d show them to. I was a trophy girlfriend he paraded around at parties and events.” I cover my face with my hands and shake my head. “I’m sorry?—”

Christian pulls my hands from my face. “Nova, you’re forgiven.” He rests his hands on my shoulders. “Did I want to shake some sense into you before you left? Yes, of course I did. But you needed to make your own mistakes. You needed to become your own person. Who God made you to be, not who Kent Price wanted you to be.”

I hang my head and roll my lips between my teeth. “Who I was in Paris was not the woman God created me to be.” Hugging my arms around my middle, I continue. “You were right about everything. And I hated that you were.”

Chris motions for me to sit, and we both plop down on the couch. “Believe it or not, Dad has always had our best interests at heart.”

I laugh sardonically. “Dad doesn’t have a heart.”

Chris steeples his fingers beneath his chin and looks away from me. “Dad is sick.” He drops his hands and faces me. “Did you know that?”

My heart sinks. “I had a feeling. When I saw him...”

Christian's eyebrows shoot to his hairline as he cuts me off. "You saw Dad?"

"Yep. I went to the house to try and make amends. When he came to the door, Dad told me I had no home with him and he had no daughter." I dismissively wave my hand as if Dad's words don't continually cut me to the bone.

"He's been acting strangely, but he never mentioned seeing you." More to himself than me, he says, "That would explain his even worse mood." His eyes bore into mine. "I was really hoping you'd return at least one of my phone calls. I tried telling you about his kidney disease so many times."

I wince. "How bad is it?"

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“Well, he’s on the edge of needing dialysis or a kidney transplant. And neither of those options have any guarantees.”

I say, “So you’ve been dealing with this mostly alone. I assume Mom has done the minimum to shoulder the burden.”

Chris scoffs. “Yeah, I shouldn’t be surprised though.”

“Honestly, I’m shocked she hasn’t mentioned it yet. I know her and Dad have far from a healthy marriage, but that’s no small thing.” My mind wanders back to our time with Trevor, and I clench my hands into fists. “I’m guessing you either haven’t talked to Mom in over a week or she hasn’t told you I’ve come home.”

“We’ve texted a few times, but she hasn’t mentioned it.” He looks up at the ceiling, then back at me. “She’s never been good at facing hard things head-on.”

I blow out a puff of air. “No she’s not.”

We’re silent for a long beat. I contemplate opening the new can of worms with our mom but before I can, Chris leans forward and says, “I think she’s having an affair.”

I swallow hard. “Yeah, I’m afraid of that too.” Trying to give her the benefit of the doubt even though it’s something she doesn’t deserve, I add, “Maybe it’s a way to distract herself from reality.”

Christian’s brow furrows and he grits his jaw. “That’s no excuse.”

“No, it’s not,” I quickly agree. Feeling a bit like Mom, I wave my hand in the air and change back to the original subject. “I’m sorry you’ve been facing this on your own. I should have answered your calls. There’s no excuse. I was so selfish.”

“You were,” Chris agrees, and he might as well have plunged a well-deserved dagger into my chest. “I’m sure that’s something else that’s keeping Dad from moving on and forgiving you.”

“Yeah.” My voice cracks.

I suspected he didn’t tell Chris he saw me since my brother would have shown up the minute he knew where I was. Guilt crashes over me anew, as if I haven’t regretted the decision to run away every minute since realizing my mistake four years too late. My chest tightens, my breathing quickens, and I can’t draw in a full breath. I curl my nails into my palms, attempting to ground myself to this moment. This is not where I want to slip out of reality. If I could just cry, it would release this coiled tension in my heart. I close my eyes, fighting against my lightheadedness.

After a deep breath, I open my eyes and look around, trying to find anything to ground me to reality.

Chris slips his arm around my shoulders. A picture of calm. Completely unaware of the battle waging as the numbness subsides.

If I’ve become a master at anything in my life, it’s hiding my emotions from the world. With practiced smiles, I conceal the crumbling pieces of myself. But as I’m here with my brother, who has forgiven me and been one of my safe places, my defenses crack, and my shattered pieces reveal themselves in every ragged breath I take. I draw in deep breath after deep breath.

Exhaustion from trying to stay strong has black edging around my vision, but I fight

it back when I hear a distant, deep voice ask, “What’s going on?”

My brother’s arm is no longer around me as I’m scooped into different arms and cradled against a warm chest.

My brother’s and Holt’s voices sound around me, but I can’t make out anything over the roaring in my head. Other voices swirl into the conversation, but my mind can’t process anything they’re saying. All I understand is the warm comfort I feel while wrapped in these strong arms. The safety I feel as the arms tighten around me. The familiar scent of pinewood, fire, and leather helps calm me enough to breathe easier. I’m so comfortable, in fact, that I allow the edging darkness to suck me under.

Chapter Seven

Nova, Age 9

Mom and Dad are fighting again. It seems like that’s all they ever do anymore. I curl up on my window seat and cover my ears, clenching my eyes closed. Even though they’re in the kitchen and I’m up in my room, their voices carry through the whole house. I feel like I’ll never escape their terrible marriage.

They used to try and hide it around me. Now it’s like they think I’m old enough to see the truth—that they don’t like each other. I overheard Mom tell someone she’s sticking around just for me and Christian. Is it bad to wish she wouldn’t?

There’s silence for a few seconds, and I slowly open my eyes. Footsteps thump outside my door, but they pass quickly, and I can tell it’s Mom running to her room. Then I hear her pacing around, her cries muffled through the wall. I want to go over and comfort her, but it’d be no use. The last time I tried, she shooed me away and told me not to worry about her.

Her cries grow stronger, and Dad's footsteps thump up the stairs. I can hear a knock against Mom's door before Dad asks if he can come in. Mom tells him no.

"Amanda. I'm so tired of this. You're acting worse than a child! Why are you crying?"

Mom's door squeaks as it opens.

"You know why I'm crying! It's your fault."

"If you'd just listen to me and act like an adult for once instead of flying off the rails and storming away from a hard situation?—"

"Our entire marriage is a hard situation. You can't tell me you're happy with this."

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“I have an image to uphold. You signed up for that image when you married me.”

“Signing that prenup was the second biggest mistake of my life.”

“Oh yeah?” Dad raises his voice. “And what’s the first?”

“Marrying you!” she screams before slamming the door.

My lips turn down and my chest fills with a heaviness I can’t shake. If Mom regrets marrying Dad, that means she regrets me. That she regrets Christian. Her life would be better without me.

Dad’s door slams closed next.

My throat grows tight, and I fight down the pain, forcing myself to go numb. I find a book of fairy tales on my shelf and sit in my window seat in a way to try and distract myself. When Mom and Dad fight, these make-believe worlds are a way to escape.

I’ve read one chapter when a flicker of light outside pulls my attention away from my book.

Christian and Holt are out back building a fire next to their tent. I could keep reading, but their laughter carries up to my window. I want to laugh too, so I pull on a hoodie and sweatpants and head to the kitchen for snacks and drinks.

After getting everything together and putting them on a tray, I slide open the glass door and balance everything in my arms. My shadow crosses in front of them. Chris

turns and sees me before I can say anything. I set the tray on the porch table so I can close the door behind me. Then I pick the tray back up and head toward my brother and his best friend.

As Chris's face comes into view, he looks at me with pity, not irritation. He already knows why I'm out here. It's probably the same reason he and Holt are sleeping outside on the cold, hard ground and not in his room.

Chris pats the spot in the grass next to him, and I set the tray on the grass before plopping down.

"They were really going at it tonight." Chris opens the bag of marshmallows and stabs through one with a stick before hovering it over the fire.

"Yeah," I say sadly, rubbing my nose to try and stop the tingling there. The last thing I want to do right now is cry. "I know it's not cool to hang out with me, but I really don't want to listen to Mom's sniffles all night."

"I get it," Chris says, turning his marshmallow as it browns. Chris turns to Holt. "Do you mind if she hangs out here with us?"

Holt shrugs. "It's all right."

We sit in silence as we brown our marshmallows. Every so often one of us will point out a constellation we found.

Holt takes a swig out of his soda with his free hand, and I wrinkle my nose.

"What?" he asks.

"How do you drink that?" I point to his can.

Holt lifts it up and turns it side to side. “What? Soda?”

“Yeah. Sweet tea is way better.” As if to prove my point, I pick up one of the glasses I brought out and take a sip, being careful not to drop my marshmallow into the fire.

“If you say so, SuperNova.” Holt takes another swig.

“SuperNova?” Christian asks.

Holt shrugs. “Her name is Nova. She’s obsessed with that movie.”

I can’t help but giggle at that.

“Whatever,” Chris says, taking two graham crackers and placing a chunk of chocolate on one side and setting the warm marshmallow on top. Using the second graham cracker, he slides the gooey sugar off the stick and makes a s’more.

Holt and I both follow suit. The three of us sit in silence, making and eating my favorite dessert. Holt drains his can of soda and eyes the other two glasses of iced tea.

“Want one?” I ask, lifting one up and handing it to him.

“Sure.” He takes it and swallows down half the glass. When he pulls it back, he sputters. “That’s strong!”

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I sit up proudly. “I know. That’s how I like it.”

Holt chugs the rest. “I can see why.”

Chris drapes his arms over his knees and leans forward. Resting my head on my brother’s shoulder, I take comfort in his presence and warmth.

Holt gets up and grabs a log from the large stack by the trees and throws it on the fire. He holds his hands out, warming them against the flames.

“You’re getting better at making fires,” I say to Holt.

“Thanks. Uncle Walt recently taught me.”

“Is he still taking us fishing this weekend?” Chris asks him.

“He told me as long as we’re up before six. Otherwise, he’s going without us.”

In the fire’s light, I see Chris roll his eyes. “Whatever. Grandad actually appreciates his sleep but can’t take us this weekend.”

Holt laughs. “Just because you need more sleep than a newborn baby doesn’t mean the rest of us have to wait for you.”

“It’s more normal than you running a mile before the sun is even up!” Chris shoots back.

“You can’t start training too early.”

“Training for what?” I ask.

Holt sits up straighter. “The Navy SEALs.”

My mouth pops open. “That’s what you want to be when you grow up?”

“More than anything.”

“They’re like practically impossible to get into though,” Chris says, and Holt’s shoulders slump. Chris quickly adds, “But if anyone can make it, it’s you.” He pats Holt firmly on the back and he perks up.

Once Chris and Holt call it a night, I head back into the house and tiptoe up the stairs. Thankfully, Mom and Dad both seem to be asleep. I can hear Dad snoring through the walls, and there’s no crying or sounds of pacing coming from Mom’s room.

I crawl under my covers and stare up at my ceiling covered in glow-in-the-dark stars, pretending that I’m outside falling asleep under the real ones and not slowly suffocating in this bedroom beneath plastic ones.

Chapter Eight

Holt

I know each curve and bend of these roads like the back of my hand. Whether I’m on two wheels or four, I could drive them with my eyes closed—not that I would. Especially not with the precious cargo sitting in the front seat of my truck. She’s been asleep for the last fifteen minutes. Apparently, she needs the rest.

I was up late last night mulling over my conversation with Chris and Roxy. The look of betrayal in Chris's eyes when I went back inside after Nova left hit me like a sucker punch to the gut.

He stood from my couch and threw his hands up in irritation. Neither Tootsie nor Titan liked how he approached me, and both trotted over to sit in front of me as if defending me from Chris's frustration.

"How could you keep this a secret from me?" His voice wasn't loud, but his words were clear.

I sat the wood I had carried in down next to the fireplace and dusted off my hands before facing him again.

Blowing out a puff of air, I answered, "It wasn't my secret to share, and she asked for time to process everything. Getting rejected by your dad shattered her. No matter how it looks on the outside, I can see it's eating away at her."

Chris ran his hands through his hair. Roxy stood and rubbed up and down his back. "I don't agree with what she did, but I can sympathize with her. It's not easy to admit you've messed up, especially when family is involved." Her words surprised me.

He swallowed hard when he looked at his wife. A million unspoken words passed between them. I saw the moment his anger dissipated.

Chris turned to face me. "I don't like that you kept this from me. But you're one of the few people in our lives who has always had our best interests at mind."

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“And that’s exactly what this was. I wanted her to tell you, but she was afraid you’d reject her just like your dad did.”

His eyes went wide. “I would never—”

I put my hands up to stop him and said, “I told her that. But she was raw from everything she just faced. And she needed more time.” I run my hands over my hair. “So yeah, I didn’t like keeping it from you, but it’s what I thought was best at the time.”

Chris tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Roxy remained silent during Chris’s confusion and distress, but she held his hand the moment he reached for her.

I cleared my throat. The pups looked up at me, and when I motioned with my head toward their dog beds, they obeyed my silent command.

“I don’t want this—or anything—to come between us, but this was all up to Nova. And she didn’t feel ready.”

Chris shook his head. “I don’t want her to feel like she can’t trust me to be there for her. But I guess that’s what happens to families like ours. Where status overrides pretty much everything else. In a roundabout way, I get why she left, I just wish she didn’t cut me out in the process.”

“And she hates that she did that too. Believe me, the weight that she’s carrying is unreal.”

Roxy gave me a sad smile, then looked at Chris. “It seems like she’s doing her best to work through it all. I think patience is the best way to help her. She’ll come around when she’s ready.” Conviction rang in her tone.

“She will,” I agreed.

Chris nodded his agreement.

A soft snore comes out of Nova’s mouth, bringing me back to the moment. I glance over at her sleeping contentedly.

Nova is the same yet different. There’s a worldliness in her eyes that she didn’t have before she left. But she still wears her various masks that fit each occasion like a shield, keeping people out while bottling all her emotions inside.

Maybe Chris got used to her doing it, but even after years apart, I know Nova. I can still see through who she pretends to be and for who she is. This strain with her dad is harder for her to manage than she lets on. Nova wants everyone to think she’s okay that her own father has all but disowned her, but I can see how terribly it affects her. It’s written in the smallest downturn of her lips as they’re raised in her practiced smile. The way her eyes don’t crinkle at the corners like they do when her face reveals genuine happiness.

The leather seats crinkle, giving away her stirring. I glance over as her eyes blink open and she glances around.

“Where are we?” she asks.

“I’m taking you to one of my special spots,” I answer before facing the road again.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Twenty or so minutes. How’s Sleeping Beauty feeling now?”

Her lips turn down into a frown, then a pout that would be cute if I didn’t know the reason behind it. She crosses her arms over her chest and rests her head against the seat.

“Like useless garbage.”

My foot taps the brake, jolting us forward as I narrowly miss a squirrel scurrying across the road.

“Oh!” Nova shouts, craning her neck to look back at the rodent safely standing on the edge of the road.

“Stupid squirrel,” I mumble.

“I’m pretty sure I saw it shaking its fist at you. I guess you missed the ‘squirrel crossing’ sign back there.”

I crack a smile, feeling the tension from her slowly ebb away.

“We’re here,” I say as I pull into the small lot.

She eyes me warily. “Where is here, exactly?”

I stare straight ahead, gathering my thoughts. Turning to her, I finally answer. “One of the places I go to when I need time to myself. Where I can spend time with God in His creation to heal.”

Nova gives me a soft smile that touches her eyes.

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I get out of my truck and go to her side to open her door. Even though I know she's perfectly capable of getting out without my help, I reach up and grab her by the waist to guide her down. When her feet touch the ground, she looks up at me and my breathing stops at how her emotions are fully laid bare. How she's fully exposing her heart to me. There are no masks she's hiding behind, and full vulnerability shines in her eyes.

"Thank you," she says before licking her lips. My eyes can't help but track the motion. I ignore the pulling sensation in my chest and swallow the consuming desire that small action elicits. I remind myself she is freshly out of a bad breakup and on a dating sabbatical.

"You haven't even seen what I've brought you here to see."

She shakes her head. "Thank you for seeing me." It's a soft whisper.

I tuck a honey blonde strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm here for you."

A soft smile lifts her lips. "You always have been. I'm sorry I ever took you for granted."

"I never saw it as you taking me for granted. You were there for me in ways no one else was. So you have no reason to apologize. You don't need my forgiveness, and you already have Jesus's forgiveness."

She bites her lower lip and looks at the dirt. It's clear she doesn't know what to say, so I take her hand. "You are forgiven, Nova. Whether your dad ever comes around or

not, our Father in Heaven is the only one who matters. And He's forgiven you."

Her watery eyes blink up at me. "I needed to hear that. Thank you."

Crushing her to my chest, I whisper, "I promise to always remind you of that. And that you are loved. So deeply."

We stand like that for long seconds before she pulls back and visibly relaxes.

"Okay, what is it you want to show me?"

At that, I pull her toward our final destination.

This particular slice of paradise is hidden, but thankfully not deep into the national forest. Nova is at least wearing sneakers, making the short hike doable.

Nova's hand feels so small in mine. So soft. Both of her hands are capable of extraordinary beauty. I hate that her creativity has ever been stifled. I hate that the gift God has given her has been shoved into a closet by the people who were supposed to encourage her. I hate that she's been told she's only worthy as a showpiece and not the amazing human being she is.

Nova is silent until we reach the hidden gem tucked away in the forest. A waterfall pours down a cliff, feeding a teal blue pond.

"Wow," she whispers, then releases my hand to walk closer to the body of water. Her head slowly tips back and she inhales deeply.

I come up behind her, close enough to feel her warmth but not close enough to touch. "This is my favorite place in the whole world other than home," I whisper.

She turns to look up at me with a genuine smile. Her dimples indent both of her cheeks, and I can't help the swell of pride that I feel from knowing I'm the one who helped put that smile there.

"I can see why." She turns her attention back to the view. "If it was above fifty degrees right now, I'd be diving off of that ledge over there." She points to a spot halfway up the waterfall.

"You were always fearless."

Her smile falters for less than a second before she has it back in place.

"Why are you doing that?" I ask.

Nova looks confused. "Why am I doing what?"

"Hiding yourself. Hiding your true feelings." I gently grip her chin between my thumb and forefinger. "You don't need to hide anything from me. It's human to feel things."

She sets her jaw and her eyes flit down, refusing to meet mine. I drop my hand, not wanting to push her any further or give her the wrong idea about what I've said.

"Apparently, Daddy Dearest didn't want a human girl. He wanted a robot who did whatever he said, when he said it, and without question." Her eyes flick up to mine. "Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to pretend to be someone you aren't? Someone you've never been or will ever be?"

"Not personally, no. But I've seen it between you and your brother. I've seen how your dad doesn't see you for the amazing person you are. And I hope you know that I do. I see you, Nova. You."

After stopping back at Chris's to collect Aunt Birdie's borrowed car, I follow Nova back to the Storybook Inn. She parks it in the carport, and we walk into the house together so she can give the keys back.

Aunt Birdie calls out to us before we can leave. We go into the den where she's sitting on the couch, flipping through what looks to be an old leather notebook.

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“What do you have here?” Nova asks, sliding in next to Aunt Birdie.

“This is Holt’s great-great grandma, Ella Mae’s journal.” Aunt Birdie carefully runs her fingertips over the page. “She had such amazing ideas for the rooms. She loved literature and wanted to share that love with her family. Ella Mae and Frederick wanted a big family and the couple loved the classics, so they planned on decorating each room to be themed around a different classic book. Unfortunately, she died young and wasn’t able to fulfill that dream before her passing. I can tell from her journals she was a remarkable woman, someone ahead of her time.”

Nova’s eyes light up. “Well, then, let’s make her dreams a reality!”

As much as I don’t want to crush Aunt Birdie’s dreams, I need to bring her back to reality. “Not to be a party crasher, but you’ll need to get approval through the historical society before you can even think about changes.”

Aunt Birdie and Nova both pinch their lips and give me a disapproving glare.

“You are a party pooper. Let us dream,” Nova says before sticking her tongue out.

Aunt Birdie’s shoulders slump. “Well, there goes that.”

After Uncle Walt died, Aunt Birdie became obsessed with researching the Graves’ family history. I’m not quite sure why, but I assume it was her way of coping with his unexpected passing. Aunt Birdie has pretty much turned diving into the family history and achieving every goal the founding family wrote down into her life purpose.

“Listen, Ella Mae Graves deserves to have her dreams become a reality. A mural for each room to fit what she wanted. The historical society should see the beauty in that and of completing an unfinished part of history. A mural from classic literature in each room. How beautiful would that be?” Aunt Birdie says this all as if she’s trying to convince me.

Nova nods enthusiastically. “That would set the Storybook Inn apart. And!” Her eyes go wide with excitement. “This is the Storybook Inn! How perfect would it be to have each room tell a story? Speaking of”—her brow scrunches— “why is this called the Storybook Inn?”

“Well, rumor has it that the great storyteller, Demitri Wolf, wrote his greatest work, *The Tall Tale of Tate Windsor*, while he stayed with the Graves family in the late 1800s. But there’s nothing about it in any of the journals I’ve found. It’s just been a rumor since the family estate became the inn in the 1970s,” Aunt Birdie goes on to explain. “The Graves who opened the inn took that rumor and ran with it.”

Nova tilts her head in concentration as she looks down at the page Aunt Birdie is looking at. “He looks just like Holt!” She points to an old picture of a man standing in front of the fireplace.

“That’s his grandfather.” Aunt Birdie looks up and smiles at me. “He got to hold Holt as a baby, and then, just a few days later, passed peacefully in his sleep.”

“Dad never talked about him,” I say, my throat growing thick. Dad never talked about anyone, really. When I moved in with Uncle Walt and Aunt Birdie, I learned how to value my family history and about where I came from. It also taught me how to appreciate the Storybook Inn and the experience people get when staying here.

“He should have. He was a good man. Did you know—” She cuts herself off.

“Did I know what?” I press.

Aunt Birdie bites her lip. “It’s something I shouldn’t bring up.”

“You have me too curious.”

She takes a deep breath. “I just don’t want it to make you feel bad.”

For some reason, this has my palms sweating. “What do you mean?”

“Your grandfather almost joined the first group of Navy SEALs.”

Shock ripples through me. “Almost?”

“He never shared the details of why he didn’t. But his faith was strong, and he clung to the knowledge that it wasn’t God’s plan for him. He lived a fulfilling life even without achieving that goal.”

Aunt Birdie’s words hit me straight in the chest. How many times have I felt like a failure and like I let my men down by being medically discharged? How many times have I questioned God, asking why He allowed me to excel at the program only for it to be stripped away in a moment?

Almost as if she knows I need some form of comfort, Nova gets up and sits next to me, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“Kind of cool you guys had the same dream,” she says.

“Holt shares a lot of the same characteristics as his grandfather. A hard worker, loyal to a fault, and a faith that can move mountains.”

Aunt Birdie's words fill me with warmth. She's always spoken highly of Grandpa Graves, so I allow her compliment in comparison to soothe the ache that's remained since waking up in a hospital bed after the explosion.

"Thanks" is all I can manage around the tightness in my throat.

Aunt Birdie reaches around Nova and pats my shoulder, giving me a proud smile. "Well, let's get a plan ready to present to the historical society that will knock their socks off!"

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“Do you need me for that?” I ask.

“We’ll just need you for the muscle after it gets approved and we can get started.” Aunt Birdie winks at me.

My lips tilt up into a half-smile. “You can count on me for the muscle.” I make a show of flexing. Nova and Aunt Birdie both shake their heads at me, biting back smiles.

With that, I bid them good night and head back to my cabin to let my pups out. I send up a silent prayer that God will do the impossible and bring Aunt Birdie’s dream to life.

Chapter Nine

Nova

“Change of plans, Nova girl,” Aunt Birdie says as I step through the door of the inn. She’s wearing dress pants, a white blouse, and she’s putting on her nicest jacket. All of which is very different from the house dresses she usually wears.

“Where are you off to?” I ask.

“We’re off to meet with the historical society.”

My eyebrows shoot up at that. “You already got an appointment with them?” I ask, remembering the hoops Maya—the new librarian—and Des had to jump through to

have necessary updates done at the library. “Don’t you usually have to wait for one of their monthly meetings?”

"Just for that tyrant Gladys Monroe to attempt to embarrass me in front of all of Rocosa like she tried to do with sweet Maya and the library?" She mirrors my thoughts as she waves a dismissive hand. "Absolutely not. When I want something done, I get it done!" she answers proudly. "I need you to change into something more business casual."

I bristle at her request. For most of my life, I’ve worn what other people wanted me to wear to events.

Aunt Birdie must notice my distress. "Need I remind you, we’re meeting with Gladys Monroe? It would be best if we both go into this meeting looking ready to get down to business. You know how she can be."

"I didn’t know you wanted me to go."

"I’m not doing this alone. We"—she motions between the two of us— "are. I thought you’d be happy to swap cleaning toilets to sketching out and designing the murals."

"You’re talking me out of cleaning duty?" I ask, and Aunt Birdie loops her arm through mine as we walk down the path.

"This is going to better suit you and your abilities," she answers.

I clench my jaw. And like the hawk she is, Aunt Birdie notices. She places a gentle hand on my shoulder as I unlock my door. "This is in no way meant to demean the work you’ve done for me already. You’re a hard worker and give everything your all, even scrubbing the bathrooms. This isn’t because you’ve done a bad job; this is because I know where your talents and passions are and I want to help nourish them."

I nod, holding back the emotions swarming me, and we head inside. “I just don’t want to be treated like a little princess anymore.”

She gives me a playful smile. “You’ll always be a little princess to me. I’ll never forget your gap-toothed smile when you showed up here the first time.” She drops her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Or how you looked at my Holt. As if he hung the moon, stars, and sun.”

My cheeks heat. Thankfully, Aunt Birdie’s back is to me as she rustles through my closet and pulls out a fitted cream sweater, which I pair with my favorite black maxi skirt. I then twist my hair into a neat bun.

“So what makes you think I can manage painting murals for you? I have no proper training. Are you sure you can trust me with this?”

“You are passionate about art and have always been a master with the paintbrush. The paintings you did for me are still the ones most complimented by guests. Several have even asked to buy them off me!”

Something unfurls in my chest at her praise. Dad tried to stifle my passion for art and painting. Beau slowly drained it out of me as he concluded that because I am a work of art, I should showcase that part of myself over the art I create. Looking back, it was obnoxious to be flattered by his compliment, but I’m not surprised that his view of me was so one-dimensional, so shallow.

“I know I should have asked you first, but you were an answer to my prayer,” she says, her expression softening. “And Ella Mae’s.”

I grab my purse from the coat rack and we step outside.

“It’s not that I don’t want to do it. I’d love to,” I say.

I lock up and we start our walk into town.

“But,” Aunt Birdie prompts.

“But I haven’t painted in years.” I bite my tongue. That’s not true. I have painted, but no one has seen the finished results. “I’m not sure I’m experienced enough to meet your expectations.” I revise my partial lie.

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My chest hurts as I think about my paintings sitting in the extra bedroom of Beau's apartment. After overhearing Beau on the phone bragging about how he was receiving all the benefits of being married without the actual commitment, I couldn't leave fast enough. Unfortunately, that meant my paintings were collateral damage and abandoned in my haste to get out. The signs had been popping up everywhere, telling me it was time to leave Beau. That not only were we living in sin, but he was never going to commit. So I came home. Then lost all my bravado as I landed at the Denver airport and realized I had no one to pick me up. So I took a taxi to Rocosa—my home—and was reminded once more that I had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. I was a coward not to go to Christian and beg his forgiveness before facing Dad. Thankfully, when I ducked into the library, I ran into Reese who forgave me much more quickly than I deserved and then offered her home to me.

Aunt Birdie loops her arm through mine, pulling me from my thoughts. "Don't be ridiculous. I only expect you to exceed my expectations."

The historical society offices are just two blocks away from us now. A terrible sense of dread trickles down my spine.

I scoff. "Don't get your hopes up."

"Well, I don't plan on having you jumping head first into a full wall mural. I figured you could make some sketches and do some small-scale paintings before digging into the project."

"You've made quite a few assumptions, Aunt Birdie."

She only looks slightly embarrassed. “Well, excuse me for wanting to help you pursue your passions.”

We walk up to the ornate door that says Historical Society in an elegant script.

“Are you in?” Aunt Birdie asks.

At the look in her eyes, I can’t say no. “Let’s do it.”

A smile spreads across her face as we enter the building.

“Absolutely not!” Gladys Monroe says, slamming her fist onto the table. “The Storybook Inn has been a staple in Rocosca since the founding of this town! How could you want to desecrate that place with murals done by a silly amateur?”

I bristle at her comment. Not her calling me an amateur—I couldn’t care less what this woman thinks of me—but to call artwork a desecration is absurd. Aunt Birdie laid out her thought-out plans for renovating the inn and—to her credit—Gladys listened without interruption, but the moment Aunt Birdie finished, Gladys immediately turned us down.

Gladys Monroe is one of the board members of the historical society. Since she married into a founding family, she believes she is better than everyone else. Even though Aunt Birdie also married into a founding family, she doesn’t throw that weight around. Gladys has been a thorn in pretty much everyone’s side since before I can remember. This is my first encounter with the tyrant, and I’m hoping it’s also the last.

Mr. Smith, the historical society’s new president, looks to each of us, remaining silent, allowing Gladys to take control of this meeting. I thought he was the leader of the historical society and that they’d need to meet with the rest of the board before

making a decision, but as usual, Gladys Monroe has bulldozed over everyone else

“The murals would be done in the style that was prevalent at the time. They would only enhance the beauty of each room and give the place a uniqueness to separate it from other bed and breakfasts near Denver,” I say, straightening in my seat.

Gladys crosses her arms over her chest and raises an overdrawn eyebrow. “You think quite highly of yourself, Miss Price.” She wags one of her manicured fingers at me. “I don’t think the rest of the board will be too keen to hear that the prodigal rich girl has come back only to ruin a historical landmark.”

Despite the turmoil consuming my insides, I sit up straighter, tilt my chin up, and apply every ounce of pride that comes with the Price name.

Before I can say anything, Gladys goes on. “That’s right, princess. I heard Kent cut you off when you ran off with that Frenchman and became his little?—”

“Enough!” a booming voice says from behind us.

Holt strides in as if he owns the place, brimming with confidence and controlled anger. “You will not disrespect either of these women again.”

I swallow the lump of emotion in my throat. Gladys’s words are no different than the thoughts I’ve had about myself since leaving Beau. I turned into someone I could no longer recognize in the mirror. At the confirmation, shame slams into me, and I’m left reeling in the aftershock. No one around me can see my turmoil. Numbness is something I’ve perfected over the years and hidden behind whatever mask fit the expectations of every occasion.

“Well, Mr. Graves. So nice of you to finally join us,” Gladys says dryly.

Gladys's statement pulls me from my inner turmoil. I furrow my brows and look from Holt to Aunt Birdie. Is there a reason why Holt would need to be present for today's meeting?

"I should have known you were up to something when I got the call that the meeting was rescheduled." He shakes his head and looks at Mr. Smith. "Do you have anything to say?"

Mr. Smith raises his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm just here as a formality. Gladys already told me?—"

He flinches, and I assume Gladys either stepped on his foot or kicked him beneath the table to cut him off.

"This is an absolutely ludicrous request. You are asking for permission to mar a perfect canvas with this unaccomplished girl's paintbrush."

A low rumble sounds from Holt's chest. When I look up at him, he resembles a grizzly who's ready to charge.

"Have you ever seen Nova's paintings?" He directs this at Gladys, his thick right eyebrow raised, his other hidden beneath his patch. "They are some of the most beautiful works of art you'll ever see."

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My eyes dart to Gladys, who lifts her lips into a mocking smile. “No offense, Mr. Graves, but I don’t believe you are exactly an expert on works of art or an unbiased party.” She leans back in her chair with an air of authority.

“And neither are you. For whatever reason, you have held a grudge against my aunt and Nova for as long as I can remember.” Holt turns his attention to Mr. Smith. “I am requesting another member of the historical society to speak to about this change.”

Mr. Smith’s nostrils flare as he glances at Gladys, and I can practically see smoke pouring out of her ears.

“The only reason I have allowed this private meeting to begin with is because Birdie got me a signed picture of you-know-who and I don’t want that favor hanging over my head any longer,” Gladys admits.

I assume Gladys is referring to a favorite celebrity of hers who stayed at the Storybook Inn. Aunt Birdie rarely asks anything of her famous guests, and I assume she requested this specific celebrity’s signed picture to get on the prickly woman’s good side.

Mr. Smith ignores Gladys’s silent, piercing protests. “Well, Mr. Graves, I will see if I can find someone else to meet with you next time,” At least the man appears to have grown at least a weak backbone.

Gladys strikes the table. “I will not have this! I will be respected! How dare you question me?”

Holt places his hands on the table and leans forward so he's meeting Gladys head-on. "I'm simply asking for a fair, unbiased opinion."

She sits up straighter, narrowing her eyes into little slits, but before she can say anything, Mr. Smith taps the table and ends the meeting with a promise of fair consideration for this request.

"You know it's not true," Holt says as we sit on the swinging bench on the Storybook Inn's back porch.

"What's not true?" I ask.

"You're not a little..." He trails off.

I cough at the surprising choice of topic and words. "Not anymore. That's not who I am now. But to give Gladys credit, she wasn't wrong to call me Beau's little?—"

"Don't," Holt says, placing a calloused finger on my lips.

My entire body warms at Holt's touch. At the sincerity in his eyes. At him. I need to get a hold of myself. I'm on a dating sabbatical in order to help me clear my head, get right with God, and then maybe see if love finds me. Not that Holt would ever try to pursue something with me anyway.

Slowly, Holt pulls his hand back and casually lays his arm across the bench behind me. "There is no longer condemnation for those in Christ Jesus."

I'm silent for a long moment, trying to apply that verse to the conflicting belief about myself. Holt pushes back on the bench and it rocks backward, throwing me temporarily off balance. He grips my shoulder and anchors me to him. Once we're swinging in a steady motion, his thumb traces circles on my shoulder and I shiver.

His heat permeates even through the flannel I borrowed from off the coat rack. This is not helping my case.

Maybe sharing the beliefs I have about myself will help diffuse the growing tension I feel. After another moment of deliberation, I say, “It’s not easy to recognize the new me over the woman I was for so long. The woman who was selfish yet controlled by someone else.” I chew the inside of my cheek, then add, “I should have stayed home. Or at least come home after the first year away. I missed my brother’s wedding, my dad’s diagnosis, and countless other things. No wonder Dad refuses to talk to me.” I swallow down the emotions clogging my throat.

Holt stops the swing, turns to face me head-on, and grabs both of my shoulders. “Your dad is the one in the wrong right now. Sure, you never should have run off. But how he’s handling you coming home isn’t your fault. It’s his. If I was him, I’d be thrilled you were back.” Holt takes my face in his hands, taking a moment, and I soak in the pure sincerity in his expression. “I am thrilled that you’re home.”

“Me too,” Aunt Birdie chimes as she steps out onto the porch. Holt’s hands drop from my face to take a steaming mug of...something off Aunt Birdie. She hands a second one to me.

I raise the mug to my lips, sniff, blow, and take a very cautious sip. It smells like cocoa but tastes like s'mores and coffee.

“What is this?” Holt asks, taking his own sip.

“Coffee that was made with freshly ground beans and mixed with s’more hot chocolate powder,” she answers.

I take another careful swig and allow the warm drink to slide down my throat, warming me from the inside.

Aunt Birdie looks between Holt and me excitedly. “So? What do you think?”

“Delicious.” “Disgusting.” Holt and I answer at the same time.

“Coffee shouldn’t taste like a s’more. Or chocolate. It should taste like coffee,” Holt explains.

Shrugging a shoulder, I say, “It still tastes like coffee but with a kick of something chocolatey. It’s yummy.”

Holt doesn’t look convinced, but he takes another sip anyway.

“Well, I’m glad at least someone enjoys my newest concoction!” Aunt Birdie says before going back inside.

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We pick our gentle swing back up in silence and enjoy the fall weather. The leaves have begun to turn, with only a few scattered across the ground. In another week or two, they will be all the colors of the autumn rainbow, and it can't come soon enough.

“What are you thinking about?” Holt asks.

I blow on my hot chocoffee and take a tentative sip. It slightly helps quell the nerves consuming me.

Releasing a humorless chuckle, I say, “Oh, you know. Minor things like how much I missed the changing leaves in Colorado this time of year and what a complete screw up I am.”

The swing abruptly stops. When I look over at Holt, there's something strange yet powerful in his expression.

“That's enough self-deprecation. I hate it. Especially coming from you.”

I shuffle down the bench, putting some space between us. “I was just trying to make a joke.”

“No, you weren't. You were just trying to cover your tracks. We may have been apart for a few years, but I know you. Stop the self-deprecation.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “It's not like I don't deserve it.”

Holt carefully sets his mug on the banister next to him. “You don’t deserve it. Not from your dad, not from Gladys. And not from yourself. You can’t go back and change anything. Focus on doing better now. Being better now.”

“I’m trying to,” I whisper.

“I know.” Holt takes my hand in his. It’s warm and comforting. Unlike Beau’s hands, Holt’s are work-worn and covered in calluses. “But I don’t want to hear you talk about yourself like that anymore. Don’t even think that way.”

He removes his hand from mine and grabs his coffee. We sit in silence, enjoying the comforting sounds of the autumn night. And I allow Holt’s words to sink down into the deepest depths of me to find a little healing.

Chapter Ten

Holt, Age 12

My life sucks. My dad doesn’t want me. I never even knew my mom. And the only reason Uncle Walt and Aunt Birdie took me in is out of obligation.

To top all that off, all Uncle Walt wants to do with me is take me hunting and fishing. The moment a hunter’s safety course opened in Denver, he had me signed up and forced me to take it. Even though I passed easily, the last thing I want to do on a Saturday morning—or any morning—is wake up before dawn and trek into the woods. But considering it’s summer and nothing Uncle Walt hunts is in season, we launch a boat on the water to go fishing.

I’ve complained many times...but he insists.

I’d rather be alone in my room playing video games. But no, we have to go out and

fish for hours on end in the name of “bonding.”

A frustrated sigh leaves me as I cast my line.

“What’s on your mind, son?” Uncle Walt whispers, recasting his line.

The boat rocks gently on the water.

“I’m not your son,” I spit.

He winces. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” I should apologize, but I can’t bring myself to. Bitterness still clouds my thoughts and at this moment, my apology wouldn’t be genuine.

“You start school next week. Are you excited to make new friends?” he continues as if I didn’t just give him an attitude he didn’t deserve.

Shrugging, I say, “I guess.” No one will want to become friends with the new kid, though. Especially one who doesn’t have a mom and whose dad didn’t want him.

Dad took his trucking job as an excuse to get rid of me. He told me life as a trucker isn’t for a kid. The truth is, he doesn’t want me, and traveling nonstop was the perfect excuse to push me onto his brother and wife.

“There are some great kids in this town. Give them a chance, and I’m sure you’ll make tons of friends.” Uncle Walt sounds like he means what he’s saying. But I don’t trust it.

I give him a fake smile. “Sure I will.”

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I'm not sure where these so-called "great kids" hang out. Every time I've walked into town with Aunt Birdie or Uncle Walt, I've only seen adults who eye me warily. As if they know my history—or worse, my dad's history. Neither Uncle Walt or Aunt Birdie have told me much about what my dad was like growing up, but during a few drunken nights, Dad told me all about his teenage rebellion. I took it as a lesson in who to avoid turning into. Especially since his offenses are still muttered under the breaths of the townspeople.

My line takes off, and I have to hold the rod tight before trying to reel in whatever my hook caught. I plant my feet firmly and use what strength I can manage to pull back on my rod.

"It looks like a big one!" Uncle Walt shouts before grabbing the net.

I go head to head with this fish for a solid fifteen minutes before it finally breaks the surface and I catch sight of the huge rainbow trout.

With expert precision, Uncle Walt nets the fish. When he pulls it into the boat, he makes me unhook my line and I wrinkle my nose at what I have to do next.

"Birdie will be thrilled. She loves rainbow trout. This will feed us and a few of the guests tonight for dinner."

I can't hold back my smile when Uncle Walt takes a picture of me with my first fish. All thoughts of my life before Rocosa temporarily fade away as we continue catching fish after fish.

We return the ones that are too small and prep the others for dinner. After I put the last trout in the cooler, Uncle Walter pats my shoulder and says, “Nice work today. I’m proud of you.”

It’s a phrase I rarely heard from my dad. My chest fills with pride. “Thanks,” I mumble before latching the cooler’s lid.

As we drive past the inn’s small parking lot, I notice a shiny Mercedes parked right beside the sidewalk.

Uncle Walt must notice too because he says, “Well, this is unexpected...”

I want to ask him, “What’s unexpected?” but I figure I’ll find out soon enough.

After pulling his beater truck into the garage, I help him lift the cooler out of the bed and we carry it into the back entrance of the house.

Aunt Birdie and a woman I’ve never seen before are sitting on the chairs at the kitchen island and talking over a cup of coffee. They both look up when the door slams behind me. Aunt Birdie’s smile is wide as she meets my eyes.

“There are my two favorite boys!” she announces, then comes over to give me a hug and Uncle Walt a kiss.

We set the cooler on the floor, and Aunt Birdie opens the lid, inspecting our score.

“Looks like you boys got quite the haul today,” Aunt Birdie says proudly.

“Rainbow trout is one of Nova’s favorites,” the other woman says as she peeks into the cooler. She looks more like a yacht queen than a fisherman.

“Who’s Nova?” I ask, finding myself actually curious. Maybe she is one of these elusive kids Uncle Walt told me about.

The woman looks at me proudly. “My daughter. I’m Amanda, and you must be Holt.” She extends her hand and I shake it. After dropping my hand, she adds, “I also brought my son Christian. He’s your age and will be in your class this year. Birdie thought it would be nice if you two met before school started.”

“Cool” is all I say before a girl in a flowery dress practically bounces through the swinging doors.

“Did someone say my name?” She’s almost a foot shorter than me, with blonde hair in braided pigtails.

She stops short at the sight of me, her gap-toothed smile dropping. “Who are you?”

I look over at my aunt for clarification.

Aunt Birdie comes over and places her hand on my shoulder. “This is my nephew, Holt. Holt, this is Nova.”

Nova pushes her hand forward with all the confidence of a businessman and firmly shakes my hand. She has quite the grip for a little kid.

“Christian!” Nova shouts, startling me and everyone else in the room.

“What?” A boy my age pushes through the door and comes to stand next to the girl.

Nova motions to me with her hand. “Meet Holt. Your new friend.”

Christian eyes me warily, and I’m sure I look like I’m doing the same.

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I give him a nod and ask, “Sup?”

He pushes his glasses up his nose, his eyes narrowing. “Nothing. Want to go to the Lula Belle’s Cafe and get ice cream? They just got ten new flavors.”

I shrug. “Sure.”

Before Christian and I can even step through the door, Amanda says, “Take your sister.”

Christian rolls his eyes. I fight the urge to do the same.

Nova folds her hands in front of her and bats her eyelashes at her brother. “I promise I won’t get on your nerves.”

Christian raises an eyebrow. “You better not.”

“Be sure you’re back before dinner,” Uncle Walt says.

“Yes, sir,” I acknowledge.

“Such a polite boy,” I hear Amanda say as we leave through the back door.

Without warning, Nova loops her arm through mine and peppers me with questions. “When did you move to Rocosa? Why haven’t I seen you around town before? Where did you and Mr. Walter go fishing?”

“Geesh, Nova! Let the kid think. I appreciate that you’re not annoying me, but don’t annoy the new kid instead.”

Nova pinches her lips closed and gives me an apologetic smile. “Sorry.” She wrinkles her nose, making the dark freckles across her sunburned skin stand out. “It’s been a while since anyone new came to town. And Dad never lets us come to the Storybook Inn to meet any of the kids passing through town.” She puts a skip in her step, shifting my arm up in the process. “I’m just excited that Christian will finally have a friend.”

Christian swats his sister’s other arm. “Shut up. I have friends. If anyone doesn’t have any friends, it’s you!”

I expect her to go all glassy-eyed and pout, but instead, she sticks her tongue out. “I have Reese.”

Christian just rolls his eyes.

We walk the few blocks it takes to get to Lula Bell’s Cafe in silence. As we step through the door and the mixed smell of ice cream and coffee greets me, I realize I didn’t bring any money.

The three of us step up to the ice cream counter, where Christian and Nova place their orders for two hot fudge sundaes. One with nuts and one without nuts, but with extra whipped cream. The clerk turns to me expectantly.

“And what can I get you?” she asks.

“Nothing for me.”

Christian looks at me, clearly confused. “Why?”

I swallow down my embarrassment and try to ignore the burning of my ears. “I didn’t bring any money.”

Nova pats my arm. “Don’t worry. We got you.”

Christian gives me a tentative smile as he pulls a credit card out of his wallet. My eyes widen.

“You have a credit card?”

The clerk smirks at me as if she knows something I don’t.

“Yeah, so tell her what you want. I’ll pay.”

“You sure?”

“Yes!” Nova answers.

I place my order for a sundae, without nuts and with extra whipped cream.

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“Like me!” Nova says excitedly.

Christian rolls his eyes again. “Calm down, Nova. You act like you haven’t been around another kid in forever.”

She places her hands on her hips. “I haven’t. I’ve only been able to hang out with you, Mr. Serious, all summer.”

I try to hold back my smile at the spunky girl.

She tilts her head and asks, “What?”

“Nothing.”

After Christian pays and we get our ice cream, I follow the duo outside and we sit at the only picnic table.

“Why don’t you guys have more friends?” I find myself asking.

The siblings share a look. “Our dad has a...reputation. So everyone thinks we’re stuck-up or something. It’s always been that way,” Christian answers.

“What’s your dad’s reputation?” I ask.

“Rich, heartless, CEO jerk,” Nova says plainly.

“How old are you?” I ask, unable to ignore my curiosity. She looks a good bit

younger than Christian and me but speaks with a bluntness and confidence of someone...less small.

She sits up straighter. "Six, almost seven."

I raise my eyebrows. "Oh."

Christian shakes his head as he takes a bite of his icecream. "I was an only child for six years." His eyes flick up to meet his sister's glare. "Life was easier then."

Again, I expect her to cry or pout, but again, she sticks out her tongue. "Maybe, but life was a lot more boring without me!"

For the first time in a long time, I laugh.

Chapter Eleven

Holt

My senses are on high alert as I navigate the forest before the break of dawn. Other than an occasional rustle of leaves or chirp of birds, these woods are quiet. I do my best to avoid snapping any fallen branches as I head toward the project that has consumed a huge chunk of my free time over the last several months.

Since discovering an abandoned house at the edge of the Storybook Inn's property, I've come out here to pray and spend time with God. Something about the ruins called out to me from the moment I first laid eyes on it. As strange as it sounds, it almost felt as though I shared a camaraderie with the four crumbling walls. It reminded me of when I was crumbling into myself when Dad dropped me off with Uncle Walt and Aunt Birdie. But they didn't let my rough edges deter them from helping to build me back into something better than I was before. Which is exactly

what I've been trying to do with this structure.

I sit on the log bench and open up my Bible to read a chapter in the Old Testament and a couple from the New Testament. It's the same as I've done for the last year as I work through this reading plan. From each of the passages, a single word stands out: restore. The same word that struck me the first time I saw this site.

The sun has fully risen and spills its light onto the forest floor and the bones of a house I once thought was impossible to rebuild. When I first saw it, the walls were crumbling. Flowers and weeds poked through the holes of the stone foundation. To turn this rubble into a home again has taken a huge amount of time, energy, and money. But despite those very obvious obstacles, that word has remained steadfast: restore.

It's a word that's come to me in three different ways.

The wind rustles, lifting leaves off the forest floor and blowing them toward me. Restore, restore, restore. The word echoes without pause.

Nova. This house. And lastly, boys like me who were abandoned by the people who were supposed to be their safe place.

I can create that safe space here. "Is this what you want from me, Lord?" I ask out loud. Ever since being medically retired from the Navy SEALs, I have struggled to find my purpose. But the more time I spend out here, the more I see this building become more than rubble, the stronger I feel the pull to move forward on this path. "Am I doing the right thing, restoring this building to its glory so I can help those kids find their own restoration here?"

Instead of a booming voice, a peace fills me. I allow it to grow and expand in my chest until it spreads through my limbs.

The chime of my phone alerts me and I'm brought back to reality. I pull it out of my pocket and am surprised to see a text message from Axel, Roxy's nephew.

Axel: Hey, this is sort of random but...I want to build something for Roxy for her birthday. Chris said you sometimes do woodworking stuff...do you think you could help me out?

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A feeling of rightness fills me.

Me: For sure. What were you thinking?

Axel: Originally, I thought maybe something to go with the bookshelves Christian got her, but now I'm second-guessing myself. Any ideas?

Me: Let me think on it. If you want to, come over later and we can brainstorm.

Axel: Cool. I can be over in an hour.

Me: See you then.

"Maybe that's part of it," I think out loud.

Over the next half hour, I pour back over those same verses, feeling the same sensation as before and hearing that same word on repeat: restore.

"All right, Lord. I'm going to follow Your lead on this. Guide me on the path you have set before me. Light my way so I don't fail."

I close my Bible and head back to my cabin.

As I wait for Axel, I let the pups out, freshen their water, and pour some kibble into their bowls. They both devour their midday meal, then find a spot in the sunshine to curl up and nap.

They don't snore for long before the rev of a motorcycle wakes them. They both hop up and jump around, excited to greet their new visitor.

Axel parks his bike in my gravel driveway next to my truck. My own motorcycle is tucked safely in my makeshift garage shed.

He pulls off his helmet and sets it on the handlebars, then shakes out his hair.

"What's up?" he says before both pups storm over to him and hop around. He leans down and pets them both.

"Nice bike. Is that the one you've been fixing up with Chris?"

His mouth pulls up in a proud, lopsided smile. "Yeah."

"She looks and sounds great. You did good, kid."

Axel stands a little taller. "Thanks."

I whistle for the dogs, and they follow me and Axel into the cabin. After closing the door behind us, I head over to the desk tucked into the corner of my living room. It holds countless drawings of woodworking ideas I've come up with over the years. One sticks out from the bottom of a pile, and I tug it free.

Uncle Walt's handwriting sends an unexpected wave of grief to crash over me. My shoulders tense, and Axel must notice because he walks over and asks, "What's wrong?"

I clear my throat and mutter, "Nothing. Just found one of the sketches I made with my uncle."

Axel gives me a look that tells me he knows how I feel. And he really does. He lost his dad not long ago and is still taking it hard. Roxy and Chris have done what they can to help lessen the blow, but there's only so much that comfort can do. An ache remains, even years after the loss.

It feels like I've lost two dads. My biological dad and Uncle Walt—the man who stepped in to be a father figure and exceeded everything Dad didn't even try to be.

Axel sidles up beside me and studies the page. "What is it?" he asks.

"It's a bit of a camel in this state."

Axel pulls back and gives me a confused stare. "A camel?"

"Something that combines a bunch of ideas without any of them actually going together well."

"Oh. What's it supposed to be?"

My lips quirk up at the memory of making this drawing.

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“Now, it doesn’t look like much in this state. But I know your aunt is going to love it. This combines everything she loves. A recliner for relaxing, a table for her coffee, and a resting spot for her book that can hold her place.” Uncle Walt looked so proud as his mess of a vision came to light on the page.

Axel asks, “So it’s a reading chair?” Pulling me out of my memories.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what you could call it.”

“What’s this thing?” He points to a triangle-shaped block on the edge of the attached table.

“A place to rest your book and hold your place.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. “Do you think it’d be possible to make the table swivel instead of just being attached to the side of the chair?”

Reality hits me. This is Axel’s first project; I’m all about being ambitious, but this may be too much.

“I’m up for tackling this project with you, but maybe let’s start a little smaller?” I ask.

Axel sheepishly scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah, maybe it’s a little much to start out with.” He squints as if deep in thought, then comes up with his own idea. “What if we made a little table with legs that fits under the couch? Like something she can set her drinks and books on?”

I can't help but smile at his excitement. "That's something I think we can definitely do and pretty quickly too."

Axel bounces on the balls of his feet. "When can we start?"

I check the time on my phone. "Umm..."

"Today?"

"Today?" I repeat, finding myself caught up in his excitement.

"Can we maybe at least get the materials today?"

"I can definitely do that."

"Awesome!"

We hop in my truck and head to the nearest home improvement store. It seems that my list of builds just got a little longer.

"So what did you do today?" Nova asks over her shoulder as she brews her signature sweet tea. Hers is the best I've ever had, with more caffeine than a pot of coffee and just the right amount of sugar.

I knocked on her door after getting back from shopping with Axel. The more I'm in her presence, the more I want to be with her. Even though hanging out with my friend's little sister when I was a teenager wasn't always my hangout of choice, she rarely got on my nerves. If anything, she provided a slight reprieve from Christian's serious persona. Don't get me wrong, I love the guy, but it took getting married to a practical stranger a few months ago for him to break free of his dad's expectations and choose to live freely.

“I actually helped Axel plan his birthday gift for Roxy,” I answer.

“Really? I didn’t know her birthday was so soon.” Nova comes over carrying a tray of sweet tea and her homemade chocolate chip cookies. Baking was one of the few things Amanda did with Nova as a little girl. And if Amanda Price does anything right, it's cook and bake. Nova has the same gifts.

“It’s not super soon. But we’re building something for her, and he wanted to get a head start on it.”

She takes a spot beside me. Before she can try and serve me, I hand her a glass of tea and the biggest cookie on the platter. Then I grab my own.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as I bite down on the warm treat. The outside has the perfect crunch while the inside is soft, and the chocolate chips melt on my tongue.

“Your future husband is a lucky man,” I say with a groan.

It takes me a second to realize what I just said. My gaze swings to her, and the light blush on her cheeks gives away her own surprise. But the smile on her lips tells me the compliment is well-received.

Nova tilts her head to the side. “If I ever get married.” She emphasizes the if. Then she takes her own bite of cookie and clearly savors the taste. “And that’s a big if.” Slowly, she chews the rest of it and swallows it down with some sweet tea. “I don’t mean to toot my own horn, but these are pretty amazing. It’s a new recipe.”

“Did you come up with it?” I ask, taking another cookie from the plate.

“I did,” she says proudly with a little shimmy of her shoulders.

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“Well, let me just say, if you do end up getting married, I am going to be very jealous of your future husband.”

She bites down on her bottom lip with a little smirk, and it’s at that moment I realize my statement couldn’t be more true. I am jealous of her future husband. And not just for her amazing baking skills. I feel my ears heat and quickly change the subject.

“So have you tried to reach out to your dad again?”

Even though I know it’s a tender topic, I feel the need to push her a little bit. It’s a good way for me to redirect my thoughts from where they were headed.

Nova chews slowly, appearing to mull over my words. “No. But I think I may go to his office tomorrow. He does still work there even though Christian took over as CEO, right?”

I nod. “You know Kent; he needs to have control somewhere.”

She doesn’t even flinch at my statement. Her father’s need for control is a fact that’s been ingrained in her since birth.

“I’ll call his secretary tomorrow morning and ask casually if he’s in. If so, I think I’m going to bite the bullet and drop in unannounced. Maybe throwing him off his routine will make him soften or do something out of his comfort zone—like talk to me.”

I rest my hand on her shoulder. “He will talk to you eventually. Just pray about it, and he’ll come around. You’re his daughter.”

She clenches her jaw. “Not according to him.”

“Those were words spoken as a knee-jerk reaction. God is working on him.”

“I hope you’re right. At this point, I truly believe only Jesus can change his heart of stone.”

“And He will.” I say it with all the certainty I don’t feel, while praying my words aren’t just an empty promise.

Chapter Twelve

Nova

I slowly push a deep breath through my lips before lifting my fist to knock on the office door.

Dad’s secretary is scheduled to be out at lunch—something she told me when I called an hour ago—which I thought would be the perfect time to show up here. If Dad is going to reject me again, it will have to be to my face...again. Preferably without an audience.

It hasn’t been long since his last rejection, but I feel as though I’ve lived another life since that day.

The door swings open before I can give it another knock. Dad looks ruffled and irritable.

Some things never change.

“Nova.” His tone is sharp, yet not as lethal as the last time we talked.

“Hi, Dad. I’d really like to talk.”

He draws his lips into a firm line. Again, I’m struck by how much he’s aged. Kidney disease has really taken a toll on him.

Dad is silent for a second too long, and all the bravado I worked up while driving here slowly drains out of me.

“This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come here. I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry for running off.” I turn on my heel. Dad reaches out and grabs my arm.

“Nova, wait.” His voice doesn’t hold the same command it usually does. That little fact brings me hope.

Slowly, carefully, I turn to face him again. I work up the courage to stare at the man whose actions made it clear I’d never be enough.

“What?” I ask.

He clears his throat as if getting his next words out goes against everything he stands for. “We do need to talk. Really talk.”

My heart hammers against my ribcage. Any remaining bravado dissipates.

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“O-Okay,” I find myself saying.

“We can go out to lunch somewhere. My treat.” He attempts to give me a smile, but it’s weak and awkward.

“I have my own money.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Oh?”

I cross my arms over my chest and stand taller. “Aunt Birdie has me working around the Storybook Inn.”

He grimaces and shakes his head. “Nova. A Price doesn’t?—”

“A Price does whatever needs to be done to survive. And believe it or not, working at the Storybook Inn helps me do more than survive. I thrive there.”

He forces another smile that barely touches his eyes. But he’s clearly trying, and I should respect that.

“Right.” He grabs his suit jacket off the coat rack next to his door and slides it on. The material that once used to fit him like a tailored glove hangs off his shoulders.

He motions with his hand, and I let him lead me out of his office’s waiting room and into the elevator that takes us to the bottom floor.

The walk to the restaurant is spent in awkward silence, and he moves a little slower

than he used to. Part of me wants to ask him more about his condition, though the little girl in me doesn't want to see her dad as anything but invincible. But it's mostly the bitterness I feel from our history that has me clamping my mouth closed.

When we reach the restaurant, he opens the door and motions me in.

"Table for two," he says to the hostess, who quickly grabs two menus and tells us to follow her.

Someone at a table we pass greets Dad. I turn and give them a polite smile before focusing my attention forward to give them privacy. He rarely wanted me involved in conversations with his associates unless it benefited him in some way. So instead, I scan my surroundings, taking in the pop of white tablecloths that contrasts with the deep red wallpaper. Dimmed crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, barely illuminating the dining room. Each of the seated patrons is dressed in business attire, not a single person in jeans from what I can see. When my gaze sweeps to the far corner of the room, my heart stops at the couple tucked into the intimate table for two.

Mom is sitting at the table facing me, and Trevor sits across from her, his hand softly gripping hers. I can tell from the profile and the distinct slick pompadour hairstyle it's him. She wears a flirty smile and gazes at him in a way I don't remember ever seeing her look at Dad.

I rub my chest, feeling a pang of sympathy for my parents' dying marriage. Then another pang of sympathy for Dad, who probably deserves it. Regret slams into me. It's not a thought or belief I should have.

It's a funny thing about knowing Jesus—it changes us without us even realizing it. With that thought, I say a silent prayer. Lord, give me wisdom on how to handle this. Do I allow it to play out? Or distract Dad?

I look over at Dad when he turns back to me. This time, a genuine smile is on his face. And even though I truly do believe the truth will set us free, I don't want to forfeit the potential of this lunch. He doesn't seem to notice Mom at all. The hostess takes a turn, diverting us away from Mom and her companion.

The hostess seats us on the other side of the dining room, Mom and Trevor far enough away to not be in focus. Just as a precaution, I sit on the side of the table facing them.

We haven't been sitting a full minute when our waiter comes over.

"What can I get you to drink?" he asks.

"Just a water for me, please," I answer.

"A water with lemon for me."

The waiter dips his head and leaves Dad and me to talk. Dad folds his hands on top of the table and leans forward.

"So, tell me. How was Paris?"

His question shouldn't surprise me or take me off guard, but it does. I want to leave Paris and all the mistakes I made there in the past. It's why I haven't reached out to Beau's assistant Elise despite my promise to stay in touch.

"It was...Paris."

Dad lifts his eyebrows as if encouraging me to continue. In the dim lighting, the bags under his eyes and the shallow pallor of his skin are barely noticeable. I can almost pretend he doesn't look sick at all.

The waiter returns and places our waters in front of us, as well as a basket of breadsticks. Then he takes our order. I order lasagna, my favorite Italian dish. Dad orders chicken parmesan and pasta, his usual.

The moment our waiter walks away, Dad asks me again, “Well, I’ve only ever been to Paris for work. So tell me what it is that appealed most to you.”

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I know it's childish, but I throw a barb. "The art."

His expression falls. "Well, Beau did promise to get you in with the prominent artists of Paris. Did he do that?"

From his level tone, I can't tell if he's attempting to cut me right back or is showing genuine interest.

"Not exactly." I grab a breadstick and rip a section off, putting it in my mouth in hopes I can gather my thoughts and a smidgeon of wisdom before I have to speak again.

"Hmm," Dad hums. "I suspected he wasn't the man you thought he was."

The word "suspected" is unexpected. I imagined I'd hear something more along the lines of "I told you so" or "I know how to read people and you should have listened to me." I swallow the bite of bread without tasting it.

"Not at all," I admit. His expression tells me he wants to know more, but this is all I have for today when it comes to my mistakes. "So, what's going on with you?" It's a generic question, but that's all I can manage right now.

He gives me a sad smile. His mask of pride and confidence slips from his face. "I'm sure you know by now that I'm sick."

"Kidney disease."

Dad raises his eyebrow. “You must have been talking to your brother. The doctors tell me I either need dialysis or a kidney transplant. Neither of which is appealing to me.”

“I don’t think that’d be appealing to anyone,” I say.

“I’d imagine a kidney transplant wouldn’t be great, but it would be a long-term solution without a long-term weekly commitment.”

It’s Dad’s turn to grab a breadstick and bite into it. For the first time since I can remember, he looks uncomfortable.

“Unfortunately, I am not exactly high on their priority list for a kidney.” After a brief, silent moment, he stands. “Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

“Sure.”

He heads to the bathroom, which is thankfully in the opposite direction of Mom and Trevor. I take out my phone and send a quick text to Holt.

Pray for me. I’m out to lunch with my dad and...Mom is here with her “work friend.”

No response comes as I wait for Dad. Which I fully expected. But sending a text to Holt bolstered my courage.

“Trevor?” I hear Dad ask.

“Ah, Mr. Price. What a nice surprise.” Trevor’s tone is full of sincerity covered in slime. If sincere slime existed, Trevor would be its poster child.

I can hear the two men approaching me from behind.

“Nova?” Trevor chuckles. “Yet another pleasant surprise.”

Unsure of what to do, I stand, pushing my chair back, which screeches and makes me wince.

Trevor leans forward and kisses my cheek.

“You know Nova?” Dad asks.

Trevor puts his arm around my shoulder and tugs me into his side. “I got to meet this pretty girl shortly after her return from Paris.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but yes, one day at brunch, Mom and I ran into Trevor, and I was able to meet Mom’s work associate.” The white lie slips out, and I immediately feel guilty.

Trevor’s fake smile slips for a second. “Right. I just so happened to bump into Amanda and Nova at the restaurant. Amanda graciously invited me to sit with them, and to keep unwanted male attention from them, I agreed. You have two very beautiful women in your household.” He winks.

Dad’s nostrils flare and his eyes light up with fire as his gaze drifts behind me. “I suppose you just ran into Trevor here, too? Hmm?”

My head whips around to find Mom staring back at Dad like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming eighteen-wheeler.

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“Kent, I didn’t realize you ever ate anywhere outside your office,” Mom says haughtily.

“I didn’t realize you were having an affair right under my nose,” Dad shoots back.

The restaurant goes silent. All eyes are on us.

A sick feeling fills my stomach. “Go back to your meals, people. Nothing to see here.” When they go back to how they were—minus a few Nosy Nellies—I say, “Mom isn’t having an affair. She and Trevor are justfriends.”

The look in Dad’s eyes makes me shrink inside myself. “I thought you called them ‘work associates.’” He puts the words in air quotes, then pulls out his wallet and slaps a one hundred dollar bill on the table. “We’re done here.” He directs the words to no one in particular, which means he’s dismissing all of us.

We haven’t even gotten our food yet and this lunch has completely blown up in my face. He storms out of the restaurant without a backward glance.

Shame is painted all over Mom’s face, but Trevor doesn’t seem to notice. As arrogant as he’s proven to be, Trevor wraps an arm around Mom’s waist and leans down to whisper something in her ear. Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t push him away.

Irritation boils inside of me. “I feel like someone just sucker punched me in the chest.” Searching Mom’s eyes for any sign of regret, I add, “I know Dad is far from perfect. You and I know that more than anyone. But this just...” I look between the two of them. “You both make me sick.”

Mom's mouth falls open and regret immediately fills her eyes.

With that, I grab my purse, turn on my heel, and follow in Dad's footsteps. Once I'm outside, I power walk back to the parking garage where I left Aunt Birdie's car and drive to the nearest art store. It's been too long since I played with paints, and painting is the distraction and comfort I need right now.

I want to go back to the office and try to talk to Dad, but I have no idea what to say. Any of the minimal progress we made today has gone out the window. It will take a miracle to save their marriage from this. Or bring something remotely normal from the ashes of our past.

It's a quick drive to the store. As I browse the aisles, I ask the Holy Spirit to intercede for me.

I don't know what to ask of my Heavenly Father. He's already given me so much. With all the good and grace Jesus has shown me, how can I ask anymore of Him? Will I reach a point where I'm asking too much? Does His grace ever run out? Am I truly forgiven?

My fingertips halt on a bottle of paint. I may be making my own money now, but I should also be smart about how I spend it. I scan all the colors and settle on six instead the usual twelve or more.

After gathering the rest of the supplies I need, I check out. When I reach the car, my phone notifies me of an incoming text. I drop my shopping bags in the backseat and slide into the driver's side before locking all the doors.

When I open up the text, I can't help but smile at what it says.

Holt: I'm always praying for you, SuperNova. But I'm praying extra hard for you

now. Come over when you're done. I know exactly what you need to feel better.

Me: I'll be there soon.

Chapter Thirteen

Nova

I drop my shopping bags off on my counter before practically running over to Holt's cabin. My plan was to change out of this dress into something more comfortable. But from the moment Holt's text came through, the need to be with him has overwhelmed me. He's my shelter in the storm. My safe place. I need my safe place more than ever before.

The wood beneath my feet groans as I step to his door. My fist doesn't even touch the wood before Titan and Tootsie's alternating barks announce my arrival.

The door swings open, and Holt stands there wearing a white T-shirt that clings to all the right muscles—his broad chest, large biceps, and chiseled waist, to name a few. He's wearing black sweatpants that look way more comfortable than the wrap dress that's been slowly suffocating me all day.

Holt widens his stance and settles his hands on his hips. Even though I'm slightly surprised by his comfy-cozy look, it doesn't compare to the shock I feel when my gaze lands on his feet. He's wearing socks covered in...Sasquatches that say "Gone Squatching." I stare down at his socks, blinking at the absolutely unexpected hilarity of this situation. As if he doesn't even care that I'm staring at his feet, he wiggles his toes. Slowly, my eyes travel back up his massive form, and the smile he wears shocks me beyond words.

"You, Holt Graves, are full of surprises. I had no idea you believed in Bigfoot."

“Who said I did?”

Without a word, I point at his socks.

He shrugs, then turns, and I’m left staring dumbstruck at him as he practically swaggers into the house. There’s a tattoo on the inside of his forearm and I see a pattern of what appears to be dots on his inner bicep. Two tattoos I’ve failed to see before. Two tattoos more than I knew he had.

Titan and Tootsie follow me in and make themselves cozy in their doggy beds.

The rustic interior makes the cabin even cozier on the inside than the outside. Sure, there’s a ton of flannel, but it’s the type of thing that makes me want to curl up on the couch and wrap myself up like a human burrito with a good book and hot cup of cocoa. It’s homey. I follow Holt into the kitchen and hop up onto the counter next to the stove.

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“It’s so cozy here,” I say with sincerity.

Holt grunts in response, and I roll my eyes, mumbling, “Of course you believe in Bigfoot; you act like you’ve been raised by them.”

“What was that?” Holt asks. It, like the rest of the cabin, is rustic. He’s popping old-fashioned popcorn on top of the gas stove. The pop pop pop of the corn fills the otherwise silent cabin.

There’s no need to sugarcoat anything with Holt, so I answer honestly. “I said I shouldn’t be surprised you believe in Bigfoot since you act as if you were raised by them.”

I can see him fighting a smile beneath his three-day scruff as he shuffles the kernels around in the pan.

“Can I help with anything?” I ask, jumping down from the counter and coming to stand beside him.

“Nope, everything is already set up.”

I raise my brow and cross my arms over my chest. His good eye travels down my form, and I’m confused by the warmth I feel at the appreciation I see in his gaze.

“Why don’t you put on something more comfortable?” He motions to my dress.

“Sure,” I say awkwardly. “I’ll just pop over to my cabin and grab?—”

“I have stuff here.” Turning off the stove, he motions for me to follow him to a bedroom. I stand outside the door while Holt pulls a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt out of the laundry basket of folded clothes sitting on a chair.

“Okay,” I squeak, feeling shy all of a sudden.

He smiles at me, then says, “Come outside when you’re ready.”

“Outside?” I tilt my head, reminding myself of Tootsie and Titan when they look confused.

“Yeah.” He gently pushes me into the room, then closes the door behind him. “Come to the back deck when you’re all done.” His words are muffled from behind the closed door.

I change as quickly as I can into the gray sweatpants and long sleeve T-shirt he laid out on his bed. There is no reason for me to not just walk over to my cabin and put my own clothes on, but these smell like him and are more cozy than any of mine. So instead of questioning Holt’s suggestion, I enjoy the feel of the soft cotton against my skin and Holt’s comforting scent wrapped into each fiber of these clothes. I roll up the shirt sleeves and hem of the sweatpants before making my way to the back of his house and stepping through the sliding glass doors. A gasp escapes my lips at the sight before me.

I do a spin, slowly taking in everything he’s done. There are twinkle lights twined through the slats of his pergola, two lounge chairs covered with blankets, and a table in between them holding two bowls of popcorn and two glasses of sweet tea. Against the house is a white sheet set up as a projector screen.

“You did all of this for me?” Playfully, I place my hands on my waist and pop a hip. “Or am I infringing on a hot date you had planned with another girl?”

I'm only joking, but Holt's Adam's apple bobs, and any playfulness I was feeling fades away. Maybe he did cancel a date with another girl just to make me feel better.

"Shoot, is that what happened? Don't cancel your plans for me." I tug up my pant legs and head back toward the door.

"Nova, stop!"

I turn and face him. His stormy expression takes my breath away. "I did all of this for you. I'm not dating anyone or remotely interested in anyone el—" He clears his throat.

"Oh," I whisper. "That's good. I'm sure if you were, she wouldn't be too happy with this arrangement."

"Exactly. My woman would know I'm all hers." His good eye searches mine intently as if there's a deeper meaning or maybe even a promise in his words, but I don't allow myself to dwell on them. I am on a necessary dating sabbatical and even if I wasn't, Holt deserves someone better than me. A girl with less baggage.

Nodding, I say, "That's good. Jealousy is never a healthy emotion to have active in a relationship." That reminds me of why I texted him in the first place. I try to push away the charged atmosphere surrounding us to focus on the problem at hand. "Speaking of..."

All the previous heat in his expression is replaced with concern. "What happened with your dad?" He motions for me to take a seat, so I do. Holt follows suit.

I dive in and give him the play by play of what happened, beginning with my arrival at Dad's office and ending with Dad storming out of the restaurant.

Holt is silent for a long pause, then says, “Chris had a suspicion your mom was cheating. He just never knew for sure.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know if they’ve fully infringed on an affair, but...” I grimace. “They looked pretty cozy tucked into a private corner. At a minimum, there’s definitely emotional cheating.” I clench my jaw.

He reaches across the distance between us and takes my hand in his. “I’m sorry. No matter how it’s progressed, none of it is easy.”

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“You know what’s sad? When I was a little girl, I wished they’d just get a divorce. Neither of them were open to counseling. They basically hated each other. One of the nights you and Chris camped outside because they were fighting, I heard Mom scream that she wished they never got married.” I shake my head. “It made me believe that she regretted ever having me or Chris.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Holt jumps in. “I think that’s one of the very few things your mom doesn’t regret when it comes to your dad. Actually, I know that.”

“How?”

“I overheard her talking to Aunt Birdie one of the times she came to visit. She’d vent to her all the time about your dad. But one time she said, ‘Christian and Nova are the only two things that make this miserable marriage worth it.’”

“No, she didn’t.” I narrow my eyes, showing all my disbelief on my face.

Holt nods confidently. “Yes, she did. Despite her imperfections and the ways she messed up, she loves you two. And your dad does, too. Both of them are just terrible at showing it.”

A humorless laugh escapes my lips. “Thankfully, I have you to show me genuine care and concern.” I look around once more at all the effort he put into tonight. “Seriously, Holt. This means everything to me.” Without thinking about it, I close the distance between us and wrap my arms around his neck. I’m awkwardly perched halfway between his leg and the chair, but not for long. Holt pulls me fully on his lap and hugs me back so tightly that a few of the shattered pieces of my heart start to stitch back

together. The emotional pain I constantly feel when it comes to my parents relents just a fraction.

Holt rests his forehead against mine once I pull back.

“You will always have me, SuperNova. I promise you that.”

Chapter Fourteen

Nova

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Crack! Thud.

The steady rhythm wakes me from my mid-afternoon nap. I sit up on my couch, stretch my arms over my head, and glance at the clock. Three o'clock in the afternoon. The buffalo plaid blanket slides off me as I stand and make my way to the window. I pull back the curtains and am very pleasantly surprised by what I find.

Holt Graves is chopping wood.

His flannel shirt is open in the front, showcasing the fit of the black T-shirt underneath that molds to his abs and broad chest. I swallow the lump in my throat, head over to the kitchen, and pull my water pitcher out of the refrigerator and fill up a glass. As if I'm being controlled by a puppet master, I slide on my boots and head outside. I watch in awe as Holt brings the axe down and splits each log with ease. His sleeves are rolled up and his hat is on backward. That surprise tattoo peeks at me from his forearm. It's like a scene straight out of a contemporary mountain man romance book. Except I'm not a stranded businesswoman in need of lodging; I'm a disaster of a girl trying to piece her life together after making a huge mistake.

He's so focused he doesn't notice me for several more minutes. And in those minutes,

I'm pretty sure my mouth turns into the Sahara Desert. Holt has always been good looking, but knowing a man is nice to look at and becoming attracted to him are two completely different things. Ever since coming home from Paris, I can't help but acknowledge the pull I have toward him after each of our interactions.

After successfully splitting the last round, Holt looks up and finally sees me. He swipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm and gives me a smile that turns my legs to jelly. I awkwardly lift the glass in greeting before walking it over to him.

He thanks me as he takes it and swallows down several large gulps. I can't tell if it's sweat or drips of water that slide down his neck onto his chest, but either way, it has me mentally fanning myself.

"It's like you read my mind," he says, pulling out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his mouth. His jaw is covered with day-old stubble, enhancing the hot mountain man vibe he's putting off.

Boy, am I glad he can't read my mind right now.

"Well, when I heard you chopping wood, I assumed you'd get thirsty." I motion to his body, covered in a thick sheen of sweat. "Since you looked like you sweated out half your body weight."

He gives me a playful smile. "It seems like you've paid quite a good deal of attention. How long were you watching me?"

I pretend like the burning on my cheeks is from the bright autumn sun and cross my arms over my chest. "You can blame yourself for looking so good out here in plaid, wearing that eyepatch and backward hat. It doesn't hurt that you're built like a ripped lumberjack. Lumberjacks are coming back to the romance world, you know."

Holt's eye flashes. "Oh yeah? What about your world?"

My mouth drops open, and I take several steps backward. This is flirting. Am I okay flirting with my brother's best friend? Am I okay that Holt is dishing out even more than I am?

With a boldness I didn't expect to have, I say, "Well, my world has been taken by storm by a war hero turned lumberjack, so..." I trail off, turning my face away to hide the mortification washing over me at my brazenness.

I hear the thunk of the axe sinking into his splitting log, then the crunch of leaves beneath Holt's boots as he comes closer.

He makes a deep humming sound in the back of his throat that has my belly flipping. Brushing a strand of hair off my shoulder, he says, "I told you I'm no war hero."

The air crackles with unshared words, unexplored desires. Finally, I work up the courage to face him and drop my arms to my sides. "You may not claim the title, but it doesn't make it any less true."

He's silent for a long moment, staring at me as if he's weighing my words. "How do you do that?" he asks, his voice low and gravelly.

“Do what?” I ask, embarrassingly breathless.

“Make me believe things I have no business believing.”

I lift a shoulder. “I think it’s less about what I can do and more about how you know you can trust me to be honest even when you may not actually want that honesty. The same as you are with me.”

“You trust me?”

“With my life.”

He sucks a breath through his teeth, then searches my eyes, lifting his hand up to cup my face. My eyes flutter closed as the rough calluses of his palm meet the smooth skin of my cheek.

“Nova, you don’t know what you?—”

“Holt! Nova! Where are you?” Aunt Birdie flies around the corner of my cabin, shouting.

Holt drops his hands to his sides.

When Aunt Birdie spots us, she adds, “It’s destroyed. Everything is ruined!”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, stopping her and resting a hand on her shoulder. Holt stands beside me.

“The kerosene heater in the basement exploded. Soot got into the ductwork, and the house is uninhabitable.” Tears stream down her face. The usual ball of sunshine has turned into a raining storm cloud.

I put my arm around her and lead her to the bench on Holt's small front porch.

“Try and relax. You have insurance, right?”

She nods, her breathing calming.

“Okay, let’s call them and get this all figured out. It will take some time, but...” I trail off, realization dawning on me. “This may be what we need to override Gladys and her reign of terror.”

Aunt Birdie chokes on a laugh. “I think that may be a bit of an exaggeration.”

I pull back and lift an eyebrow. “Is it? That woman is the human equivalent of a tapeworm.”

Aunt Birdie laughs harder this time, and I give her a few moments to gather herself as her face falls once more. “This house has been around since the founding of Rocosa. Walter would know what to do.” Her voice cracks on her late husband’s name.

“Why did you start the kerosene heater? It’s time to kick on the furnace anyway,” Holt says unhelpfully.

“I don’t know!” Aunt Birdie cries, then buries her face in her hands. “I’ve ruined everything. This house. This business. Your family’s legacy.”

Holt’s voice is calm when he places his hand on her shoulder and says, “Aunt Birdie, this place is more yours than it’s mine. And it’s not ruined. We will fix this. There is

a silver lining.”

She throws her hands up in defeat. “What could that possibly be?”

Holt raises his unscarred eyebrow. “The explosion didn’t cause a fire.”

“Well, no matter what, it’s ruined!” Her shoulders shake.

“It’s not,” Holt says calmly, then pulls out his phone and makes a call.

He puts some distance between us and him as he paces the sidewalk and talks.

Aunt Birdie’s eyes are red, but as she looks at her nephew, I see a spark of hope return. “I don’t know what I’d do without that boy,” she says, motioning with her head toward Holt.

“Me neither,” I whisper in agreement. If Aunt Birdie hears me, she doesn’t give any indication.

We sit in pensive silence as Holt continues speaking to the person on the other line. After a few minutes, he hangs up, then tucks his phone back in his pocket.

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“Well?” Aunt Birdie asks, standing and wiping down her apron with shaky hands.

“The insurance adjuster will be out in a couple hours to assess the damage, then we’ll get to work cleaning everything up.”

The three of us head into the house and take inventory of all that needs done. It’s a lot. Even more than I originally anticipated.

“This is going to take months to clean,” I say with a wince.

Aunt Birdie’s eyes go wide. “The house is booked until the end of the year!” she exclaims.

“We’re in between guests right now though, right? So there shouldn’t be any guests or guests’ things that have been affected?” I ask.

Aunt Birdie covers her face. “I didn’t even think of that! This is the first time in two years the house has been fully vacant. At first I thought that was a bad thing, but it turned out to be a huge blessing. Praise the Lord, it’s just the inn’s things.”

“See? Things are already looking up!” I say, trying to find any silver lining I can grab hold of.

“Oh, you’re right,” Aunt Birdie agrees.

“Do you have some open cabins?” I ask. If they need my cabin to keep the business running, they are going to use my cabin.

She bites her thumbnail in her nervous tick. “Yeah, I usually try to leave those open for the hunter stragglers, though.”

I shrug. “Well, they need to plan ahead this year. If you need my cabin, I can find somewhere else to live.”

Birdie and Holt both give me a dirty look. I put my hands up in surrender. “I’m just saying I won’t be a stumbling block for your business.”

Both of them roll their eyes.

“You could never be a stumbling block, Nova.” The sincerity in Holt’s voice sends warmth spreading through me. “We can make this work.”

And we do. Over the next several hours, Aunt Birdie and I make calls to all the upcoming guests and update them on their accommodations. Some sound disappointed, but by some miracle, none of them ask for cancellations.

After I hang up my final call, I give Aunt Birdie a high five.

“See? No big deal.”

Once I’m back in my cabin, I fire up my old laptop and do something I haven’t done since high school and never thought I’d do again—research. I wasn’t kidding when I told Aunt Birdie this could be a blessing in disguise. Now I just need to figure out how to turn this travesty into Ella Mae and Aunt Birdie’s shared dream.

The Storybook Inn’s architecture is unique to other buildings constructed in its time period, especially in Rocosa. Frederick Graves and his contractors—or whatever they were called back then—had imaginations ahead of their time.

Aunt Birdie has made it clear that she wants to remain true to the time period and what Frederick and Ella Mae would have wanted.

I spend the next few hours poring over websites and PDFs with blueprints and designs of the early twentieth century. As expected, the only murals talked about were in public buildings, but there were a few articles that noted wealthy families had murals painted in their homes too.

Ella Mae's journal sits untouched by my door. Aunt Birdie handed it to me yesterday so I could read it, but I haven't gotten a chance to open it until now. I leave my laptop on but close it and set it on the coffee table. I grab the leather-bound journal from the entryway table, then tuck myself back under my blanket on the couch.

Nonfiction isn't usually my genre of choice, but it doesn't take long for me to get sucked into the journal entries. Ella Mae has an absolutely beautiful way with words. I quickly find myself lost between the antique pages, sinking my feet into the footprints she's left behind.

The love Ella Mae had for her husband was even more beautiful than what my favorite romances describe, and his love for her was selfless and steadfast. Frederick went above and beyond when it came to his wife. She mentioned to him that she loved a mural she saw in an estate in London, and Frederick told her he wanted to make it a reality in their new home.

Soon her writings turned from dreams for their home to news of her pregnancy and her excitement to start their family. As I read about each kick she felt from the baby, I feel as though I'm walking through this time with her.

By the time I reach the end of the entries, my heart is overflowing. The way this woman wove words together and poured her heart out on the page has me overwhelmed with emotion. The last entry was only two days before she gave birth.

According to these entries, her pregnancy was hard, and by the end, she was on bed rest. But her faith remained solid, as did her belief in God's sovereignty.

"So this is why you're so passionate about fulfilling Ella Mae's wishes," I say out loud to no one. Ella Mae is someone I know I would have been friends with if I lived back then, and I'm sure Aunt Birdie also feels a kinship with the echo of Ella Mae now in her words.

By the time I lay in bed listening to the crackle of the embers in my fireplace, I have the same drive to make Ella Mae and Aunt Birdie's joint dream come true.

Chapter Fifteen

Holt

“This is a bit different than what I was doing, but hey, it’s going to get done one room at a time,” Nova says before she slips her N95 mask on.

“You don’t need to do this,” I tell her.

“This is going to be fun. Just imagine how we’ll feel once we get each room clean and ready.” Her voice is muffled through the mask.

I can’t help but appreciate her positive attitude. Ever since Aunt Birdie announced the destruction of the Storybook Inn, I couldn’t help but feel defeated. Like we have an endless uphill battle. Nova is looking at this as an uphill journey, almost as if she can see the light at the end of the tunnel before we even enter the trenches.

We made breakfast together at Nova’s cabin, where we also created a game plan to get the inn cleaned up. Aunt Birdie went into town to gather more supplies for our cleaning adventure. Nova and I agreed to work our way from the entrance to the back of the house. My goal is to get one room done a day to not overtax our lungs from the soot or wear ourselves out too quickly.

Nova is in ripped jeans and a paint-stained T-shirt. I’m wearing one of my old flannels. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t choose it based on how Nova looked at me in my wood-splitting flannel. Those charged moments before Aunt Birdie dropped this bombshell on us had me all twisted up inside. I was seconds away from laying my heart out to Nova.

It was easy to ignore the growing attraction when I would only see her a few times a year while I served in the SEALs. Each time I'd come home for a break, she'd get more beautiful, and not just in appearance. I could see her true self break through the mold her parents tried to force her into. I chalked it up to me feeling sentimental and learning how to reconcile who she was as a kid and the woman she was growing into. Now I spend most of my days with her and it has completely uprooted that explanation. I'm falling for Nova Price, and I'm not quite sure what to do with that.

The squeal of wood grinding against wood pulls me back to the moment as Nova attempts to drag one of the tables by herself.

She grunts and I chuckle.

Nova shoots me a playful glare. "Don't laugh at me, Graves!" She shakes out her limbs. "These are Pilates arms, not lumberjack, superhero arms." She motions to me, and I can't help but flex for her. Her cheeks pinken as she rolls her eyes and turns away. "Oh, get over yourself."

I grip her arms and gently nudge her to the side. "I got this, SuperNova."

I lift the table easily, carrying it out onto the porch. Nova stays put.

When I meet her back in the entryway, she narrows her eyes at me and places her hands on her slender hips. She blows out a puff of air, making a loose strand of her blonde hair lift into the air and fall back down over her eye.

She mutters, "Show off" under her breath.

We work together, pulling the rest of the furniture out of the entryway onto the porch. Once we get started on the cleaning part, it's hard to stop. The satisfaction I feel after scrubbing down each wall and seeing how the floors sparkle by the time Nova

finishes them is unreal. Once Aunt Birdie gets back, she'll start cleaning the entryway furniture.

By the time six o'clock rolls around, I am drained and in need of a shower and a substantial meal. We paused for lunch and I scarfed down a sandwich and an apple, but now I need something much heartier.

Nova pulls off her mask as she finishes buffing out the last stain on the floor. As if she can read my mind, she says, "I'll order takeout from Rico's and we can all three eat at my place."

Which is exactly what we do.

Nova made a small salad for each of us, and Aunt Birdie ate her favorite chimichanga from Rico's while Nova and I split a supreme pizza. By the time seven thirty hits, I feel more than ready for bed.

"Well, I'm going to go get settled in my cabin and prep some breakfast for tomorrow," Aunt Birdie announces.

"I can come over in the morning to help," Nova says, putting her hand over her mouth as she appears to fight back a yawn.

Aunt Birdie waves her off. "No need. Tomorrow's breakfast is going to be easy."

"I'll still be over to help at least carry things."

"Fine. But if you need to sleep in, you sleep in!" She waggles a finger at Nova. "You've been working your tail off."

Nova smiles. "Deal."

Thankfully, Van was able to get the large white tent we keep for weddings and other outdoor events set up and fixed with a few space heaters for when the weather is cool. Van also scrounged up enough tables to seat all our current guests who are staying at the cabins. Emma knows which cabin to go to once she gets here to finish up breakfast and get set up for the rest of the day. Situations like this make me appreciate Aunt Birdie's dedicated employees.

Nova and I tell Aunt Birdie good night when she heads to the door, and I know I should leave too. But I can't. Nova insisted I bring Titan and Tootsie into her cabin for dinner. Now they're both curled up and sleeping in front of the fire looking even cozier and more at home than at my place. I tell myself it's for their benefit, not mine, that I stay a little longer.

Nova collects the plates, and I help her get the dishes washed up and drying on her dish rack. We work in comfortable silence until she starts humming an old hymn gently to herself. I can't help the smile that spreads when she looks up and catches me watching her.

“What?”

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“I like listening to you. Usually when people hum it means they’re happy. And I like seeing you happy.”

She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I am happy. Happier than I can ever remember being.”

I search her eyes, hoping I can get a glimpse of some sort of hint that I am part of that happiness.

“You’ve always found a way to make me feel better, and now is no exception. Thank you,” she says, her voice growing quieter at the end.

“Don’t thank me, I need to thank you. You’ve jumped in and made a huge difference on a mammoth of a project.”

“I love it here and...” She swallows, her eyes dropping to the floor. “You don’t know how good it feels to be productive like this.” Her eyes flick back up to mine. “I feel useful and like I finally have a purpose outside of sitting quietly and looking pretty.”

If any other woman called herself pretty, I’d think her conceited. But I know Nova, and I’ve seen how she was treated most of her life. She was born beautiful, and she’s grown even more beautiful over the years; there’s no denying it.

“Well, you have a purpose outside of looking pretty,” I say, giving her what I hope is a flirty smile. “But you really are a beauty.”

She bites her lower lip and looks away, drying her hands on a tea towel. From her

side profile, I can make out her blush. “Thank you,” she mumbles.

The click click of paws on the hardwood grows closer as Tootsie makes her way to Nova. Tootsie rubs her head against Nova’s legs, and Nova leans over to rub Tootsie’s back.

“Looks like I’ve been replaced.” I place a hand on my chest, pretending to be wounded.

Nova shakes her head, then drops to her haunches and rubs behind Tootsie’s ears. Tootsie licks Nova’s face and makes a happy sound in the back of her throat. Nova giggles, and my heart takes on a new rhythm as my mind drifts to the future and the hope that Nova will stick around so we can have more moments like this.

The next two weeks pass in a blur. We work on the inn late into each night with volunteers from all over town popping in to help us in their free time. Aunt Birdie’s bingo crew, also known as the old lady brigade, make sure we all stay fed and privy to the town’s newest gossip.

Thanks to the generosity of our community, most of the house—minus two bedrooms—is soot-free, which is a project Nova and I tackled today.

The remaining soot stains have left us with fatigued muscles, and we learned the hard way that the only fix to the stains is by covering them with paint. Which is our last project before we can reopen the main house. Unfortunately, we need to go through the historical society to get the colors approved. Gladys Monroe has been a nightmare through this entire process, and I know her approval will only come after miles of red tape.

Nova and I stare at the wood paneling on the master suite’s accent wall.

“I didn’t think this was the style in the 1800s. Wood paneling didn’t come around until the 1950s,” Nova says. “I’ve been researching this house’s time period and haven’t seen anything about wood paneling.”

“Maybe they updated it before it went through the historical landmark process,” I suggest.

She narrows her eyes. “I wonder what’s hiding behind there.”

I look up at the ceiling where the crown molding is pulling away from the plaster. “This molding isn’t original either.”

Nova looks up at it, then does a slow turn around the entire room. “But the rest of it looks to be.”

That’s when my gaze finds the hole I noticed earlier. It’s not something I thought anything of at the time. The unfortunate consequence of owning a hotel is damage secretly left behind by guests.

“Come over here,” I say, motioning for her to follow me.

“What?” she asks.

“There’s a hole in the paneling over here. It’s hard to see from far away since the colors are the same, but I noticed it after I moved the dresser. I’m wondering if we can see anything behind it.”

“Ooh.” Nova grabs a flashlight out of the hall closet and comes back in to survey the damage.

I shine the light into the hole, and Nova sounds delighted by whatever she sees

through it.

“Do you have a hammer somewhere?” she asks.

“Yeah, but we can’t exactly demo this wall.”

“We’re not demoing the wall, just the paneling.” She sticks her finger knuckle-deep into the hole. “There’s a gap. We could easily fit a hammer in there to pull it back some more. It looks like there’s something your aunt would love behind this.”

“Really? What?”

Nova’s lips spread into a broad smile and her eyes light up. “A mural.”

Nova runs her fingertips across the intricate design almost reverently. “This is absolutely stunning. I wonder why they never finished.” Her brow scrunches as she studies the section of wall that has only a sketch of the mural done.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!”

Nova and I both spin around and find Gladys Monroe gaping at the mural we just uncovered.

Gladys points at Nova and shakes her finger. “I told you no! This is a historical landmark. You can’t just go changing things willy nilly!”

I step in front of Nova, who places her hand on my arm.

“I’ve got this,” Nova whispers.

Nova faces Gladys head-on. “I didn’t do this.”

Gladys’s eyes flick to mine. “Are you telling me he did this?”

“No,” Nova answers, standing her ground. “We don’t know who did this.”

Just then, Aunt Birdie’s surprised gasp pierces the stand-off. She glides past Gladys

and slowly walks the length of the wall and studies the unfinished masterpiece.

Gladys's mouth opens and closes several times, reminding me of a goldfish. "This is...is..." Gladys appears to be at a loss for words, probably a first in her miserable life.

"This," Nova says, moving her hand in a sweeping gesture down the wall, "is original to the house and was covered up by someone in the 60s or 70s."

"They didn't put murals in homes back then! People don't put murals in their houses now! It's a waste of time and money!"

Nova's eyes darken, and she takes several steps closer to Gladys. If I was ever afraid Gladys would intimidate Nova, those fears now fly straight out the open window. Gladys should be afraid of Nova.

"Art is an expression of emotion. It's a gift God gave to man. Often, it's beauty from the ashes. Light coming out of the darkness. And today, that's exactly what this is. What happened here was devastating, but thanks to a lot of hard work from dedicated friends and family, the Storybook Inn will be better than ever. Uncovering this mural is just the tip of the iceberg. Buckle up, Monroe, because the best is yet to come."

Gladys stares at Nova, unblinking.

"Were you let in here or did you force your way in?" I ask her.

Her eyes snap to mine. "The door was unlocked."

"The Storybook Inn may be a historical landmark, but it is not public property. You have no legal right to be in here," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

She puts her hands on her hips and squares her shoulders. “I have every right to be sure my standards are being upheld.”

“No. You don’t. We are abiding by the historical society’s rules and the approvals we’ve received for this project. This mural has been here since Ella Mae lived here, predating the paneling and making this house even richer in history,” Aunt Birdie says, speaking up for the first time since arriving.

Gladys lifts her chin. “We’ll see about all that.” With that, she spins on her heel and marches into the hallway and down the stairs.

Aunt Birdie focuses back on the wall. “I can’t believe it. This is...is...”

“Monumental,” Nova says, coming to stand next to her.

Aunt Birdie rests her hand on her chest. “He did it, but it’s incomplete. I wonder why he stopped.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Frederick Graves,” Aunt Birdie answers. “I found his journals in the attic about a year ago. They’re full of his plans for this house, the town, his family. In his journals, he talked of hiring an artist to paint a mural in their bedroom. But I never read that he actually went through with it. I mean, Nova and I have read Ella Mae’s journals where she talked about doing this, but nothing indicated that it actually happened.”

“You’ve been holding out on me,” Nova says. “I’ve been reading Ella Mae’s journals, but this whole time you’ve had Frederick’s too?”

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Aunt Birdie looks sheepish. “I guess I wasn’t sure if you’d be as invested in their story as I was and didn’t want to waste your time.”

Nova’s mouth falls open. “I may be even more invested than you. Their story rivals some of the best romances I’ve ever read.”

“I’m sorry, Nova Girl. You can read his journals whenever you like.” Aunt Birdie puts her hands on her hips, attempting to sass back Nova. I smile at the two women who have come to mean everything to me.

Nova giggles. “That’s great, because I think they’ll give us even more ideas on how to transform the inn into the home they always wanted.”

“I’d love to bring their dreams to life.”

“Didn’t Ella Mae die pretty young?” I ask, trying to remember the little bits of family history Uncle Walt shared with me. One unfortunate thing does stand out in my memory...Ella Mae’s story mirrors my own mom’s.

Aunt Birdie’s face turns crestfallen, as if Ella Mae was a dear friend she lost and not a distant relative of her husband’s. “She did. But Frederick never remarried. Instead, he threw himself into his work with the railroads, becoming a lesser-known railroad baron.”

I stare at Aunt Birdie in shock. “I’ve never heard any of that. Just the stuff with Ella Mae.”

Aunt Birdie gives me a conspiratorial smile. “That’s because no one except Frederick, Ella Mae, and one of the other founding men—Douglas Sherman--knew, which he took to his grave. Even back then, they didn’t trust to tell the other founding family, the Monroes.” She looks around as if making sure there are no other listening ears, and her grin widens to Cheshire Cat size. “There’s something else in the journals...he hid treasure somewhere on the property. His journals don’t explain where, but I’ve looked through every inch of this house where it could possibly be and haven’t found a thing.”

My mind wanders to the spot deep in the woods on the edge of the property where I like to spend time with God.

“Did you read anything about a house deeper in the woods?” I ask. “Maybe a hunting cabin?”

Aunt Birdie taps her lips with her finger as if deep in thought. “No. This is the only building original to the Graves family.”

“Or recorded as belonging to the Graves family,” I mumble.

Nova chimes in, “What aren’t you telling us?”

I run my palm against the side of my jeans. “One day when I went out hunting, I found something on the edge of the property.”

Uncertainty grips me and I go silent. I probably should have told Aunt Birdie about the house before now. Hopefully she’s not too angry that I’ve kept that place a secret from her. Aunt Birdie gently shoves my shoulder. “Well, go on then! You have us curious now.”

“I found a crumbling house with a huge and sturdy standing chimney. I’m wondering

if maybe the treasure could be hidden there?”

Nova’s eyes widen and she bounces on the balls of her feet. “You have to show us!”

Chapter Sixteen

Nova

“Here it is.” Holt gestures in a sweeping motion toward the bones of a new house on top of an old stone foundation. There’s a standing fireplace and a chimney against the remnants of a stone wall that looks to be original.

Titan and Tootsie sit obediently by a nearby tree.

I walk over to the fireplace and knock on the stone as if I can tell if there’s a hollow spot or not. Could the treasure be hidden in this somewhere?

“So this is what you’ve been working on when you disappear for hours or days at a time?” Aunt Birdie asks, slowly walking the length of the front of the house.

Holt exhales a breath, settling his hands on his hips as he appraises the efforts of his hard work.

“Can you see the potential of this place?” he asks.

Aunt Birdie and I share a wary glance.

“Yeah,” I say with full confidence. “Completing it won’t be easy.” I motion to the work he’s already done. “But if anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Holt turns on me, his good eye lighting up his expression. He makes his way over to

me, and I can tell he's unsure of how I'll respond to what he's about to say. "This idea is just in its infancy phase, but I feel God calling me to start a program for at-risk boys here."

Warmth floods my chest. Holt may look the part of a Navy SEAL-slash-lumberjack, but under all that muscle beats a tender heart. He's always looked out for others and is one of the few people I know who truly has others' best interests at heart.

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“I love that idea,” Aunt Birdie says, coming to stand on the other side of Holt. “And you would be perfect for it.”

Holt’s humble smile warms me from the inside out.

“Thanks, Aunt Birdie.” He wraps his arm around her and gives her a side hug.

A soft rustle of leaves and then a light thump disrupts the sweet moment. I shift my attention to Titan, who looks up at a squirrel in a tree. The squirrel chucks an acorn right at Titan, then takes off through the trees as if it's starting a game of tag. Titan barks and chases after it, his tiny legs tearing through the woods. The forest here can be unpredictable with holes, ravines, and potentially even poachers’ traps. An almost maternal instinct kicks in, fear for Titan’s fate overriding any logic in my brain.

“Titan!” I shout, chasing after him.

“Nova, wait! There’s...” but I don’t catch Holt’s next words as I sprint after Titan.

“Titan, come!” I shout again, my legs pumping as fast as possible, not able to even see the quick, tiny dog.

A rustling of leaves sounds just ahead, then a thump, and finally a bark far different than any I’ve ever heard Titan release.

“Titan?” I call.

There’s a ravine ahead, but the momentum from my sprint doesn’t allow me to slow

down enough to stop before I tumble down into the exact thing I feared Titan would fall into. Rocks, roots, and other forest debris scrape my arms, legs, and face as I continue my descent. I try to grab on to one of the roots sticking out of the wall of dirt to no avail. My head smacks against a providential pile of leaves as I finally come to a stop.

Titan barks from behind me. It's not the sad bark from earlier, but a happy bark as he trots over and stares at me at eye level since my head is still on the ground. I lift it up and he gives my face a lick.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," I mutter sarcastically.

"Nova!" Holt calls from above me.

"Oh, my goodness!" Aunt Birdie shrieks. "Are you injured?"

"Umm, I don't think anything major, but...everything hurts." I sit up and brush some of the dirt from my arms. Wiggling my legs and toes, I shout back up, "But it doesn't feel like anything is broken." My ribs ache with the effort I put in to call up to Holt and Aunt Birdie.

"I'm coming down to get you," Holt says, already turning and getting ready to start his own descent.

"You can't climb down that hill without help. You'll tumble even faster than Nova. I'll run back to the inn and get some supplies." Aunt Birdie places her hand on Holt's arm. She peeks over the edge. "Are you bleeding?"

I notice a few bleeding cuts and scrapes on my arms and legs. I wince as I look at the rather large cut on my thigh. My adrenaline must still be running high because I don't feel that specific pain. "A little but not a ton. I'm sore but not seriously hurt." Thank

the Lord.

That's all Aunt Birdie apparently needs to know because she's power walking in the direction of the inn without saying anything else.

"Can you breathe okay? Are you sure nothing is broken? Is your vision blurry?" Holt asks.

Inhaling a deep breath, my ribs groan in protest. "I can breathe fine, my vision is normal, but my ribs hurt. I'm mostly unscathed outside of these cuts and what will probably turn into some nasty bruises."

Holt paces back and forth at the top of the hole, running his hands through his hair almost obsessively. "I'm so sorry, Nova." Then he looks over the side and scolds Titan. "You shouldn't have run off like that. Look at what happened to Nova." He motions to me.

Even from down here, I can hear Tootsie's whimper before she shuffles to the opening and stares down at me and Titan. Tootsie and Titan may be two different breeds, but they are best friends, and it's clear she's concerned for him.

Holt paces at the top, hands behind his head, muttering to himself for I don't know how long. I try to reassure him but he won't stop blaming himself.

"I'm back!" Aunt Birdie announces.

Several clods of dirt roll down and hit me in the face and chest when the rope snakes its way down the side of the ravine. Aunt Birdie peeks over the side, huffing and puffing.

"Let me try this on my own," I say to Holt, who looks like he's ready to repel down

the dirt wall.

“Do you think you can pull yourself up?” Aunt Birdie asks.

I inhale a deep breath and say, “Let’s see if Pilates muscles help in a real-life emergency.”

My joke falls flat.

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“Do you have a blanket or something I can tie around myself to pull Titan up with me?” I ask, squinting up as the sun breaks through the clouds and an opening in the trees.

“Oh yeah.” Aunt Birdie disappears for a moment before throwing down what looks to be a baby carrier. “Put that on and Titan will know what to do.”

I strap the contraption on and turn to face Titan. His tail wags wildly as if this is an adventure and not a search-and-rescue mission. I scoop him up, and he practically slides himself into place.

Once I make sure he’s secure, I grab tightly on to the rope and slowly, methodically, pull us up, digging the toes of my shoes into any little crevice I can find as I ascend with Titan. My arms scream and my legs burn as I climb higher and higher until my nostrils are filled with fresh forest pine and not mud and earth.

The moment he can reach me, Holt wraps his hands around my upper arms and carefully pulls me and Titan the rest of the way up while I make sure Titan isn’t smooshed in the process. The cut on my leg scrapes against the edge and I hiss in pain.

“What’s wrong?” Holt asks, taking my shoulders and scanning me from head to toe.

He must find the cut on my leg because his expression turns concerned. “You’re bleeding pretty heavily.”

I wave him off despite the now growing pain. “It’s fine. Probably just looks worse

now than it will after being cleaned up. I'd be surprised if I even need stitches."

Holt grits his jaw as he removes Titan from the carrier and puts him on the ground. The second he stands up straight, he wraps his arms around me. He presses smallkisses against my hair, and I pathetically realize that falling down that ravine feels like it was worth it for this moment.

After Holt realizes I am indeed alive and okay, he scoops me into his arms as if it takes him no effort to carry me. This moment convinces me that Holt Graves is a superhero. Or at least my superhero.

Cradling me against his chest, Holt starts down the trail to the Storybook Inn, muttering "Sorry" all the way. Aunt Birdie trails behind us, muttering to Titan what a bad boy he's been and how he better give me all the doggy snuggles I want to try and make it up to me. I peek over my shoulder and find Tootsie, oblivious or uncaring of the scolding her counterpart is receiving.

We reach Holt's truck, and he doesn't even put me down to open the door.

"What are you doing?" I mutter, trying to distract myself from getting too comfortable in his arms.

"I'm getting you to the hospital. I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I never should have taken you out there."

I glare up at him. "It was my idea to sprint after Titan as if there aren't obstacles around every tree trunk. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine."

"I should have yelled louder or warned you about the ravine before we left the house," he says.

Both Holt and Aunt Birdie look completely devastated by this accident.

“I’ll be fine. Just like I was when something similar happened.”

A shadow passes over Holt’s features. “This feels like that trip to the hospital all over again, except this time, it isn’t your fault. It’s mine.” He looks down at Titan, who is sitting and pawing at the air as if to say, “I said I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

“Keep me posted!” Aunt Birdie says before planting a kiss on my forehead.

“I will,” Holt agrees before closing my door.

With Aunt Birdie, Tootsie, and Titan safely on the porch, Holt peels out of the driveway and heads toward the same Denver hospital he took me to when I was ten.

Chapter Seventeen

Nova, Age 10

“I’m fine. Just leave me alone,” I say, pushing Holt away.

“You’re going to need stitches.”

I stare up at Holt defiantly. The dew on the grass seeps into my jeans, but I pretend like it doesn’t bother me. Just like how I’m trying to pretend like the cut on the side of my head doesn’t hurt like crazy. Without warning, Holt scoops his arms under my armpits and pulls me up so I’m standing and glaring up at him. Then he tugs me along until we reach the entrance of the Storybook Inn.

“Sit,” he commands, pointing at one of the rockers on the front porch.

I cross my arms over my chest and pout. “Fine.”

Holt is only gone a minute before he’s back and kneeling in front of me. He opens the first aid kit and pulls out the peroxide and a few cotton balls. He gently presses the peroxide-covered cotton ball against the cut and I grimace.

“Ouch. Stop.”

He raises a dark eyebrow at me. “Do you want it to get infected?”

“No.”

“Then let me clean it before I take you to the hospital. Even I can tell you’re going to need stitches.”

“Okay, Dr. Graves,” I say in a mocking voice.

Holt grits his jaw and narrows his slate-gray eyes at me. “You’re mean when you’re hurt.”

I roll my lips inward, feeling a little guilty for being so nasty to him. Holt is only trying to help me.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “It just stings.”

Gently, he presses another cotton ball to the cut. It hurts a little less this time. Then he hands me a towel full of ice.

“A bandage won’t stick to your hair, but press this against it as I take you to the hospital. It should help.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital. This will heal eventually on its own.”

“It will heal eventually after you get stitches,” he pushes back.

I try to give him my best puppy dog eyes since they usually work.

“Let’s go.” He hooks a thumb in the direction of his truck.

I give up. “Fine.”

He gives me a triumphant smile and walks me over to his ancient truck. I like it when he smiles. Holt barely smiled when Christian and I first met him. Even though my brother is still the most serious person I know—other than Dad—he makes Holt smile too.

“Buckle up,” Holt says, clicking his own seatbelt.

Without complaint, I do what he says. The ride to the hospital feels like it takes forever. When we reach the parking lot, Holt is able to get a spot close to the emergency room entrance.

After checking in at the front desk, I sulk over to one of the chairs and sit down. Holt sits beside me, then rests his face in his hands.

“I’m sorry, Nova. This is my fault.” Up until now, he’s been fully in charge and confident since the moment I fell.

I press the towel he gave me to my head. “No, it’s not. It’s mine.” I shouldn’t have tried to do what I saw on that internet video while Holt was stuck with me.

Holt sits up and shakes his head. He stares at me, looking sadder than I’ve ever seen him. It’s weird seeing him like this. I don’t like it.

“It’s my fault, not yours,” I say, firmer this time.

He sets his elbows on his knees and rests his head in his hands.

“Nova Price,” the nurse calls.

I get up and follow her, but before the door closes behind me, I look back to Holt. He's sitting up straight again and staring at me with his face full of guilt. I feel even worse since I’m the one who put the frown on his face.

I sit on the bed, continuing to hold the cloth to my head.

After what feels like forever, the doctor comes in. “Hi there, Miss Price. I’m Dr. Hollinsbrook. One of my nurses got a hold of your mom and she said to do whatever we need to get you healed up.” He writes something down on the clipboard. When he looks up, he says, “She’ll be here soon.”

Nerves fill my belly. Mom is not going to be happy about this.

The doctor pulls my hand away from my head then narrows his eyes as he looks me over. “Sorry, Nova, but you’re going to need stitches. And we’re going to need to shave part of your hair to give them to you.”

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I shrug as if it doesn't bother me. But Daddy is going to be furious. He has a big dinner coming up that we will all be at. Usually, my hair is pulled up for those things. There's no way I can wear my hair up with part of it shaved and with ugly stitches where the hair should be.

A nurse comes in and carefully shaves my hair around the cut after sticking a needle into my scalp to numb it. The pinch hurts almost as bad as when I fell, but I keep my pain and tears to myself. I swallow them down until they fill the growing pit in my stomach.

It's not until after the doctor clips the final stitch that Mom comes in. "Oh, sweetie, Holt just told me what happened. Are you okay?"

I want her to come over and stroke my back. Tell me that everything will be okay. But she doesn't. She remains standing in front of me, just out of reach.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answer.

"Oh, thank goodness this can be covered with your hair." She grimaces, I'm guessing at all the blood. "Although washing it will prove to be difficult." She comes forward and reaches for me. Hope grows in my chest, but instead of stroking my face or pulling me into a hug, she grips my chin and turns my face toward her. "But can you imagine if you fell and cut your face? That scar would be hideous and permanently mar your beautiful skin."

My chest tightens with the same dread it always does when Mom talks about my beauty. I don't care if I'm beautiful; I'd rather make things that are beautiful. Likemy

paintings or drawings. One good thing about Dad's company being so big and him being so well-known is that putting me in beauty pageants would only put my safety at risk. Mom has talked about it countless times, but that's the one thing Dad stands his ground on.

By the time Mom signs the paperwork to send me home and we meet Holt back in the waiting room, his hair is sticking up in every direction. His gaze quickly lands on the side of my head and his frown only deepens.

"Mrs. Price, I'm so sorry. I didn't?—"

Mom puts a hand up. "No need to apologize, Holt. I know my Nova can be quite a daredevil. She's just lucky this is the first time she's gotten hurt trying to pull off one of her stunts."

My heart sinks. I probably shouldn't have tried to jump off the tree onto one of the cabin's roofs. Especially with Holt looking out for me. I hang my head. "I'm sorry, Holt. It was stupid of me to do what I did. Please don't think it was your fault."

Holt's expression turns sympathetic. "Are you okay?"

I shrug a shoulder. "I get to try a new hairstyle."

He laughs but quickly stops when Mom gives me a stern look.

"Don't do anything like that ever again. Do you understand me?" she asks.

"Yes," I answer.

Instead of hugging me and telling me she's glad I'm okay—like most moms would—she shakes her head. "We are so lucky it was on your scalp and not your

face. That would have ruined everything.”

I look over at Holt, whose eyebrows are scrunched together. Clearly, he doesn’t understand the relationship Mom and I have.

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay, SuperNova.” He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Let me know if you need anything, all right?”

“I’m sorry for what I did. It was stupid.”

Holt leans down. “We all do stupid things.” Mom is distracted by her phone, so Holt drops his voice low enough that only I can hear him. “You know all the stupid stuff me and your brother have done. Just try to be smarter about it next time.” He gives me a lopsided smile.

“You’re so lucky you get to try out a new hairstyle,” Reese says before taking a lick of her ice cream.

I scoff. “Lucky?”

Reese shrugs as if falling six feet and splitting my head open was only a minor inconvenience.

I flip over my hair, revealing the splotch of pink skin on my scalp. “Do you think this looks cute? Because it’s definitely not.”

Reese rolls her eyes. “Anyway, did Holt take care of you?” She takes another bite of ice cream and looks at me dreamily. “I bet he was gentle. He’s so big and strong, but he’s also so sweet. Especially with you.” There’s a hint of jealousy on her face.

“Why would you care?” I ask. “Do you have a crush on Holt or something?”

Her face turns beet red. “N-no, I don’t. I was just wondering if you did.”

I narrow my eyes at her. Sure, I could push her and make her admit her own crush on Holt, but I don’t want to. Reese is my only friend and the only girl in our school who hasn’t made it clear that the only reason she wants to come over is to see Chris or Holt—who is almost always here when Chris is.

“Okay, if you say so.”

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“I do say so.” She gives me a firm nod of her head and takes a final bite of her ice cream cone.

Chapter Eighteen

Nova

Mom whisks into my hospital room. “How did this happen?” She directs her question at Holt, who continues to brood in the corner, looking far more upset than he should be.

“I’m fine, Mom. It’s just a few bumps and a bruised rib or two. They gave me some light pain meds. I’ll be back to normal after a few days of rest.”

“It’s my fault,” Holt says, standing from his chair and making his way over to my mom, who crosses her arms over her chest.

“Explain,” she demands.

I jump in, not wanting Mom to blame Holt for any of this. “Holt was showing me and Aunt Birdie something out in the woods. Titan took off after a squirrel, and I wanted to make sure he didn’t go too far. He fell down a ravine, and I wasn’t able to stop fast enough to not take the tumble myself. Now we’re here.” I shrug, feeling the scratchy material of my hospital gown.

Mom leans forward and brushes the flyaway hairs off my forehead. “As long as you’re okay.” She leans down and presses a kiss to my cheek, something I don’t

remember her doing for over a decade.

Emotion wells in my chest.

She pulls me gently in for a hug and whispers, “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you. We just got you back; I don’t ever want to lose you again.”

My throat thickens. Those are the words I’ve craved hearing from her countless times before. I’ve wanted her to admit she missed me while I was gone, but she’s ignored my act of rebellion up until now.

Please Lord, let this be the start of true healing.

There’s a rustling in the hallway before Dad’s intimidating form fills the doorway. Mom shuffles back a few steps, her face turning into an expression of shock.

“Is she okay? What happened?” Dad asks, working his way into the room. “I got a voicemail from Birdie saying Nova had been hurt and was brought to the hospital.”

I’m too stunned to speak. The concern in his voice is more genuine than I’ve ever heard.

“I fell down a ravine and got some bumps and bruises. They said I’m lucky I didn’t break anything or hit my head harder. You guys really didn’t need to come all the way here. It sounds like the voicemail was more dramatic than it needed to be. She didn’t even need to call you. I’ll be discharged soon. I’m fine.”

Dad stares at me for a long moment, almost as if he’s seeing me for the first time. He doesn’t look through me like he did when he slammed the door in my face or stormed out of the restaurant. He scans my face as if he’s checking to see if I really am all

right.

“She’ll be fine, Kent,” Mom snaps. “Not that you would even care. I’m shocked you even came.”

“Of course I came, Amanda!” Dad shouts. “She’s my daughter, and I need to make sure she’s okay.”

Mom stands and settles her hands on her hips, straightening her spine as if she’s ready to go into battle. “Well, it would be the first time you’ve shown concern for our little girl!”

His face goes red and his eyes turn lethal, as if a single look could incinerate Mom on the spot. “How dare you insinuate I don’t care about my child?”

Holt steps between my parents and places a hand on either of their shoulders. “Let’s not do this here.”

Dad shrugs out of Holt’s hand. “Don’t speak to me as if I’m a child.”

“Well, you’re acting like one!” Mom says.

I rub my temples, trying and failing to fight back my growing headache.

Their voices rise again.

“Guys!” I throw my hands up in the air and then let them drop to the mattress. “Please. Not here.” Pain shoots through my body at the action, though if it’s from the tumble or the upper body workout from pulling myself and Titan from the ravine, I don’t know.

Mom's face softens, and she makes her way back over to me, gently stroking my face, giving me a comfort I don't ever remember receiving from her as a child. The last time I was in a hospital with her, she was more concerned with the scars my injuries would leave behind. This feels a lot more like genuine care.

"I'm sorry, daughter mine. You're right." She strokes my hair where my hidden scar hides. The way her eyes turn glassy, I wonder if she's also remembering the last time we were here. Almost as if she snaps out of her momentary stupor, she adds, "This isn't the place for fighting."

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“You two have fought enough anyway. I am so sick of it. My entire life—” I stop myself. Maybe I should try and take the words back, but I won’t. Their fighting is one of the reasons I left and it’s time they know it.

Holt drags a chair over and sits on my other side, giving me the impression that we’re becoming a united front against my parents.

“You’re right.” Dad hangs his head, and I can’t stop my sharp gasp. “I’m sorry.”

My eyes shift over to Holt, checking to see if my dad just said what I think he said or if maybe it was a hallucination. But the expression on Holt’s face makes me realize the words were actually spoken and not just a figment of my hopeful imagination.

Dad walks over to another chair and sits down, resting his elbows on his knees and leaning forward, gripping his head in both hands.

Mom is the one to break the silence. “What did you just say?”

Dad slowly lifts his head. “I said I’m sorry.”

Mom blinks at him in what I assume is surprise. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say those two words.”

When Dad’s eyes close, I speak up. “Mom.” She looks at me, and I shake my head. “Don’t push it,” I mouth.

She dips her chin in understanding. “I’m sorry too, Kent.”

Dad looks over at her cautiously. “You are?”

“I am,” Mom says before tilting her head up.

Something shifts in my dad’s expression.

“Not just for now but for what you saw at the restaurant. I know it looked bad, and it may have developed into something worse if it continued, but I stopped it. I broke things off with Trevor.”

My heart pounds so hard I’m sure it shows on my heart monitor.

“So you two never...”

Mom vehemently shakes her head. “No.”

Dad’s shoulders relax, and my parents stare at each other for a long minute. Neither one breaks eye contact. There’s no derision or hostility in either of their eyes, but there is something tender. Almost sweet.

I glance over at Holt, who appears to be as dumbfounded as me.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” Dad asks Mom, sounding shy.

Mom’s lips lift in a soft smile. “I’d like that.” Her attention swivels to me. “Once we talk to the doctor about what Nova needs.”

Mom stands and motions for Dad to come take her spot by me. He does.

“You’ll move home and I’ll provide everything you need,” Dad tells me. He awkwardly runs his hand down my arm, and something warm and hopeful fills my

chest.

For the first time in my life, Dad is showing concern for me. He's being affectionate in a way that shows love. And not just because he wants something from me or is putting on a show to look like a doting father. But because he is looking out for my well-being. The mere thought has tears spilling down my cheeks. It's painful and healing all at the same time.

Dad looks down at me, his eyes searching mine, before a lone tear spills down his cheek. Then he grabs my hand and kisses it just below my IV.

"I'm going to be better. Do better for you. My littlestar, sorry doesn't even come close to how I feel right now. But I'll start with that. I'm sorry for all I put you through. I'm sorry you thought running away would make your life better. And I'm sorry for the expectations I put on you to look and act perfect." Dad kisses my hand again, then curls my fingers into a fist and rests his head on it. The strain this is putting on my IV is uncomfortable, but the minor discomfort is worth it for this moment of necessary emotional healing.

We sit like that for I don't know how long. My focus is fully on Dad as the weight of this moment washes over me. The weight of expectations slides off me, and it feels as though I can take a deep breath for the first time in my life.

Eventually, an older nurse walks in and breaks the silence.

"Hi there, pumpkin. How are you feeling?" She doesn't look at me but immediately checks over my vitals and my IV fluids.

As she focuses on me, sympathy fills her expression. "Are you in pain?" Something about her Southern accent is comforting.

“Not currently.”

Dad sits up, releasing my hand and wiping his face with a handkerchief he produces from inside his suit jacket. Then he stands and does another unexpected thing—he walks over to Mom and puts his arm around her. She startles at his sign of affection, but a smile tugs at her lips. Holt’s expression mirrors my own—one of total shock. I’m happy he’s here to witness this spectacle with me. Mostly so I have proof that this is reality and not a dream.

“The doctor will be in shortly to update you on whatto do over the next few days.” She nods to me, then to everyone else in the room.

“Sounds good,” I say.

After she leaves, Dad turns to Mom and asks, “Can I get you a—a bagel?” He stutters. Dad just stuttered for the first time in my life. He quickly clears his throat. “Or a coffee?”

“I’d like that,” Mom agrees.

Once my parents are out of the room and I can no longer hear their voices, I ask, “Did that just happen?”

“I think it did.” Holt stares at the closed door, looking as shocked as I feel.

“What’s happening?” I mutter mostly to myself.

“Apparently falling down a ravine is the key to bringing families together.”

I snicker. “Well, I can’t say I’m happy I was the one at the short end of the stick, but...” I look away from Holt’s gaze, too embarrassed to admit these naive desires aloud.

“You’re hopeful this is going to be a turning point for your parents,” he says for me. I once again thank God for putting Holt here with me.

My gaze snaps to his. Without consent, my eyes travel down the length of his scar before raising back up to meet his glass eye. It reminds me of what a selfless man he is. When my focus shifts to his other eye, an entirely new sensation overwhelms me. One that doesn’t make sense and that I should never in a million years dwell on.

These warm and fuzzy feelings around Holt have to be superficial. He literally pulled me up out of a ravine the moment he could. This sensation just stems from all of that. Once the excitement wears off, these feelings will dissipate.

Never mind the attraction burning just beneath the surface. This is Holt. A war hero. While I’m the prodigal daughter with nothing to offer him.

Aunt Birdie’s cheerful humming greets my ears before the ball of sunshine herself shuffles through the door. I’m thankful for the distraction from my thoughts.

“How are you feeling, sweet girl?”

“Confused,” I answer honestly.

“Is it from the medication?” she asks, looking concerned.

“No, I’m just on saline right now. My parents are the ones who have me all twisted

up.”

Her eyebrows rise and she sits in the place Dad recently vacated. “What do they have to do with this?”

“They were here. Then fought—not confusing but totally expected—then made up. And Dad just took Mom for coffee in the cafeteria.”

Her brows raise even higher. “Is that so?” Aunt Birdie looks away thoughtfully.

“I don’t want to get my hopes up, but...it seems at least a little bit promising.”

“It does,” Holt agrees.

The doctor comes in while staring down at his chart. Without looking up, he says, “I’m Dr. Hollinsbrook, and I have to say, Miss Price, it looks like you got lucky today.” He snaps the chart closed and looks at me. “It’s been a while.”

“I wouldn’t call falling down a ravine lucky,” Holt grits out through clenched teeth.

Dr. Hollinsbrook gives Holt a patronizing smile. “I understand that.”

“So what’s the verdict, doc?” Aunt Birdie asks.

The doctor looks at me. “Are you okay if I share this with them?”

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I motion nonchalantly with my hands. “Feel free. They were there for it.”

Dr. Hollinsbrook thumbs through my chart and keeps his focus on it as he speaks. “It looks like Nova has a few bruised ribs, and the cut on her leg was superficial enough to not need stitches.” He looks up and stares at me. “For what you experienced, these are minor things.”

Something comes to mind and I’m grateful Mom and Dad aren’t here like Mom originally suggested. I turn to Holt and Aunt Birdie. “Would you two mind stepping out for a second? I want to ask the doctor something a little more personal.”

Aunt Birdie nods, but Holt looks unsure.

“It will just be a second,” I try to reassure him.

“Okay,” he says before walking out and closing the door.

Dr. Hollinsbrook closes the file and leans casually against the wall.

“What can I do for you?”

“Do you know my blood type?”

He appears taken aback by my question but reopens my file and flips through the pages. “Not currently, but I can give you a few places where they can find that out for you.”

“Would you mind?” I ask.

“Of course.” Dr. Hollinsbrook pulls the pad and pen out of the side table, jots down a few lab names, tears the paper from the pad, and hands it to me. “There you are.”

“Thank you,” I say.

He pulls a small stack of papers out of the file and hands them to me, going through what I should and shouldn’t do as I recover.

Once he’s gone, a plan takes shape in my mind. It’s no small thing, and I know it’s something I need to pray about. But as each second ticks by, a feeling of rightness fills my chest.

Today is a turning point, and I won’t allow fear of the unknown to hold me back from jumping into something I feel in my very core is a part of God’s plan.

Chapter Nineteen

Nova

My childhood home looks exactly as it did when I ran off to Paris. But ever since walking through the door after my time in the hospital, everything feels completely different.

The kitchen that was once my parents’ favorite battleground is now where they make each other coffee and share countless laughs. Where there used to be screaming and fighting, there’s flirtatious banter and intimate whispers.

The changes with my parents make me feel like I’m living someone else’s life. Mom has been doting on me every chance she gets, even after countless assurances that I

am perfectly fine. Sure, I've needed to take a few over-the-counter pain pills, but outside of that, I'm my normal self. She's only let me cook and bake with her after consistent begging.

Things definitely could have gone worse.

Reese has come over to visit after work and we've stayed up way too late eating ice cream and other junkfood. Just like we did when we were kids having a sleepover.

Today is the last day I'm allowing myself to just rest before going back to the Storybook Inn. I've read ten books since getting out of the hospital and am currently on my eleventh.

I've become fully immersed in Ryken and Marigold's world in *A Sea of Golden Chains* by Callie Thomas when I'm scooped into large arms. Clutching my book tightly to my chest, I glare up at Holt.

"What do you think you're doing?" I ask.

A half grin sits on his lips. "Taking you on a ride."

I drop my book on the side table as he walks past it, then cross my arms over my chest. "What if I don't want to go? Mom and Dad will be worried to see I'm gone."

Holt stops and looks down at me. "You do want to go, though. Besides, I already spoke to them while you were reading your little fantasy novel."

I tilt my chin up defiantly and push out my bottom lip. "Well, maybe I just wanted to read my little fantasy book this evening."

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Holt chuckles deep, and I can feel the vibrations beneath his chest. “You shouldn’t be this cute at twenty-three.” He starts walking once more.

“Twenty-four next week,” I correct, adding to my defiance.

He leans his head forward so he’s whispering in my ear without breaking his stride. “Oh, I know, SuperNova, I have big plans.” A small shiver dances down my spine. The half smirk on his lips tells me Holt knows exactly what he just did to me. He motions with his head toward the door. “Get the doorknob for me, would you?”

My glare deepens but I do as he says. “I don’t want to celebrate my birthday.”

He looks contemplative for a second before he’s closing the door with his foot, carrying me to his bike, and carefully lowering me onto the seat.

“I don’t appreciate that you are not respecting my wishes. Going for a ride. Forcing me to celebrate my birthday.”

Holt leans forward, resting one hand on the handlebars and the other on my knee. My pulse quickens as his nose almost brushes mine. “Fine. Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t want to go for a ride with me right now, and I’ll carry you right back to that couch and hand you back your book.”

I purse my lips and look away.

“Nova.” His voice deepens, and something that’s lain dormant in me springs to life.

“Yes?” I say, sweetly peeking over at him.

His eyebrow rises, and I can’t help it when my eyes trail the scar that runs through it and down his cheek, stopping at his chin. It doesn’t matter how many times I look at it, that scar will remind me of his selflessness every single time.

“Do you or don’t you want to go for a ride with me right now?” His voice is still that deep, husky sound, and I have to fight back a shiver.

“I want to,” I mumble.

Holt pulls his hand off my knee to cup his ear and lean down even further. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“I want to go for a ride with you.” My words come out clipped.

A wicked smile curls his lips. “That’s my girl.”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, his eyes widen as if the words slipped out without his consent. He takes a step back and runs his hands through his hair, clearly uncomfortable.

“Do you still have my helmet?” I ask, trying to mask the confusion in my voice.

“Yeah,” he answers before grabbing it out of the tail pack and then his own from the other side of the handlebars. Holt told me he had an intercom installed after our last ride. This is the first time I’ll be using it.

“Thanks.” I can’t help but feel shy. Any discomfort vanishes when I slide the helmet on and he can no longer see the blush I know is on my cheeks.

He reaches beneath my chin and flips the switch on before doing the same on his helmet.

“Can you hear me?” he asks, his voice coming through the speakers in my helmet.

“Perfectly,” I answer.

He gives me a curt nod before getting on the bike. A long, awkward silence stretches between us as we leave Rocosa behind and glide across the roads leading us to Denver.

“I’m sorry I called you my girl,” Holt says, breaking the silence.

“Don’t be,” I answer, a sudden braveness coming over me. “Fourteen-year-old me would have fainted if you called her your girl.”

His deep chuckle fills my helmet. “Did fourteen-year-old Nova have a crush on me?”

“Not exactly. Everyone else did, though.”

Something about this day, this moment, feels monumental. As if all our short walls are down, revealing each of our vulnerabilities, leaving us unashamed of the truths passing between us.

“I can’t say I felt the same way about you back then.”

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Before he has a moment to say more, I add, “I didn’t think you did or would have. I’m just saying—”

“What about now? How does adult Nova feel about me?”

My heart races and my palms sweat despite the chill in the air and the whipping wind.

I hesitate a beat before answering, “She’s not sure how she should feel about you.” Somehow, talking about myself in third person makes this less uncomfortable.

“I didn’t ask how does she think she should feel about me. I asked how does she feel about me?”

Like she’s falling harder and faster than she should be, especially considering the short time we’ve been reconnecting. I don’t say that though. Instead, I swallow down the lump in my throat. “You’re special to me. You always have been and always will be.”

Holt says nothing for long minutes until we approach a sign that says Brokedown Tavern and he pulls into a parking spot.

“We’re here,” he says. “You can get off first.”

I shift my weight to my left and place my foot on the ground before swinging my leg around the back. I’ve barely touched my toe down to the pavement before Holt’s hand grips my arm and holds me steady.

Holt gets off on the same side of the bike, switches off his intercom system, and removes his helmet. He helps me do the same. As the helmet comes off, so does my bravery.

He sets both helmets on the handlebars, then rests his weight on his bike, gripping me gently around the waist and tugging me toward him.

“You still haven’t answered my question, Nova. How do you feel about me now?” His voice is gruff, and my heart hammers at the way his good eye drops to my lips.

I suck in a sharp breath, trying and failing to calm my rushing pulse.

“Holt!” someone behind me shouts. “I didn’t think you were coming out tonight. But I’m glad you did.”

Holt squeezes me gently before releasing me, and I turn to face a Viking-looking man and a dark-haired beauty wearing a snarky T-shirt. Holt introduces them as Thor and Clover.

“Now that she knows who we are, it’s only fair for us to know who she is.” Thor states.

Holt scratches the back of his neck. “This is Nova.”

Thor beams at us like a cat who just caught a mouse. “Nova, as in Christian’s sister?”

“The one and only,” I answer.

Thor wiggles his eyebrows. “Does Christian know this is happening?” He motions between Holt and me with his free hand.

Clover gently swats his chest. "Leave them alone."

I take a step back, and my ribs ache like they still do throughout the day.

"Argh!" Holt mumbles before his arm slips around me and becomes my human crutch. "I never should have forced you here. I'm so sorry," he whispers into my ear.

"I'm fine." I look up at him, and he stares down at me. "I just stepped forward funny."

"Are you okay?" Clover asks, sounding concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I slowly put my foot down flat.

"She fell down a ravine two days ago. I probably should have just let her rest." Holt shakes his head. "Let's get you in there and sitting."

"You fell down a ravine?!" Clover asks.

"Yes, but I'm totally fine."

Thor chuckles. "Definitely perfect for Graves."

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My cheeks flush, and Clover swats his chest again.

“Let’s get in there,” Holt suggests, motioning us all forward.

Thor and Clover remain silent as we follow them into the building. It’s a slow evening, with only a group of old men around a circular table. One of the older men motions for Holt and me to come over.

He introduces himself as Ivan and then tells us to enjoy ourselves.

A few guys from the Denver Dragons sit around another booth. I’ve seen them play hockey on TV a handful of times.

“Archer, hey!” Thor greets the dark-haired man, giving him a firm handshake.

“Nice to see you guys again,” Archer says before his eyes land on me. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Archer.”

“I’m Nova.” I extend my hand.

“Chris’s sister,” Holt explains who I am to Archer.

“Nice to meet you,” I say before Holt whisks me over to an oversized booth and helps me into the seat.

“I’ll go get us some drinks. They have really good sweet tea. Really strong, just how you like it.” He winks, and it makes me smile.

“Sounds good.”

Holt and Thor make their way to the bar and put orders in for our drinks while Clover and I sit at the table in an awkward silence. She fiddles with the engagement ring on her finger.

“Congratulations,” I say, motioning to her ring.

She looks up and smiles brightly. “Thanks. It was fast, but when you know, you know.” She shrugs nonchalantly.

“I guess that can be true,” I respond.

“Thor told me he knew from the moment we met,” Clover adds.

“Really?” I put my hand on my chest. “That sounds so romantic.”

Clover snorts. “Not sure why since I almost broke his nose.”

“I wouldn’t change a thing about that night, love,” Thor says as he slides into the booth, scooting Clover down the bench.

Des, Maya, Chris, and Roxy come in next and immediately spot us.

Chris looks at my leg, then to my face several times. “Dad told me you got hurt, but you don’t look too bad.”

“Gee, thanks,” I respond playfully.

“You know what I mean. How is it, living back at home?” he asks as he sits down next to Roxy.

“Not bad.” My eyes shift to Holt. It is nice living at home, but I miss seeing Holt before bed and shortly after waking up. I don’t say that, though.

Chris scratches his jaw. “I’ve been wondering, why were you in the woods?”

Holt sets my tea in front of me and answers for me. “She came to see the cabin I’ve been working on. Titan took off after a squirrel. She chased after him and fell down a ravine not far from there.”

“Are you okay?” Roxy asks.

“I’m fine. The doc just told me to take meds when needed and rest. Holt took it a little too seriously, though, when he carried me to his bike. My main issue was him thinking I’d want to ride his bike over reading my book.”

“Well, excuse me for wanting to get you out of the house,” Holt responds, sitting down next to me.

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Chris looks between the two of us, and I can't tell if he's unhappy with what he sees or not. He's always been overprotective with me and the guys I brought around. How would he feel if he knew the conversation Holt and I had on the way here?

"That's so sweet," Maya says.

My eyes shift to Chris again, who wears a completely unreadable expression as he stares at his best friend. Holt meets his gaze, and Chris motions with his head toward the exit, which Holt answers with a nod of his own. They've always been able to communicate without words. Both of them head to the exit, leaving me vulnerable at the table with my brother's wife and their group of biker friends.

"So, what exactly is going on with you and Holt?" Thor asks with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Before I have a chance to say anything, a waitress comes over and asks if we want to order any food. This may be a bar, but everyone orders non-alcoholic drinks.

The girls all order first, and then the guys add theirs. The waitress's eyes linger on Des a few seconds too long. Maya places her hand over Des's and he weaves their fingers together. The waitress looks displeased but leaves us without another word.

"Where are Chris and Holt?" Maya asks.

Roxy shrugs. "Beats me. Hopefully Chris likes what I ordered for him."

Thor drops his hands on the table and looks at Des. "You wanna go check on them?"

Des nods his approval, and the two head for the exit.

Me and the three girls at the table look around at each other awkwardly.

“So, have any of you read anything good recently?” I ask.

All three girls’ faces light up. Clover talks about Evie Chandler, who is apparently Chantelle, another girl in the biker group and one of the authors she edits for. Maya jumps in and tells me about her most recent five-star read, *The Wild* by M.J. Padgett. And Roxy sighs over West, the hero of *When Forever Comes*. Which isn’t surprising since both she and the heroine of the story fall in love with billionaires. I tell them about the book I just finished, *A Drop in Forever*, a magical realism romance with the coziest of vibes. Another girl shows up, Tallulah, who immediately jumps in and gushes over *Midnight Rider*, the first book of an urban fantasy series by Stormie Black.

Books were apparently the perfect icebreaker for this group of women. It doesn’t take long for our conversations to turn into laughter and stories about how they met their guys. It makes me slightly jealous but also hopeful that these people can become my friends too.

Chapter Twenty

Holt

“Be straight with me. What’s going on with you and Nova?” Chris asks after we step outside.

I feel guilty leaving Nova alone with my friends, knowing they will probably ask her a million questions. The quicker I answer Chris, the faster I can save Nova from my friends’ prying inquiries.

“We’re friends,” I say.

Chris’s expression tells me he doesn’t believe me.

“It’s true. We’re friends. She’s on a dating sabbatical, and the last thing I want to do is push her into a relationship she’s not ready for.”

His eyebrows shoot up and his glasses drift down his nose. He pushes them back into place. “Are you saying you’d be interested in pursuing something romantic with her if she was ready?”

“Definitely.”

Chris nods thoughtfully. “That’s an idea I’ll need to get used to, if I’m being honest.” I expect him to have more to say about Nova and me, but he changes the subject. “How are you? With everything, I mean?”

My nostrils flare and I blow out a breath. “Better.” I nod, my answer coming out honestly. Chris knows I’ve been struggling with where to go from here. Being a SEAL has been my dream since I was a kid and something I trained for until I went into the program at eighteen. My identity was wrapped up in it. When it was ripped away from me after I lost my eye, I knew it would be an uphill battle. Chris is the only person I’ve confided in about it.

“Good.” He puts his hand on my shoulder. “You know I’m here for you. No matter what.”

“I know.” I get the sudden urge to share my idea with Chris. The program for at-risk boys, the program I would have needed to stay on the straight and narrow if it wasn’t for Uncle Walt. “I have an idea about what’s ahead. It’s something I’ve been praying about for a while.”

I'm silent for a beat, and Chris gives me a look that tells me to go on. I go into my plans for the non-profit I've been praying over.

"I'll be your first investor. You know we're always looking for new philanthropies to donate to."

"Appreciate that," I manage over the thickness in my throat.

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Chris chuckles. “Don’t get too emotional, my friend. It’s just money.”

“Says the billionaire CEO.”

I’m financially stable, but I’m no billionaire. As much as I don’t want to ask for help, getting investments from people like Christian will help this plan thrive. I have to remember it’s not about me. It’s about the kids this program can help.

“If you need anything, just ask,” Chris says.

Des strides out. “What secrets are you two whispering about?”

My focus snaps to Des. “Actually, I think it’s something you might be interested in too.” Before I can give him the rundown, Thor comes out, and Caius and Tallulah meet us at the door.

Caius tells Tallulah he’ll find her inside, and she heads in to hang out with the other women.

“So, what’s this meeting all about?” Thor asks, leaning against the side of the building and tapping a beat only he can hear on his leg.

I scrub my scruff and laugh. “Well, it wasn’t supposed to be a big thing and there’s nothing set in stone, but I think I know what God is calling me to do with my life.” I go through the rough outline of my plan. The guys nod along and throw in their own ideas. Each of them tells me they want to help in some way. The more I talk about it, the more right it all feels, as if their encouragement is a confirmation from God that

I'm on the right path.

We head back inside once we've discussed everything we can on the subject. As the guys take seats next to their women, I realize Nova and I are the only non-couple at our table.

I take a detour to the bar to get another drink for Nova and me both. I rest my phone on the counter next to me and tap the screen to check the time. The picture I took with Nova at the overlook is my new background.

Roxy sidles up next to me as I wait at the bar for our drinks.

"So, you and Nova?" She gently nudges my shoulder as she points at the picture she catches on my screen.

This is exactly why I came to get our drinks first. To avoid this conversation with the women. Talking to Chris about my feelings for his sister is awkward enough, but talking to his wife is a whole new level.

"We've been friends for a long time," I answer.

"It looks like there's more between you than friendship now."

I don't dare look at her head-on, afraid that she'll see through my partial lie. "I'm protective of her. I've always been protective of her. Just ask Chris."

"Oh, I did. And he's suspicious of the two of you too. Has been since he found out you knew about Nova's return before he did."

My stomach sinks. "She showed up on Aunt Birdie's doorstep not even knowing I was back. It's not like she came back for me." For some reason, the words taste bitter.

Roxy looks over at the table where Nova is laughing with our friends. “No. She came back for herself.” Roxy pierces me with a look. “Make sure you don’t forget that.”

Roxy’s words stay with me long into the evening. She’s right; Nova did come back for herself. Leaving for Paris was a way she tried to take back her life from her dad. But it only led to another controlling man. No one has let her just be herself. Very few have seen the side of Nova I’ve seen—that I’ve had the privilege to see. They think of her as the little rich girl who gets everything she wants, not knowing that the only thing she wants is freedom to be herself—something she’s experiencing for the first time in her life.

We got back pretty late after spending the night with the crew. Nova was quiet the whole way back, and I’m pretty sure that if we were in my truck, she would have fallen asleep. I almost had to carry her into her parents’ house after parking my bike in the drive.

I’ve been lying in bed for the last several hours, dozing in and out of sleep. Getting out of bed, I walk over to the window facing what used to be Nova’s cabin; seeing all the lights off puts a dull ache in my chest. She’s only a mile away, but I wish I could just pop over and talk to her late into the night like we’ve done before.

Without a second thought, I slide on my T-shirt, jeans, and boots and drive to Nova’s house, taking the pups with me.

I end up in the Prices’ backyard and look up at her window. A relieved breath leaves my lips when I see her light is still on. Which is slightly surprising since she almost fell asleep on the way home.

I toss a few pebbles at her window. It’s not long before she walks over to her window and peeks down. Even from here, I can see the smile lifting her lips. She lifts a finger as if to say one minute, and less than a minute later, she’s coming out of the sliding

glass doors that lead onto the patio. Nova stands there in her leggings and a threadbare Phantom Echoes T-shirt.

Her eyes dart to the patch over my eye, sympathy blending with the confusion in her expression. “Holt? What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know.” The honest answer surprises me.

“Well, come sit anyway.” She bends down to the two dogs obediently sitting on either side of me. “Hey, pups. You can come hang out too.”

She heads over to the outdoor fireplace and turns on the gas. Flames immediately cover the fake wood, but the heat emanating from it is very real. Nova presses a button on a small remote and LED lights turn on, casting a cozy light from the patio's ceiling.

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Tootsie and Titan's claws click-clack against the stone as they circle in front of the fire and lay down, resting their heads on their paws.

Nova stares at my dogs with a soft smile on her lips. "You trained those two incredibly well." She turns to face me.

"They were good dogs when I got them."

"Always so humble." She motions to the house. "Want something to drink? I made iced tea, too strong. Just the way we like it."

We. I like that word for us. Us. I like that one too. Shaking my head free of those thoughts, I answer, "That'd be great. Thanks."

Nova goes back into the house for a few moments, and I open the door for her to come back out. She has a tray of iced tea and a stack of DVDs. She places the tray on the table. We sit next to each other on the love seat and "Cheers" our drinks before each taking a sip. She wasn't exaggerating; she did make this batch strong.

"I don't know if I'll be sleeping tonight," I joke.

She curls her legs beneath her. "It'll wear off in an hour or so. Want to watch one of the classics?" She picks up a remote, a projector screen rising from the top of the fireplace.

I can't help but smile. "Like old times."

She places her glass on the table and shuffles through the stack of DVDs.

“It’s crazy to think our kids will have no idea what these are.” She immediately straightens, then turns to face me. Motioning between us, she says, “Not our kids, meaning yours and mine. But our future kids with whoever we end up marrying or whatever.” Her face is redder than I’ve ever seen it.

“I’m not sure if I should be offended or not.”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t want—” She pulls both of her lips between her teeth.

She goes as still as a statue, one hand clenched in a fist, the other holding the DVD. I scoot down the couch so I’m directly in front of her and brush a strand of hair off her forehead, trailing my finger down her cheek. Her skin is even softer than I’d imagined. I can see the rapid thud of her pulse in her neck. Her pupils dilate.

“I think you just answered my question.”

“What question?” Nova asks, sounding breathless.

I run the pad of my thumb over her full bottom lip. “How you feel about me.”

Gently gripping her chin between my thumb and forefinger, I tip her face up and lean forward. Her lips are just a breath away when my phone rings loudly in my pocket.

We jump apart like our sparks just caught fire, and I rush to answer the call. There’s a look of disappointment on Nova’s face. At least, I think it’s disappointment.

“Aunt Birdie,” I answer.

“Where are you?” she asks. “I was just at your cabin, but all the lights are off and

neither Titan or Tootsie barked when I knocked.”

I scratch the back of my neck. “I’m at Nova’s.”

“Oh?” She sounds ridiculously pleased. “And what are you doing there?”

“Just hanging out.” Before she can pump me for information I’m not ready to share, I ask, “What’s up?”

“Put me on speakerphone; it’s perfect you’re with Nova. I want her to hear it too!” I do as she asks. “I just couldn’t wait until morning to share it with you!” Aunt Birdie exclaims in her joyful way.

“We got the approval from the historical society to make those minor changes. They overruled Gladys! Can you believe it? That woman who’s been nothing but a thorn in my side finally got a taste of her own medicine. I just saw the email.”

“That’s wonderful!” Nova’s face lights up. “So when do we start?”

“Tomorrow, if you’re up for it.”

Nova nods. “I’ve been up for it since you told me your ideas. I’ll probably move a little slower than before, but I can’t stand being stuck at home all day another day.”

“You take the time you need! I just can’t wait to see what you do with my mess of thoughts.”

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“They’re not a mess of thoughts. They’re brilliant, and it’s going to look amazing once we’re done.”

My chest warms at Nova’s genuine excitement. I never pictured her becoming so invested in the small-town inn, something that means so much to my family. My dangerous emotions only grow at this side of her.

“They will!” Aunt Birdie agrees. “Well, this old body needs more sleep than you two. I’ll let you get back to your movie night.” She makes a noise as if she just remembered something. “Holt, let me speak to you privately again.”

I take her off speakerphone, then motion with my head to Nova that I’m going to step aside. She dips her own head in understanding.

Once I’m on the other side of the patio, I say, “Okay, I’m alone.”

“Stop stalling. I know why you’re there. Tell the girl how you feel and get on with the relationship. Marriage, then babies. You’re not getting any younger.”

I chuckle and run my free hand through my hair.

Nova looks over at me with a question on her face. I hold up a finger, telling her I’ll be done soon.

“I’m working on it,” I whisper.

“Work faster!”

I run my hand down my face. “Patience is a virtue.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right. I won’t keep you any longer. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I sit on the couch after hanging up, and Nova pops the DVD in, then comes over to the couch to sit down. The cushion dips with the force of her plop and causes her to fall into me. Without hesitation, I lift my arm up and drape it over the back of the couch behind Nova. She leans forward and grabs the remote before leaning back and perfectly settling into my side. We’re not exactly cuddling, but not exactly not cuddling. Regardless of the specifics, I’m comfortable.

“Breakfast at Tiffany’s?” She looks up at me expectantly.

I rub down the side of my face with my free hand. “Of all the classic movies out there, why Breakfast at Tiffany’s? They’re both practically prostitutes?—”

Nova’s mouth drops open. “Nuh uh! She’s a paid informant. He’s...” She bites her lip and looks away sheepishly. “He’s a male prostitute. Okay, fine. What movie do you want to watch?”

Nova has loved Audrey Hepburn for as long as I’ve known her. She didn’t have posters of boy bands in her room; she had framed pictures of Audrey Hepburn. Even now, she dresses like the icon when she’s not vegging out at home. Her outfits have more of her own flare with the plaid flannels, and sometimes even boots, paired with dresses now.

“How about Roman Holiday?”

Her lips lift in a mischievous smile.

“You’re clearly in the mood for an Audrey Hepburn film, and *Roman Holiday* is one I do actually enjoy.” I give her a dark look. “That stays between us.” I motion between her and me.

“I know, I know. It can’t get out that the big strong Navy SEAL can be soft.”

I slide my hand down her shoulder and pull her firmly against me. “I have no problem letting people know that I’m soft when it comes to you.” Searching her eyes, I add, “Always have been and always will be.” My focus dips to her lips, and when they part on a surprised breath, I can’t help but admire how soft and supple they look. Fire fills my veins.

Just when I lean forward to lay claim to what I’m growing to need as mine, Titan jumps onto Nova’s lap and nudges her hand. Almost instinctively she starts petting him.

I take that as my sign that now isn’t the time to finally kiss Nova Price. Or worse that this is all one-sided. She told me she wants to take a break from dating for a while, and after what she’s been through, I can’t blame her. I’ll be her friend and I won’t push for anything more.

At least for now.

Chapter Twenty-One

Holt, Age 25

A single tear falls from my eye as I watch them close the lid to my dad’s casket. Flurries of emotions consume me as my life with Dad plays through my head like a movie reel.

Sprinkled in with the horrible times were some good times. Like the days Dad came home happy after work when he was emotionally available enough to help me with homework. The few nights we went out for burgers and fries. But mostly I felt like a regretted afterthought. A mistake. Or even worse, but far more likely, a curse.

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“Hey,” Aunt Birdie says, grabbing my hand and grounding me in the moment.

As I look down into the eyes of my aunt, the woman who raised me, I find sympathy. But not comfort, which is something I expected to find. Especially from someone as kind and loving as her. In fact, I haven’t felt comfort all day.

Nova catches my eye across the plot and makes her way over to me. Her black hat covers her short hair, with only a few wisps of purple peeking out from the brim. She wraps me in a tight embrace and infuses me with the peace I have been searching for since I found out Dad died.

She steps back and greets Aunt Birdie before turning her attention back to me. “I’m so sorry, Holt.”

I have heard those same words dozens of times, but coming from Nova Price, I feel them. She knows the tumultuous and complicated relationship I had with Dad. Even though she was a little girl when I moved to Rocosa, she saw me in a way no one else had. Almost as if we were kindred spirits from opposite sides of the spectrum. She came from riches. I came from rags. Then when I moved in with Aunt Birdie and Uncle Walt, I landed somewhere in the middle of the two. Yet she and Christian took me in without a second thought.

I clear my throat and say, “I’ll get through.”

“You’re strong,” Nova says. Her voice is full of conviction.

So many unsaid words hang in the air between us. Stories I shared with her when I

couldn't keep them to myself. Shared memories of Dad showing up at the inn when he was on a short break from trucking, then taking the three of us—Nova, Christian, and me—out for food before disappearing from my life again for months.

"I don't feel strong right now," I find myself saying, looking down at Dad's casket.

"You are strong. And you'll continue to be strong." Again, her tone is full of conviction.

I look down at her.

"We'll get through this." She grabs my hand. "I'm here for you, Holt. Whatever you need."

"And you know you have me too," Aunt Birdie says quietly before leaving to talk to other people as Christian steps over to us.

My friend claps me on the shoulder. "I'm sure you're sick of hearing it, but I'm sorry for your loss."

Again, I'm hit with a gratefulness for the Price siblings. Kent and Amanda come over, both of them wearing expressions of sympathy. Amanda gathers me in her arms and hugs me tightly, giving me heartfelt condolences. Kent silently shakes my hand, showing compassion in his own way.

As we leave the grave site, Nova walks in front of me but turns and looks at me, and it's like I'm seeing her for the first time. She's a woman. A woman whose beauty outmatches every other woman's I've ever seen.

I take those thoughts and shove them deep down where I can ignore the new feelings coursing through me.

The following day, Nova finds me at my dad's graveside. She comes over holding a bundle of flowers.

"I thought I'd find you out here. Everyone is looking for you," she says before sitting in the grassy spot next to me. "Aunt Birdie said she's called you a bunch of times, but it keeps going straight to voicemail."

"This is where I want to be right now. With my dad. Even if he never actually wanted me." My voice cracks.

Nova loops her arm through mine and rests her head on my shoulder. My chest warms at her affection.

"Your dad wanted you," she says. "But he had his own demons and knew how to play the part of the victim. He blamed everything he could on others." Her eyes flick up to meet mine.

Any anger I feel at her candidness vanishes in a moment. She didn't say those things to hurt me or even to put my dad down; she said those things because they're true. My entire life, I thought I was to blame for my mom's death; as she brought me into the world, she left it. The only memories I have of her are memories Aunt Birdie and Uncle Walter shared with me through pictures of Mom when she was pregnant with me.

Nova squeezes my arm, reading me like she's always been able to. "I'm sorry if I overstepped."

I shake my head. "No. You didn't. You're right. Dad did an excellent job of playing the victim even when he was the true villain. But I was the antagonist to my mom's story. To her life." My eyes drift to the tombstone I've refused to look at since walking into the cemetery. Diedre Graves, beloved wife, daughter, mother. Her

birthday and death date are only twenty-four years apart.

“You couldn’t be an antagonist to anyone. You’re the sweetest and most selfless man I’ve ever known. I’m sure your mom would be proud of you if she could see you now.” Nova looks up at the sky. “If there is a heaven, I’m sure she’s looking down at you now with a smile on her face.”

Shock hits me. “You don’t believe in God or that there’s a heaven?”

Nova shrugs. “I’m not sure what I believe. But I like the idea of God and believing there’s someone out there looking out for us.”

As a new Christian, I’m not sure I have the right words to share with her. I pray a silent prayer before speaking. “There is a God and He has a plan for all of us. He is always looking out for His children.”

Nova purses her lips. “It’s hard to justify an all-powerful being selflessly loving me with my own dad...” She trails off. “Well, you know how my dad is.”

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“I do,” I whisper. “But I promise you, Nova, there is a God and He does have your best interests in mind. You just need to seek Him and then you’ll find Him.”

She gives me a sad smile. “Maybe someday. But until then, I’ll be living life on my own terms.”

It pains me to hear her say that, but I don’t know what more I could say. I’m already raw from Dad’s death, and like Nova, my dad wasn’t exactly the best example of a father.

We stare down at my father’s fresh grave. Nova slides her arm around my back and rubs up and down my spine. No words are needed. It doesn’t matter how many times people told me Mom’s death wasn’t my fault; it’s something I’ll always believe. Nova knows it, and she knows what to do to help soothe the pain that’s never gone away. She’s here. That’s all I need.

How many nights did we spend together in our childhood, similar to this? Side by side, watching the clouds or stars with Christian. Finding solace in the quiet. She was my best friend’s little sister, but she’s always been special to me.

Chris and I would go “camping” in the Prices’ backyard with a tent and two sleeping bags. Many of those nights, Kent and Amanda would fight like cats and dogs. Nova would sneak out and ask if she could hang out with us until it was time for her to go to bed. Usually by ten, the couple would have finished their fight and be sleeping in separate bedrooms.

Nova would sit between us, and Chris would put his arm around her as she trembled,

but she never let a tear fall. There were some nights I wanted to shake her and tell her to just let go. That it was okay to cry and let all those pent-up emotions out. But I never did because no matter what I said, it wouldn't matter. It was drilled into her that tears were a sign of weakness, and no child of Kent Price would be viewed as weak.

Something drips on my arm, and I turn to look at Nova. Her eyes are wet.

“Are you crying?” I ask.

Her nostrils flare and she rolls in her trembling lips. “My heart hurts for you, Holt. You went through so much with him...” Her eyelids flutter closed and she looks away.

“I don't want you crying for me. You don't even cry for yourself.”

Something unspoken passes between us, a long beat of silence that crackles with the unspoken truths between us. What those truths are remain a mystery to me. Or maybe I'm just refusing to accept it. Like I ignored the way my pulse took on a new rhythm when she turned to look at me after Dad's funeral. She's no longer a girl; she's turned into a painfully gorgeous woman. But she's Christian's sister, six years my junior, and living in Rocosa while I'm away serving my country. My team is at the ready and can be deployed at any moment for anything we could be needed for.

“I hurt for the ones I love.” She gives me a sad smile. “And I love you, Holt. You're like a—a—” She stutters, unable to say the word that would nullify the tension between us. It would stop the unexplored emotions slowly growing by the second. But she doesn't let the word fall. So I do my best to stuff down the turmoil and ignore our shifting dynamic.

I avoid Nova for the rest of my brief trip home and instead spend all my free time going on rides with Chris or working around the inn. On my last night home, I run

into Claire, a girl I graduated high school with. Over the next few months, I try to convince myself to fall for Claire in an attempt to get Nova out of my brain. One weekend home, I do the most stupid thing I've ever done—I propose to Claire.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nova

The Holt admirers are out in full force tonight at Brokedown Tavern. Originally, I was supposed to ride here with Holt. But I asked if it'd be okay if I came with Reese and Maya since Maya was working late and Reese is apparently meeting a guy she's been talking to online.

Reese said she'd drive so Maya and I could take the bikes home with the guys. I've asked Reese a dozen times if she was okay with it because the last thing I want is for her to feel uncomfortable—especially at a bar.

She's sitting at a table with her date, and Maya and the rest of the crew stay at their booth. Holt motions wildly with his head for me to come save him. A tall, busty blonde has been eyeing him all night. For some reason, my belly burns every time she scoots her stool closer to him. Holt has been waiting for our root beers for a long time, and considering the bar is packed tonight, we don't want to burden the waitresses any further for something as simple as that. Even if it gives the blonde extra time to try and snag Holt's interest.

The blonde ignores Holt's clear disinterest as he faces away from her. His brow is scrunched in discomfort until he sees me sashaying my way toward him. Because, yes, I am laying it on thick to finally put this woman in her place.

“Hey, handsome,” I say as I reach him. I walk my fingers up his biceps to his shoulders, then circle both arms around his neck.

His Adam's apple bobs, and his good eye dips to my lips. "Hey, beautiful." His voice is thick and gruff. He tugs me forward with his attention fixed on my lips. "Kiss me."

My eyes widen while my heart pounds wildly. "Are you crazy?" At the mere thought of kissing Holt, warmth pools in my core.

"No. Kiss me," he practically begs. "It's the only way to drive my disinterest home," he finishes in a whisper.

"Holt, I—" But the next words die on my lips as I see the look on his face. "Fine." I lean in and press my mouth against his.

At first, it feels awkward, unsure. But then I remember that this is fake. We're playing pretend. It's all for show to push away the thirsty woman who has refused to leave him alone. But when his large hand splays against my back and pulls me against his firm body, I ignore the warning bells going off in my head that tell me how very bad of an idea this is. That I should not be kissing Holt Graves. He's my brother's best friend. A war hero. And I'm the prodigal daughter. But as he deepens the kiss, I put those alarms on silent and enjoy the feel of falling into the best kiss of my life. Who knew Holt would be such a good kisser? I probably should have expected it. Holt puts his full heart into everything he does...including this kiss.

But this kiss. Good gravy. My toes curl and my heart flutters as a low growl vibrates beneath my fingers. That's when I realize my hand has found its way to Holt's chest. Holt's very warm, very firm, very broad chest. He slides one hand into my hair and tilts my head back to deepen our very real kiss. Without reservation, a low sound escapes from my lips. One I've never made before. My cheeks heat, but there's no point in being embarrassed because instead of chuckling as I'd expect, Holt drops both his hands to my hips and pulls me firmer against him. My body is officially pinned between his thighs. As my arms slide back up and tighten around his neck, I'm pressed completely against him, and my very world tilts on its axis. Everything I

believed about myself tumbles out of gravity into the black hole of oblivion.

My firm stance of staying on my dating sabbatical slowly shrivels up with each brush of his lips. All the belief of never being truly cherished by a man is completely obliterated as Holt's hands tenderly cup my face, then slowly, oh so slowly, he pulls back and rests his forehead against mine. I'm too revved up to open my eyes, but when he whispers the nickname he gave me in that gravelly tone, I open them.

"SuperNova. My SuperNova."

He gazes down at me as both of our chests rise and fall with exertion. Apparently, my body desired Holt's lips more than oxygen for those few blissful moments because my lungs are screaming for air and I didn't notice until now.

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Holt's dark gaze roves over my face. The look he wears is completely unreadable for a few moments before reality crashes around both of us. The blonde harrumphs and struts away. Once she's out of sight, I jump back from his hold.

Holt's Adam's apple bobs, and I can tell he's trying to keep his gaze fixed on my eyes, but it keeps dipping to my lips as if he wants more of that...more of me. But that doesn't make sense. We're friends. Lifelong friends. Lifelong friends who just shared an absolutely incredible kiss.

Involuntarily, I lick my lips, savoring the taste of Holt's root beer on my tongue, all while trying to ignore the erratic beat of my heart.

"Thank you." It's a breathy whisper out of Holt's absolutely invigorating mouth. Can a mouth be invigorating? Yes, it must be. Because with how amazing I feel right now, I could go run a marathon. Or swim across the Atlantic or some other absolutely ridiculous feat, because my goodness, Holt Graves can kiss.

"For what?" I ask.

His eyes search my face, then he grabs my hand and tugs me forward. His lips land demandingly on mine. I bend to his will without a conscious thought, needing more of this like I need my next breath. To my chagrin, it's a quick kiss.

"Why me?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Why you what?"

I shake my head, not understanding. “Why me for any of this?” I wave my hands around, noticing Holt’s strong arms once again wrapped around me. My hands land clumsily on his shoulders. “I mean, you could have called any of these women over to play the part.”

He smiles, and it’s devastating. “Do you think I go around kissing random women?”

“I don’t know what you do. I didn’t think you went around kissing friends either.”

His eyes darken, and a shiver races up my spine. “Oh, trust me, my SuperNova, there is only one friend I’ve wanted to kiss—” He cuts himself off and his eyes widen.

Warmth fills me. “Only one friend?” I tilt my head. “And who is this friend?”

Leaning forward, his voice barely audible, the warmth of his breath lingers as he says, “I don’t think you need to ask.”

I can’t tear my eyes away from his lips. The scar on the left side of his mouth only enhances my attraction.

As if he knows exactly where my mind has wandered, he says, “You’re the only person who didn’t flinch at my scars.”

“I think your scars are beautiful.” The words are out before I can debate if I should say them.

A flicker of surprise lights up his countenance. “You think I’m beautiful?”

“Don’t get cocky. I said your scars are beautiful. You, well...” I want to say something playful or witty, but I can’t. Because it’s then that I see beyond what the other women in town see when they look at Holt Graves. Yes, he’s a good-looking

guy—he always has been. I mean, every girl in my class crushed on him through the years. Yes, he’s a war hero, and the idea of being with a SEAL is what some of my favorite romance books are made of. But Holt Graves is more than those things. He’s self-sacrificing. Under his sometimes broody façade, he’s kind and would do anything to help a neighbor in need. His dogs adore him, and rightly so, with how well he cares for them. And the guys know he’d drop everything to be there for them if they needed him.

“I’m what?” he pushes.

“You’re Holt Graves. A war hero.”

He leans back on his stool with his arms still wrapped around me, both of his hands resting on the small of my back as he shakes his head. It feels far more natural than it should. “I’m no hero, Nova.”

“Always so humble,” I tease.

I can feel the other patrons’ eyes on us, but I don’t care. I barely notice.

“And you’re Nova Price. The woman who has always seen me for me. You’re the only person who’s looked at me and made me forget my scars. When you look at me, it’s as if you’re seeing me as I was and not the broken man I am now.”

Compassion washes over me. “You’re not a broken man, Holt. Far from it. You’re a hero. To those people you saved, to this country...to me.”

His eyes are on my mouth as his chest rises and falls hurriedly. “You weren’t supposed to be so good at that.”

My lips tingle at his praise. “At what?” I say, playing stupid.

“Kissing,” he replies simply before leaning down.

“I’m leaving,” Reese says behind me just before Holt’s lips can touch mine once more.

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I turn in Holt's arms, and I feel the need to go to war for my friend with the look in her eyes. All the excitement and hope that once filled her face has been replaced with a frown. She looks as if she's on the verge of tears.

"What happened?" I ask.

Reese looks from me to the exit. "I need to go. You can stay." She motions to Holt, whose arms are still wrapped firmly around me.

It takes everything in me to step away from him. Immediately, my body misses the warmth he provides.

"Let's go," I say.

When I turn to tell Holt goodbye, the look on his face has all the happiness I felt only moments ago draining out of me. His expression is full of regret.

My heart slowly implodes, and my voice is thick when I say, "I need to go with her."

I can't read him when Holt looks up at me. It's as if his face has turned to stone.

"Bye," I say in a small voice.

The bartender sets our two root beers on the bar. Holt picks them up.

"I'll see you around." He stands with both drinks and heads to the table with our friends.

I can't even look at them, too afraid of the expressions I'll find on their faces.

The moment we are in Reese's car, I file my own emotions in the back of my head to focus on later. Reese needs to come first right now, so I ask, "What happened?"

"The guy turned out to be a grade-A jerk. Apparently, something in my bio made him think we'd end up at his place at the end of the date."

I scrunch my nose. "Eww, I'm sorry. That stinks."

Reese blows out a slow breath and shrugs, merging onto the highway. "It is what it is. I shouldn't be surprised. He is a man, after all."

"Not all men are like that."

She gives me a sympathetic smile and wiggles her eyebrows. "That's all I want to say on the subject of my date. However..." She trails off and practically giggles. "What I am far more interested in is what happened with you and Holt."

"Umm, no. We will not be discussing that."

As the streetlights highlight her face, I notice the side-eye she gives me. "I'll give you until we get to your house to process everything."

Reese fulfills her promise to let me process. But once we're in my kitchen and I'm pouring us sweet tea, she spins on me.

"What exactly happened there with Holt?" Her words are clipped and to the point.

I stare at her, feeling like a fish as my mouth opens and closes, unable to form a coherent thought about what just occurred. I set the glasses on the marble countertop.

She crosses her arms and leans a hip against the island opposite of me.

After a moment of careful thought, I answer, “Holt was trying to push away that bold blonde and asked me to kiss him to throw her off for good.”

“That was not a spontaneous kiss. That was a kiss that was calculated and planned. He looked like a man who’s been starving in the desert and you were the water and food he’d been deprived of. And you, well, you matched his intensity.”

The look on Holt’s face surfaces. The regret in his expression, the way he didn’t even look at me when I told him goodbye. A heaviness fills my chest. This is what I’ve been trying to avoid. Since coming home, I’ve ignored this growing bond between me and Holt...because of what just happened. He will realize that I have way too much baggage and that I’m not worth the effort of working through it.

Without warning, I release a very ugly sob. I thought crying was supposed to help release these painful emotions. But these tears burn as they stream down my cheeks, only reminding me of how weak I am. How much I don’t deserve Holt.

“Oh, Nova. Don’t...don’t let this get you down. It will be okay.”

“I’ve fought my feelings for him for weeks. Five minutes is all it took for my defenses to be obliterated, and his instant regret was obvious.”

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“Regret?” Reese pushes away from the island. “That was not regret. Confusion, maybe, but not regret. It’s clear that he’s—”

“Don’t say it.” I hold up a hand.

Reese crosses her arms over her chest. “Will you let me finish?” She raises a brow and purses her lips.

Hanging my head, I release a defeated sigh, and say, “No. Because what you’re about to say just isn’t true. He was caught up in the moment. Nothing more.”

Reese rolls her eyes. “Don’t be so cliché. It’s clear he wants more with you. That was just the perfect excuse to do what he’s wanted to.”

His words come back to haunt me. “Oh trust me, my SuperNova, there is only one friend I’ve wanted to kiss.” Could Reese be right?

The mere thought of facing Holt again to pursue the answer to that question causes my stomach to churn. How can I look at him without thinking about what it’d be like to kiss him again? How can I look at him again without seeing the hope of a future with him?

“Fine. Just give me tonight to gather myself and I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

“Pinky promise me.” She holds out her pinky like we did when we were kids.

I wrap my pinky around hers. “I promise.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Holt

The next day, I can focus on nothing except kissing Nova and the conversation I need to have with her. The conversation where I lay it all out there, open up my heart to her, and share my true intentions.

I text all the guys—and Chantelle—hoping at least some of them will be up for a ride today because I desperately need to clear my head.

Caius and Des are the only two available, and we agree to meet at the overlook.

When I arrive, they're both there waiting for me, helmets off. Their expressions only remind me of last night's mess.

I help Tootsie off the back of my bike, clicking her leash onto her collar. Titan remains asleep in the carrier on my chest.

Des leans down and pets Tootsie. Caius shakes his head and laughs.

He points at Titan, and I assume he'll have one of his smart remarks, but instead he asks, "So Christian's sister, huh?"

I flip up my visor and narrow my eyes at him. "Shut up. I didn't ask you guys to ride for some chick talk."

Des gives me a self-satisfied smile. "Fine. Then let's get going."

I flip my visor back down, then Des and Caius slide on their helmets. They get on their bikes as Tootsie hops back onto her seat and I strap her in, removing her leash.

Once I'm on, I rev my engine and coast onto the open road, my two friends following.

Fall has hit Colorado full force. The trees are radiant colors of red, orange, and yellow. The sky is overcast, but there's no hint of rain. It's my favorite weather to ride in and I'm grateful for it.

"So, back to Nova," Des says.

I growl into my mic, "That's not why I wanted to go riding."

"If kissing Nova at Brokedown in front of everyone didn't give you a reason to want to go riding today, I don't know what would," Des goes on as if he didn't hear me. "Feels a little bit like payback from how you teased me about Maya," he mutters.

I twist the throttle and take off, attempting to drown out Des's words. For a man who's quiet most of the time, he sure has a lot to say about Nova.

The guys easily catch up when I drop back down to the speed limit. The last thing I need is a ticket.

"Calm down, Holt," Cai says, and I growl.

Des and Caius's laughter fills my helmet.

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“You know none of us expected to end up with our women the way we did. But you’ve known Nova most of your life. I don’t think settling down with her would be—” Caius says.

“I want to settle down with her!” I admit loudly. “But she’s on a dating sabbatical. If you knew her history...”

“Maybe I don’t know anything about Beau, but Reese and her were friends in high school. Reese saw how Nova was treated back then. She was controlled most of her life.” This from Des.

“And the ex-boyfriend was no different. She needs time to heal,” I say.

“That’s noble of you to give her space. But I wouldn’t give her too much or she may get the wrong idea.” Caius sounds more serious than usual.

I suppress another growl. “I thought I said I didn’t want to talk about this.”

“You did,” Des confirms. “But it doesn’t mean me and Caius don’t see that this is something you need to work out.”

“Preferably without Nova’s brother present,” Cai adds.

I was afraid Chris would come up too. And now that he has, yet another one of my fears has been confirmed.

“I have no idea how Chris is going to handle this when he finds out. I’d be beyond

mortified if he witnessed what went down last night.”

“I’m sure once the initial shock wears off, he’ll be happy for you both. He knows you’ve always wanted what’s best for her,” Des adds.

“I hope you’re right.”

“You need to make your intentions known,” Cai says.

“This isn’t some Jane Austen novel. There’s more to it. Her dad would never approve of me.” It hadn’t been a concern of mine up until this minute. I’m not sure why this new fear surfaces, but it does all the same, and it makes me question all of this even more.

Both guys scoff. “He doesn’t approve of anyone. Look at what he put Chris through to get what he worked his whole life for. Who cares about Kent Price’s approval?”

I want to agree with them, and I do to a point. But the truth is, no matter how much she may deny it, Nova still craves her dad’s approval. And I want her to have a good relationship with him. It may be slow moving, but it seems like things are changing for their family—for the better. I’d add a layer of complication to their new dynamic. It could be that complication that takes away from their progress. Again, I’m not sure why it would, but the fear arises regardless. It’s a fear I can’t currently shake.

“Nova cares.”

Neither one of them has anything to say to that.

“I appreciate the pep talk, guys, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to talk about something else. What’s going on with you and your backpacks?” I ask, referring to their women.

The shift in topic works like a charm, and for the first time in almost twenty-four hours, I think about something other than Nova, that kiss, and the impending, necessary conversations with Chris and Nova.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nova

Dad standing next to me, waiting to order lunch from a food truck, is a tangible expression of how hard he is trying to be the dad I've always wanted him to be. Nothing extravagant, but simple and caring.

He looks around, a forced smile on his face. "Well, this is a bit different, isn't it?"

A real smile stretches across my cheeks at the beautiful park setting. A group of teenagers throws a frisbee behind us.

"They have the best chicken sandwiches and cauliflower bites," I say, glancing at the menu even though I already know what I'm ordering.

"I'll have what you're having," he says.

We finally reach the front of the line and place our orders at the counter. As soon as we step out of the way and wait for our food, Dad focuses on me.

"You ordered that knowing I'd probably order the same thing." His eyes turn watery. "And it's all foods that are on my diet."

I shrug. "Guilty. But all of that is actually really good and made from scratch."

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In an unexpected show of affection, Dad reaches across the space between us and grips my hand. “Thank you.” This time, the smile he wears is genuine.

“Nothing to thank me for, Dad.”

He searches my eyes, and it looks like he wants to say something, but he sits back, removing his hand from mine.

I shove down my disappointment and ask, “How did your appointment go?”

Dad’s face falls and he shakes his head. “I don’t want to talk about that right now.”

“Well, I do. I want a solid relationship with you and Mom. And talking about hard things will help do that.”

He looks up at me, and the look he gives me takes me back to my childhood. It’s a look that stops me in my tracks. “I really don’t want to talk about this, Nova.”

I do my best to give him a placating smile. “Okay.”

We grab our food after they call our name and find a picnic table. “So how are things at the inn going?”

“Good,” I say in a voice that sounds cheerier than I’m feeling. “We just have two rooms left to finalize and I have a mural to finish. We’re hoping to have the reopening in a couple weeks.”

“That’s great,” he says. It’s clear he doesn’t genuinely care about the progress, but showing interest is at least a step in the right direction.

We bless the meal before digging in.

Dad practically devours his sandwich before starting in on his cauliflower. I’ve only eaten half of my sandwich and a few bites of my cauliflower before Dad is dabbing his mouth.

I raise an eyebrow at him as I slowly chew. After swallowing the bite and taking a sip of my water, I ask, “So, was that okay?”

He rests his hands against his stomach. “It was delicious.”

I giggle. “Or maybe you were just extra hungry.”

“I’m ready to talk about my appointment now.” He switches the topic so fast it gives me emotional whiplash.

“Oh?” I ask, putting my sandwich down and wiping my hands on my napkin.

Dad takes a deep breath and releases it. “Things aren’t looking good. Each day is another day closer to dialysis or...” The unspoken phrase hangs between us—complete kidney failure and eventually...death.

The idea I’ve been praying over takes complete root, and I’m more sure about it than anything else in my life.

“I’m sorry, Dad. That’s never good to hear.”

He shakes his head. “Dialysis means my entire life changes. My schedule will

revolve around my appointments.”

“I get it,” I whisper, then push my plate away. Any traces of my appetite are gone.

“We’ll keep praying for a miracle.”

“I’m not too good at prayer, but that’s what I’ve been asking God for too.” He gives me a sad smile.

“God may not always answer our prayers how we want or expect Him to, but He does always answer them.”

Dad reaches across the table, and I give him my hands. All of this is so unfamiliar and unexpected. It’s a reminder of God’s goodness and that the words I just shared with Dad are true. A few weeks ago, I never would have imagined sitting here at a diner having lunch with Dad, talking about faith in Jesus, or talking at all.

Even when our relationship looked hopeless, God was working in the background, doing things only He can. And in this moment, I know for a fact what I have to do.

After saying goodbye to Dad, I go for a walk through town, praying for continued clarity on what God has planned for me. For continued healing of broken relationships and marriages.

As I pass a couple sharing a kiss outside the cafe, I’m reminded of my kiss with Holt. I turn around and head over to the Storybook Inn. I told Aunt Birdie I’d be back at work today, but didn’t specify what time. When Dad suggested we go out to eat, I let her know. It’s time I get back to the mural. And maybe even have a talk with Holt.

On my walk there, my prayer transforms from my relationship with my parents to my relationship with Holt. I ask God to lead me and guide us to the path He has designed for us. I’ve been in too many failed, ungodly relationships to fall into yet another one.

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But Holt is different. We have history and a friendship that was rekindled with minimal effort. Most importantly, we both have Jesus. If I've learned anything in my short time as a Christian, having Jesus walk beside me is way better than trying to walk the path on my own.

I narrowly avoid tripping on a bump in the sidewalk right in front of Mountain Auto Repair where Reese is probably working. I take it as a sign to visit my friend first.

Going in through the main door, I see the back of Lewis's salt-and-pepper head before he turns. The bottom of his belly pokes out from beneath a too-tight T-shirt.

"Hi Lewis, where can I find Reese?"

He takes a bite of his sandwich and answers around his chewing. "She's working on the Mustang."

"Thanks!" I say before slipping into the garage.

Reese's jean-clad legs stick out from beneath a Mustang. Her feet move to the beat of the song she has playing over the speakers, which mixes oddly well with the sounds of her work. The shop is cleaner than it was the last time I was here. All the tools are hanging on the wall instead of scattered over the tables. I assume she took the time to do this last night to distract herself from her horrendous date.

"Who's there?" she calls out.

"Me, Nova."

The sound of metal against metal halts before the squeak of wheels can be heard as she glides out from beneath the car.

She sits up and wipes her hands on a nearby towel, then stares at me skeptically. “You look terrible.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You look weighed down.”

“You mean I look weighed down because I kissed my brother’s best friend and his face filled with immediate regret?”

She rolls her eyes. “I told you already, that was not instant regret.”

“Well, regardless.”

Her brow raises. “So, what are you going to do about it? You pinky promised you’d talk to him. Today.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I say, “Well maybe I need a little more time.”

She stands from her car creeper. “Why?”

“I don’t want to do even more irreparable damage to my friendship with him.” Tightening my hold on myself, I add, “I can’t lose him.”

She rests her hand on my shoulder and forces me to meet her eyes. “You’re not going to lose him. What you guys have runs deeper than that.”

I turn my face away and release a tense breath. “I hope you’re right.”

“You need to talk to him. He cares about you. Like I told you last night, that kiss was planned, and if you talk to him like an adult, there could be many more kisses in your future.”

I turn back to face her and she wiggles her eyebrows.

My belly swoops at the thought. Has Holt wanted to kiss me? Or is this Reese just daydreaming for me?

“Even if that’s true.” I shrug, attempting to feign nonchalance. “Holt deserves someone better than me, and eventually, he’ll realize that too.”

Reese rolls her eyes so intensely I’m afraid they won’t make their way back around. “Come on, Nova.”

“What?”

“Whether you think you’re good enough for Holt or not, he doesn’t care enough to stop the inevitable.”

“And what, pray tell, do you believe is the inevitable?”

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She gives me a deadpan look. “Are you really going to make me spell it out for you?”

I settle my hands on my hips.

Reese ticks off her fingers. “Marriage, then babies. Lots and lots of babies.”

I feel my cheeks flush. “What?”

“I’m not sure how you can’t see it, but that man is head over heels for you. Like I said, that kiss.” She fans herself. “Had me blushing! It was the perfect distraction from my scumbag of a date too.”

Covering my face with both hands, I attempt to hide the redness I know is there.

She gently pushes my shoulder. “Go talk to him. What’s the worst that could happen?”

My arms fall to my sides. “I could make a complete fool out of myself and ruin a lifelong friendship.”

“Well, don’t rush in there and throw yourself at him. Just be yourself, act normal, and see where the conversation and situation take you.”

I point at her. “I’m trusting you on this.”

She gives me a sassy smile. “You will never go wrong with trusting me on anything.”

“We’ll see about that.” I turn to leave.

“Call me as soon as you’re home and tell me everything. And I mean...everything.”

Without turning around, I know she ended her statement with a wink.

“Stop!” I say with a wave of my hand, then turn to face her again. What I’m about to say dies on my lips when a clean rag hits me in the face.

“Get out of here and go get your man.”

I laugh at her antics. “See you later.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Holt

The satisfying crack of wood splitting temporarily distracts me from the impending conversation I plan to have with Nova. I neatly place the split pieces onto the growing pile. The stack is double the size it usually is this time of year, but I needed something to keep my body occupied while my mind ran away with the memory of that kiss.

It was supposed to be fake. At least, that’s how I tried to play it off. The reality of it, though...not a single breath of that kiss was fake for me. I felt every brush of her lips, the way her fingers dug into my chest as if she was holding on to me with her dear life while branding me with her touch. The way her body melted into me, telling me what I already knew, that she was my perfect fit—she is my perfect fit. But when Reese interrupted us, the look on Nova’s face made me question if these feelings are all one-sided.

Tootsie and Titan jump up from their place under the pine tree and both give a happy yelp. They wag their little stubby tails like crazy as Chris rounds the corner of my cabin.

“Hey,” he says, bending down and giving Tootsie and Titan some scratches.

I swallow the growing lump in my throat. “Hey.”

“So you and Nova, huh?” He stands, and the pups trot off to lay back down under the pine tree’s shade.

“What about me and Nova?” I try to play dumb, but he gives me a look that tells me he doesn’t buy it.

I grab another log and sink the axe into it. The stubborn log only splits a little, so I do it again. This time, it splits in two.

He pushes his glasses up his nose. “If you think I came here to tell you to back down with Nova, you’d be wrong.”

I toss the logs onto the pile haphazardly. “Really?”

Chris nods. “Really. You’re the first guy Nova’s picked that I’ve actually approved of. Not just because you’re a good friend, but because you let her be herself. She doesn’t have to wear a front for you, and when she does, you see right through it. It’s kind of scary that you seem to know my sister better than I do.”

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My throat tightens. “To be fair, I know you better than you know yourself.”

“And I know you. Which is how I know your feelings for my sister are more than surface level. You’re not one of those punks who were only out to use her, and she’s not out to use you.”

“She’s grown into an amazing woman. If I can get your approval and her interest, I’d really like to pursue her with forever in mind.”

He smirks. “I had a feeling there was more to your story when I found out you kept her secret from me.”

I grimace. “Yeah. That was being stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

He slaps me on the shoulder. “I can imagine.”

“But we’re cool, and you definitely have my approval to pursue her.” Chris shakes his head and crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m glad I don’t need to give you the talk.” He lifts his hand to put “the talk” in air quotes then recrosses his arms.

I can feel my ears heat. “Definitely not. The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt Nova.”

“I know.”

He motions with his head toward the parking lot. “You want to go for a ride with the crew? You’ve apparently missed all of the messages in our chat.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket, and sure enough, have dozens of missed texts in our group chat. Chris looks at my screen and raises his eyebrows at the picture of me and Nova I still have as my background.

I clear my throat. “Do you mind if I bring the pups?” Usually when I ride with the guys, I go sans pups, but since the relationship with my new backpack is up in the air right now, I figure these two will enjoy the ride. I had just rounded the corner of the house before coming out here, and I overheard Nova talking to Aunt Birdie, saying she’ll be working on the mural all afternoon.

“You know those mutts are always welcome. As long as I’m not the one strapping that little terror to my chest.” His shiver drives home his point.

I laugh at my friend’s description.

A few minutes later, I’m wearing Titan in his carrier on my chest and buckling Tootsie into her dog carrier on the back of my bike. Chris shakes his head.

I flip on my intercom. “Ready?”

“Always,” Chris answers.

The rumble of our bikes pierces the silence as we pull out of the parking lot and head toward the highway. We’re only a few miles in before Thor’s booming voice fills my head.

“So the pirate has become the courter, I hear?”

I shake my head. “Not officially.”

“Dude. What are you waiting for?”

“He just got my blessing. Give the guy a moment to process before jumping on him,” Chris interjects.

“Yeah, Thor, just because you got engaged three seconds after meeting Clover doesn’t mean that’s how fast the rest of us work,” says Caius as he rides up next to me.

“To be fair, Chris got married like three days after meeting Roxy,” Thor throws back.

“That was completely different and you know it,” Chris defends himself.

“True, true,” Thor relents.

Another familiar bike comes into my mirrors.

“Who are we talking about?” Des asks.

“Holt and Nova. Even though they made out in front of all of Denver last night, he hasn’t asked her out,” Thor continues.

“It wasn’t all of Denver, and we didn’t make out! It was just a kiss.” Even I hear the lie in my rebuttal.

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“No, just a majority of the Dragons, the old men, us, and our women,” Caus piles on.

“Guys, that’s my sister,” Chris scolds.

I laugh at my friends. “I needed to do somethingextreme to get that other woman to back off.”

“That’s true. Before Clover, I couldn’t keep women like her away from me. Those types of women have a thing for strapping military men.”

“Aww, did you just call me strapping?” I ask.

“You may just be a SEAL, obviously not as awesome as us Marines, but I think strapping is a fitting term.”

“All right, guys, this is getting weird,” Chris says.

Thor and I laugh.

“It looks like we’re all backpack-less!” Chantelle’s chipper voice comes into the mix.

“Well, except Holt and his sidekicks.”

As if he can hear her, Titan barks in approval, then comes Tootsie’s deep bark.

The whole group laughs, and we spend the next hour talking and ribbing each other while enjoying the bright fall day.

“Don’t be a stranger! Bring that pretty girl around more. I want to get to know her better and learn all about who you and Chris were as kids. It’s hard to imagine Chris as anything other than an ambitious businessman.” This from Chantelle.

“That’s pretty much who he was growing up too. Not a whole lot has changed,” I tell her honestly.

“I’m right here, guys,” Chris says.

“Am I wrong?” I tease.

Chris’s silence speaks volumes. The group laughs again.

I chuckle. “Will do. I can’t promise Nova will have anything more exciting to share though.”

“That’s fine. I’d still like to get to know her. Maybe she can make some covers for my future books.”

“Talk to her about it the next time you see her. I’m sure she’d be open to it,” I say. A new hopefulness fills my chest. My friends like her, and they want her to be a part of their lives, like I want her to be a permanent part of mine.

As we approach Rocosa’s exit, Des and I bid the group goodbye and veer toward home. The ride has been a great distraction, but I wouldn’t mind keeping myself occupied for a little longer.

“Do you need a hand with anything at your house?” I ask Des.

He raises his eyebrows. “Uh yeah, I can think of a few things.”

His answer makes me think he's telling me this for my sake and not necessarily his own. I feel bad that we haven't hung out as much as we used to. But with Maya now in the picture, his free time is mostly dedicated to her. And with Nova back in town...there I go again, allowing my mind to drift to Nova. Now I'm thinking about that kiss. I take off down Main Street too fast. Tootsie barks and Titan follows suit, waking up from his nap. I slow down just in time to make the turn to Des's tiny house.

I park my bike and remove my helmet before Des pulls in and parks. He helps Tootsie off the back of my bike while I let Titan down to stretch his legs. The pups are familiar with Des's property and stay well within the bounds of his yard.

Des motions for me to follow him to his front deck. "There's a squeaky plank." He points to one of the boards.

I walk to it and shift my weight back and forth. Sure enough, it needs some TLC. "Can you get me your hammer and a few nails?"

Without a word, Des turns and heads inside. While I wait, I look around his property and see a stump that needs to be removed. It looks like he's taken the axe to it a few times, but with all the nervous energy filling my veins, that's the exact project I need to get my frustrations out.

Des comes back out with a box of nails, a hammer, and a bottle of water. He hands them all over to me. I thank him before taking a swig of the water, setting the bottle off to the side, and finding the spots on the board that need to be secured.

While I do that, Des fills a couple of bowls with water and sets them on the ground for the pups. They both bark in appreciation before I hear them lapping up water.

With a few nails pounded in, I stand and step back on the board. It's as silent as the

rest. I set the tools off to the side and wipe my hands down my thighs. “Well, that’s that.”

“Thanks.”

I motion with my head toward the stump. “Mind if I take an axe to that?”

“Be my guest. Would you mind if I grade papers while you do that?”

I chuckle. “Not at all. It’s your house.”

After taking off my leather coat, I help myself to his axe in the splitting log and get to chopping.

As each pass sinks deeper into the stump, a smidgeon of tension leaves my shoulders. Several minutes pass, and I can feel the sweat on my back growing with each swing. I turn around to check on the pups and find them lying on the deck, warming themselves with the last bit of the sinking sun.

I take another swing, and a large chunk breaks free, giving me a huge wave of satisfaction. Another few minutes pass before another chunk breaks free. I pick up the wood and toss it to the kindling pile a few feet away.

By the time the sun has nearly finished its descent, I’ve reduced the stump by half. I sink the axe back into the splitting log where I found it and wipe my brow with the back of my arm.

The outdoor lights turn on, and Des comes out to stand on the deck.

“Feeling any better?” he asks.

“I’m not sure.”

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I run my hands through my hair and grimace when I feel the sweat-soaked strands.

“Not really. It’s just something I need to pray about, I think.”

“Prayer is never a bad idea.”

Nodding my agreement, I say, “Thanks for this.”

He laughs. “I should be thanking you for helping me.” Des holds up his hands. “I really need to get caught up on these algebra tests.”

I quirk a smile at that. “Fair enough. Call me anytime you need anything.”

“Will do,” he agrees.

“All right, I’m going to get the pups home.” I motion to the dogs, now fast asleep.

Des bids me goodbye after the pups and I are situated on my bike.

With that, I fix my attention on getting back to the Storybook Inn at the end of town and pray all the way for the right words and God’s guidance.

As much as I want to make Nova mine, and as sure as I feel about us, I know God has the final say, and I won’t push against His will for us.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nova

It's only been forty-eight hours—not that I'm counting—since our kiss, but not seeing Holt has me completely twisted up in knots. I haven't had the guts to text or call him.

Between that and the father-daughter bonding lunch and dinner, most of my day was tied up with him with the exception of my time working on the mural. After a lifetime of having a poor relationship with him, I want to soak in every moment I can with Dad.

The second my head hit the pillow last night, I was out. My dreams were filled with Holt, and by five a.m., I couldn't take any more. So I was up before the sun and decided to face the inevitable—going back to the inn and potentially having the talk with Holt. Yesterday he was again MIA, but I heard bikes through town just before sunset. I figured he needed more time to process too.

Each stroke of the brush brings me closer to completing one of the most stunning scenes I've ever seen. But it only partially distracts me from playing that night on repeat.

I thought that kiss at Brokedown Tavern meant something, but I apparently dreamed up the whole idea that he wanted me for more than just a kiss. Apparently, Reese saw more than what was there too.

It's just hard to accept that those emotions etched on his face were somehow a figment of my imagination, or worse...faked for the sake of the ruse.

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Carefully, I guide my brush with the final stroke, and my heart leaps at the end product.

The mural is a stunning depiction of Walden's Pond from Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden*. I originally found it ironic due to the charm of the Storybook Inn's original construction since there is nothing simple about its design. But from her journals, Ella Mae appeared to appreciate all the nature surrounding the house and often spent time walking with her husband through the woods and exploring the landscape. She found solace in God's creation, and even though she enjoyed the conveniences of being wealthy, she always gave glory to God for all she and Frederick had.

As I stare at the completed piece and reflect on Ella Mae's way of thinking, I'm reminded of all that God has blessed me with—Aunt Birdie, Holt, Christian, and now a sister-in-law and adopted nephew to spend time with and enjoy. Despite the many mistakes I've made—and will continue to make—God has found it in His goodness for me to have a second chance at a healthy relationship with my parents.

Being a part of this restoration process at the Storybook Inn has been a tangible parallel to the changes in my own life.

There's a pile of new bedding, pillows, and curtains waiting for me to change out with the old. I'm so close to completing this final room I can taste it, so instead of taking a break like I originally planned, I move forward with my interior design experiments.

I change the dark green comforter and pillows for a light blue that matches the color

of the pond in the mural. Then I switch out the dark green curtains with white ones and set up a cushion on the window seat. I'm pleased to see how the lighter curtains allow the perfect amount of light to spill in as I close them.

"Nova," Aunt Birdie calls as she comes up the steps.

"In the master bedroom!" I shout, peeking my head out the door for good measure.

She practically skips her way over and hands me a stack of journals with various colored tabs marking the pages. "I found another journal. Look at this."

I carefully open it to the first tabbed page. Scanning through the slanted cursive, I can't help but smile as Aunt Birdie's vision—and our new design—is noted in Ella Mae's script. They had some similar ideas before, but these show how in line they really are with each other. Almost like they are two halves of a whole separated by a hundred or so years.

"See? It's like you were born to run this place," I say. Aunt Birdie has been so down on herself since the accident, and this is the perfect way to show her how good for the Storybook Inn she actually is.

She beams at me. "Thank you, Nova. You've been an encouragement in every sense of the word since arriving."

I swallow the lump of emotion in my throat. My entire life has been spent trying to make other people happy, only to fall short. But my attempts were always superficial. Looking and acting a certain way for my dad's employees, then running away at nineteen, only to be caught up in the same shallow world with Beau. Never feeling like enough.

Now my days are spent in work clothes, my hair in a messy bun, with paint and dirt

under my nails, but I've never felt more appreciated—more alive—than I do now.

A tear rolls down my cheeks at the turn my thoughts take. “Well, that’s good to hear. Thank you for giving me a chance. This whole experience has been heart cleansing.”

She gives me a soft smile. “I’m glad. This is just another example of how God works in ways beyond what we ever imagine. Not necessarily mysterious, as the saying goes, but...He fulfills His promises in unexpected ways.”

I nod. “He does.”

Heavy footsteps thud up the stairs, and my heart does a somersault. I’d know those footsteps anywhere. Holt pokes his head around the corner, and hope blossoms inside my chest.

“Can we talk?” he asks, looking directly at me.

“Sure.” My voice cracks.

Aunt Birdie gives my arm a gentle squeeze. “I’ll give you two some privacy.” She holds the journal tightly to her chest before leaving Holt and me alone.

Holt tucks his hands in his pockets and leans against the doorframe, his large form commanding the space. He’s wearing one of those flannels again with a T-shirt underneath. He’s wearing his plain black ball cap that shadows his face, giving an air of mystery. How’s a girl supposed to focus with all that raw masculine energy sucking up all the air in the room? And now I’m remembering how amazing it felt having those masculine lips pressed against mine.

“What’s up?” I ask, shaking out of my thoughts and bracing myself for whatever he has to say.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around much to help today. But it looks like you’ve made a lot of progress.” He looks around the room, his gaze landing on the mural. “Everything looks amazing.”

I cross my arms over my chest and shrug. “There’s already so much beauty in the room. I’m just trying to enhance what’s already here.”

“Either way, you’ve done a great job.”

“Thanks.” My cheeks warm at his praise.

We stand in awkward silence for a few moments before he speaks again. “About the other night at Brokedown?—”

“Don’t worry about it. We were just caught up in?—”

Holt untucks his hands and takes a step forward. “That’s the thing. I wasn’t just caught up then. I’ve been caught up for a while now. Since you came back, actually. Maybe even before then.”

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I rub my sweaty palms against my thighs. “Wh-what are you saying?”

He takes a step closer, flipping his ball cap backward so his eyes are no longer shadowed by the brim.

“I’m saying I want you to give me a chance.” He motions between us.

“A chance for?”

He reaches forward but drops his hand to his side as if fighting the desire to touch me.

“Give me a chance to prove to you that we’d be good together.”

“We are good together.”

Holt’s voice drops down an octave. “Nova.”

I can’t help the smile that curls my lips. “What exactly are you saying?” I repeat my question, needing full clarification.

He closes the distance between us and takes both my hands in his. “I’m saying I want you. To be mine. To do more than just date. I want to court you or whatever I need to do to make you mine permanently.” His good eye searches mine, the glass one making me ache for all he’s been through.

“You want me?”

“All of you. If you’ll have me.”

Without hesitation, I trace the scar that runs down his face with the pad of my finger. He shivers. I pull my hand back and hold it to my chest.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says in a gruff voice before grabbing my hand and resting it against his scar, his rough palm a reminder of the hard labor he does regularly. “Unless you’re sorry for not responding to my question. Will you have me? Can I have you?”

I bite my lip. “Yes. I’d like that very much.”

“So would I.” He kisses my palm, and I practically melt on the spot. “These hands and the woman they belong to make me feel a little less broken. You don’t look at me, my scar, or my glass eye with disgust or pity.”

“How do I look at it?”

“You look at it almost in wonder.”

“It’s a humbling reminder of what you’ve been through. How you’ve sacrificed so much for your country.” I stroke his cheek with my thumb.

The rapid rise and fall of his chest makes me brave. I raise to my tiptoes and place a kiss on the left side of his jaw where the scar ends.

I come off my toes and place both feet firmly on the ground. “Thank you.”

“It was my honor.”

“Always so humble,” I tease.

We stare at each other for a long stretch of seconds. Holt breaks the silence when he asks, “So where do we start?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.” Licking my lips, I add, “I’ve never been courted before. Just flaunted.”

He shakes his head. “To be completely honest with you, I can’t promise that I won’t flaunt you.”

My face crumples as my heart falls.

He quickly recovers. “Not because I want to look a certain way, but because I want people to see how lucky I am. How blessed I am that God gave me you.”

I can’t help but smile at that.

My hand falls from his face. “I’m okay with you flaunting me because I want to flaunt you too.”

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The moment the words are out of my mouth, his arms go around me and he pulls me against his firm chest. His heart hammers beneath my hand that's splayed there.

First, he kisses my forehead, then my temple, before landing on my lips. He moves his right hand to cup the side of my face, his thumb gently tilting my head up for better access to my mouth. His lips are a heady mixture of sweet tea and mints, the pressure making my knees weak and my head spin.

His lips work in perfect sync with mine, as if he can anticipate my next move, and he flawlessly tilts his head, firms the pressure, and splays his hand across my back as his hand slides down to cup the side of my neck. Our first and second kisses were incredible. But this one. This kiss. This purposeful kiss has thrown every kiss I've shared with any other man out the window. Beau? Beau who? It's Holt. Everything is Holt.

This kiss is life. I don't want to kiss any other man for the rest of my days. Holt wants me for me. Not because of how I can make him look in public, to uphold an image, but because he wants me.

I curl my hands around his flannel and press my body fully against his until I hear a low rumble from deep in his chest. Slowly, he pulls back until he rests his forehead against mine. Both of us are out of breath.

"You are even more beautiful freshly kissed." He stares down at me, tucks a strand of hair behind my ears, and slowly runs his finger down my face until it traces the lines of my mouth. "These lips..." He finishes his sentence by working his own lips over mine again until I'm melted on the spot and whimpering at the emotions flooding my

entire being.

As he pulls back, both eyes closed, a smile on his face, my chest constricts. He opens his eyes and gazes at me with a stare that isn't full of lust, as I'd usually expect, but adoration. A lifetime of friendship that's blossomed into something beautiful.

I shyly reach up and stroke down the side of his face, loving the way his scruff feels against my skin.

Holt slides his hand across my jaw, his thumb strokes my cheek, and his expression shifts to one of concern.

"What's wrong?" He lifts his other hand so he's cupping the sides of my face, brushing his thumbs across both of my cheekbones.

"Absolutely nothing. I don't remember having my heart feel so full, free, and safe."

"Then why are you crying?"

I swallow the lump in my throat and blink, noticing for the first time the wetness in my eyes. Shaking my head, I answer, "I don't know. These aren't sad tears though. I promise. These must be tears of joy."

He gently tightens his grip on my face and leans down while I rise up to kiss him again and again. We move across the room until my back hits the window seat. Holt lifts me up so I'm sitting on the cushion I just put there. We kiss for endless minutes, exploring the depths of this new relationship that feels as natural as breathing. It's as if we're making up for lost time. Holt kisses me as though he's weeding out the superficial kisses of my past. And I kiss him back with purpose, showing him how wanted—no, needed—he is by me. That what I feel for him isn't puppy love or some superficial experience but something I want to fall into day after day. For the rest of

my life.

The thought takes my breath away, and I pull back.

He looks down at me. “What’s wrong?”

I place my hands on his chest, loving the feel of his strength beneath my fingertips and how his pulse thuds against my palms.

“I-I think.” I shake my head. “I think I’m?—”

Holt kisses me again and pulls back just enough to mutter, “I’m in love with you too. I’ve known for a while now.”

My arms slide up his chest to circle around his neck. “You’ve known you were in love with me for a while?”

“Since the moment I saw you sitting on your couch with a cookie hanging out of your mouth as you painted your toenails.”

“Squatting slobs do it for you, huh?”

My words are meant to be playful, but instead of laughing, his eyes darken and his entire demeanor takes on a whole new intensity. “You, Nova Price, do it for me.”

I cover my face with both hands but he gently peels them away. “Don’t hide from me and don’t be embarrassed in front of me. I love all of you. Everything about you. You are what I want. What I need in this life, and Lord willing, the next.”

My eyes fill with more tears, and I thank God that these tears aren’t of sadness or from feeling inadequate, but instead are ones of unadulterated joy and gratefulness.

Then I thank Him for Holt and giving him to me even though I don't deserve his love.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nova

I crack up as Clover huffs at Thor's antics over the intercom system in our helmets. It helps deter the fluttering in my belly as Holt pulls us to a stop at a red light and reaches back to cover my thigh with his hand. I'm already clinging to him, feeling the strength of him beneath his leather coat, but the way his hand grips my leg feels like the most right thing I've ever experienced. We've spent every possible waking minute together for the last two weeks. And each of those minutes makes life even better.

The roar of our biker group is deafening, and the sound sends goosebumps down my arms. This ride is exactly what all of us needed. Thanks to this group and several other members of the Rocosa community, the Storybook Inn is officially clean, updated, and most importantly—inhabitable. We're surprising the crew with a pizza party bonfire complete with s'mores and hot chocolate at the Storybook Inn once we finish our ride.

"Make a left up ahead," Holt announces over the mic.

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Christian and Roxy make the left and we follow. I check behind us, and sure enough, the rest of the crew comes after us.

“Where are you taking us?” Cai asks.

“You’ll see,” I respond playfully.

“Oh boy, we’re in trouble,” Roxy says.

The rest of the group chuckles, and the sound of their combined laughs fills me with a sense of belonging I’ve never experienced before. Holt gently squeezes my hand, almost as if he can feel the new emotions consuming me. I rest my helmet against his back and can’t help the smile that stretches across my face. He puts his hand back on the handlebar as we head to the Storybook Inn.

The rest of the ride is full of fall leaves, winding roads, and mountain air. As we pull into the Storybook Inn, my mouth waters when my eyes land on the boxes of pizza lining the table Aunt Birdie, Emma, and Van set up by the crackling fire.

“What is all of this?” Roxy asks after removing her helmet.

“A thank you for helping us these last few weeks,” Aunt Birdie answers, coming over to our group. “We wouldn’t have come close to finishing this fast if it wasn’t for you all.”

“Aww, we were happy to help!” Maya says, giving Aunt Birdie a hug.

“It’s the perfect night for pizza, a fire, and sweet tea,” Van says, throwing an arm over my shoulder.

I glance up at him and smile. “You’d use any excuse to eat pizza and gargle sweet tea.”

“And use lighter fluid,” Van adds before playfully bumping me with his hip.

I duck out from under his arm and make my way over to Holt, who has his arms crossed and looks like he’s ready to rip Van apart.

The moment I’m within his reach, Holt grabs my hand and pulls me into a hug, then lays claim to my lips. “I don’t like when another man touches you.” There’s a hint of danger in his tone.

“Van is a work friend. Nothing more.” I slowly slide my hand up Holt’s chest, then loop both arms around his neck, needing to rise to my tiptoes to place a chaste kiss on his lips. “I’m very much taken. He knows that.”

Holt’s grip on my waist is possessive, and it sends a jolt of excitement down my spine.

“I know I gave you my blessing, but I’d really appreciate it if you two didn’t make out in front of me,” Chris says as he and Roxy come over, one of his arms around her shoulder.

My cheeks heat. “We weren’t making out. I just wanted to make sure Holt knew I was all his and he didn’t have anything to worry about with Van.”

Chris motions with his head toward where Van is now talking with Aunt Birdie. “I’m glad that boy didn’t dig his claws into you.” Van is the type of guy I would have flirted

with back in high school. Clearly, my brother hasn't forgotten what used to be my type.

"Van is a good guy, but not the one for me." I look up at Holt, who stares down at me adoringly.

"Aww, you two are so sweet," Roxy says before resting her head on my brother's shoulder.

Christian clears his throat. "Well..."

Roxy, Holt, and I laugh until two familiar silhouettes emerge from around the corner.

"Mom? Dad?" Christian says.

Roxy stands up straight, then stiffens beside him.

Dad surprises me with a smile that's only partially forced. "Birdie told us the good news and invited us." He slides his hand into Mom's palm. She looks over at him, and the smile she wears warms my heart.

"I'm really happy you've come," I say, before walking over and embracing both of my parents at the same time.

They stiffen at my burst of physical affection, but it's only a momentary awkwardness before they wrap their free arms around me.

Mom cups my cheek gently with her warm hand. "I'm so proud of you, Nova," She smiles and uses my nickname. "Daughter mine."

Her words warm my heart.

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Dad looks slightly uncomfortable but turns his attention to Roxy. “Roxy, I’d really like to talk to you.” Dad directs the next question to Christian. “Would you mind?”

Chris looks at Roxy with an expression that asks if she’d be okay with it. She dips her chin.

“Sure.”

Roxy and Dad head toward the drinks table, too far away to make out whatever they’re saying. I can tell even from this distance that Dad’s usual cool demeanor has been replaced with something like remorse and...humility.

I look over at Chris, whose gaze never leaves his wife, then over at Holt and Mom, who also have their attention on the pair.

It’s less than a minute before Roxy and Dad make their way back over to us.

Christian takes Roxy’s hand and whispers something to her. She nods with a soft smile.

As the next few minutes unfold, more members of our little town filter into our shindig. Aunt Birdie takes the little stage Van set up with a microphone and taps it. The sound reverberates through the speakers sprinkled around us.

“Excuse me,” she says into the mic.

The crowd goes silent and focuses their attention on her.

She smiles bigger than I've ever seen before. "I have invited you all here as a thank you for all you've done for me and this inn. The home of the Storybook Inn has been in the Graves family since the founding of this town. Ella Mae and Frederick Graves were two extraordinary people, and I'm proud to have married into their family. Thanks to Holt and Nova, Ella Mae's dreams of a literature-themed home have been brought to life. As you all know, the incident that happened here several weeks ago was devastating. But thanks to all of you, the inn wasn't down for long. Thank you so much"—Aunt Birdie pauses to wipe a tear from her eye— "for taking time out of your days, out of your lives, to help me recover this inn. Thank you for taking this inn dilemma and turning it into something even more beautiful than the original. This little clambake"—we all chuckle at her term—"doesn't come close to telling you all how much I appreciate the hard work you each poured in to help bring the Storybook Inn back to life." Aunt Birdie takes a deep breath. "With all that said, I'd like to ask my nephew Holt to come up here and bless this food."

Holt squeezes my hand he had taken at the start of Aunt Birdie's speech and walks up to the stage. He pulls his hat from his head then Aunt Birdie hands him the mic.

"If you'll all bow your heads as we go to the Lord in prayer." Holt looks across the crowd, and once everyone is silent, he blows out a slow breath. His tone turns reverent. "Dear Heavenly Father, I come to You humbled beyond belief. You have blessed me with a community of selfless individuals who have come together to restore this building, and in the process, restore relationships once thought broken beyond repair. I praise you, Father, for all You've given us. We thank you for this food and ask that You bless it to our bodies. Thank you for Rocosa and the family we've found in each other. In Jesus's name we pray, amen."

My throat constricts with emotion at Holt's heartfelt prayer. When I look up and catch his gaze, my heart hammers in my chest at the expression I find there.

Once everyone has eaten their fill of pizza and drank their share of sweet tea, Dad

comes over to the table where Holt and I are sitting.

“Nova, can I speak to you privately?” Dad asks.

Even though I believe my relationship with Dad is truly on the mend, years of his manipulation and control will take more than a few weeks to unwind. I’ve forgiven him, but forgetting all he put me through will take time. And it will be a while before I don’t have the assumption he has some sort of ulterior motive.

“Sure,” I answer cautiously.

Before I can stand, Holt squeezes my hand. I look at him and try to convey that I will be all right.

I follow Dad to the porch of the Storybook Inn, and we take a seat on one of the benches. Despite the changing colors of the trees around us, the shrubs lining the porch remain their vibrant green.

“So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about?” I ask when Dad has remained silent for too long.

There are tears in his eyes when he faces me. “I just wanted to say that I’m so grateful for you.” It looks like he wants to say more, so I remain silent. He gently shakes his head. “I didn’t give you enough credit as a kid or teenager. Or take your art seriously. But I saw the mural you finished in the master bedroom, and Nova, I couldn’t be more proud.”

The words strike me, and I find myself inhaling a surprised breath.

“Thank you, Dad. That means more to me than you know.”

He rests his arm across the back of the bench and leans back. “Come here.” He motions with his head for me to scoot closer. So I do.

Dad grips my shoulder, and I tuck myself into his side. I could count on one hand the number of times we sat like this when I was a little girl. A father showing physical affection was not on Kent Price’s list of fatherly duties. Even though this is the first time he’s done this in over a decade, a small piece of my broken inner child heals.

He blows out a breath before saying, “God has been working on me ever since you came home.” I shiver, and he rubs my shoulder and then continues. “I’m sorry that I turned you away when you showed up on our door.”

I look up at him, trying to convey the sincerity of my next words with my expression. “You’ve already apologized. I forgive you, Dad. And I’m sorry for running off when I was nineteen with stupid Beau. You were right about him.”

“I wish I was wrong. I wish he truly had your best interests at heart and not his own.” My breath halts in my lungs. His voice is thick when he adds, “But I’m grateful you and Holt found your way to each other. He will always put you first. Even when you were kids, he was there for you when no one else was. And I’m sorry you needed him so much.”

Nothing could stop the small sob that leaves my lips. “God blessed us with Holt. He’s amazing, and I’m so grateful for him.”

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Dad glances over the shrubs toward Holt, who's standing and talking with Des. "He did." Dad turns back to face me. "There's something else I wanted to tell you."

My heart pounds in my ears. "Yeah?"

He nods, and the smile that lights up his face is so unexpected it almost takes my breath away. "They found me a donor."

This isn't news to me, but I act surprised anyway. "That's wonderful!"

"If all goes to plan, I won't need dialysis and I can live the rest of my life the way I should have lived it before my diagnosis—spending quality time with my wife, kids, and community."

My heart overflows with the goodness of God. Dad has made a massive change over the last few weeks. Going to meet with the Christian counselor of our church and meeting with the marriage therapist has helped push him closer to Jesus. Our relationship is far from perfect, and I know we'll have rocky days ahead. But we all have something we didn't have last time—Jesus. And even though becoming Christians didn't make our problems disappear, we have the King of Heaven walking with us and the Holy Spirit living in us to restore what has been long broken. Holt hit the nail on the head—God has restored and will continue to restore.

Tears fill my eyes. "I can't wait to see what the future holds for our family."

"I can't either. Your brother has exceeded my expectations as CEO, and I will be taking a huge step back from the company from here on out. I have an adopted

grandson, daughter-in-law, and daughter who I'd like to get to know better."

A lone tear rolls down my cheek. Dad's face falls when he spots it. The hardness I once saw in his eyes if he saw me cry is mostly gone. There's still a hint of it, old habits die hard, but the tenderness of his touch when he wipes it away tells me we're on the right path.

Holt makes his way over.

"Is everything okay?" Holt asks, looking from me to my dad. His expression tells me he's ready to go to battle for me. And that makes me fall a little bit more in love with him.

I sit up straight, wanting to set Holt at ease as fast as possible. "Yeah, we were just talking about what life is going to look like ahead. And how grateful we are that God brought you to us when He did."

Dad stands and shakes Holt's hand. "I'm sorry she needed you so much as a kid because of my failures, but I'm grateful she had you then."

"She'll always have me," Holt says with conviction. Then he looks at me. "Always."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Holt

"This looks awesome!" Axel's enthusiasm brings a smile to my face.

We've been working on Roxy's gift when our free time matches up. It's been a slow process since that has been a rare occurrence, partly because of my selfishness and desire to spend as much time with Nova as I can. Even though I've known her a

majority of my life, I learn something new about her each day. I can't get enough of her.

"I kind of don't want to wait until her birthday to give it to her." Axel's announcement brings me back to the task before us.

"You worked hard on it. Give it to her whenever you want."

Axel nods. "I will."

He sweeps up the sawdust and wood chips while I put all the tools back in place. After he leaves, I lift the tarp hiding the project I've been working on for Nova since she came home. It's a small part of a very large offering, and I'm equal parts excited and terrified to give it to her.

Things with her have been absolutely incredible. Better than I ever imagined. But there's a tiny part of me that questions if this is all too good to be true. My prayers are focused on asking God for me to follow His will above my own, but that's what I think I fear the most. As much as I believe that I am walking the path God has for me, I wonder if it will all change in the future. Just like it did with the SEALs.

"Knock, knock, knock." Nova's voice drifts to where I stand at the back of the shed, and I quickly drop the cloth to hide my hard work from her sight.

"Hey, you," I say, making my way to her before wrapping her in my arms and kissing her breathless.

Her face is flushed and her eyes are out of focus when I pull back. I keep her firmly in my arms.

Once she appears to get her bearings, she says, "Well, a girl could get used to that

greeting.”

She’s wearing a jacket over her cleaning T-shirt with a stretched-out neck opening. In her apparent haste to see me, both her jacket and T-shirt hang off her shoulder. Unable to stop myself, I lean down and place a kiss on the exposed skin. This girl looks good in everything. From her Audrey Hepburn classy outfits to her painting clothes to her bumming around the house comfort wear, she always looks amazing.

“Hmm,” I hum from deep in my chest. “And a man could get used to looking at this stunner every day.”

She looks away shyly. I love that my compliments hit their mark and aren’t something she ignores or rolls her eyes at like she does with other people.

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Nova reaches up and runs the soft pad of her pointerfinger down my scar. “I could say the same.” She rises to her tiptoes and kisses the spot on my chin where my scar ends.

Her arms go around my neck, and I wrap mine around her waist. “What are you up to today?” she asks.

“Just wrapped up Roxy’s gift from Axel a few minutes ago.”

“How did that go?”

“We finished. And he looked more excited than a kid on Christmas morning,” I answer.

“He’s a good kid.”

“He is,” I agree. “But he’s one of the lucky ones. He has a family that loves him and wants what’s best for him. Just like I did. There are so many boys without that influence.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Well, it’s a good thing Holt Graves is opening up a program to help those unfortunate boys.”

I don’t fight my smile. Everything has been coming together flawlessly for my program, Mount Restoration. As promised, Christian has made a very generous donation to make this a reality. He’s also agreed to talk business with any of the guys who show interest on the topic. Cai offered assistance in teaching fire safety and first

aid, as did other guys from the Denver fire station. Thor is teaching self-defense. And Des is going to teach guitar and help out where he can during the week. Juggling their schedules may prove difficult, but I don't doubt we'll be able to work it out.

"It's more like it's a good thing that God has put this plan on my heart and is giving me the means and help I need to make it happen."

"Always so humble," Nova mutters before pressing a kiss to my lips. "Can we go to the cabin? I want to see your progress."

"Of course."

We make our way to my cabin hand in hand and grab the dogs before making the trek deeper into the woods. The pensive silence is a comfort as we walk.

She gasps as the cabin comes into view. "You've gotten so much done."

"Thanks to your dad and brother, I have an entire team working to get it done." Gratefulness fills my chest at their generosity.

"That's amazing." She leans her head against my shoulder as we stare at my dream becoming tangible.

Everything is nearing completion. The main structure of the house is already built, thanks to a solid contractor and his hardworking crew. All the rooms are ready for paint and then flooring. Nova has been helping with the design and worked closely with the contractor on the layout. Like everything else she does, she's given her all in helping turn my vision into a reality.

If everything continues going according to plan, we should be ready to officially open in two weeks. At that point, I will have a seven-bedroom, four-bathroom cabin ready.

I stare down at Nova who shares her beautiful smile with me.

Unable to help myself, I lean forward and nuzzle my nose against hers. Never in my life have I been so physically affectionate, obnoxiously so, but never in my life have I loved someone so deeply and completely.

We make our way back to the Storybook Inn. I still have a few private moments with Nova before the big surprise, so I make use of that time by exploring her lips some more while we sit on the bench outside my cabin.

“Goodness, you two are so sweet,” Chantelle says.

Nova yips and jumps off of me. When she turns to Chantelle, she holds her hand over her heart. “You almost scared me to death!”

Chantelle giggles. “Sorry! I just love romance, and seeing the last guy of our group find his happily ever after makes me giddy.”

My ears heat. I cross my arms over my chest and do my best to sound gruff. “Did you come to spy on us so you could write us into your next book?”

“No, silly. I came here to cash in on that promise you made me.” She points at me, her other hand on her hip.

I scratch the back of my neck. “What promise?”

Nova looks between the two of us and turns on me, narrowing her chocolate-brown eyes. “What promise?”

Chantelle steps beside her. “Holt was supposed to ask if you’d make some of my future covers.”

Nova puts her hand up in defense. “I’m not a graphic designer.”

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Chantelle steps back from Nova, giving her a little space. “I don’t need a graphic designer; I need an artist with a vision.”

Nova looks from Chantelle to me. “I’m mostly a painter.”

“She can draw too,” I interject. “She’s a phenomenal artist all around.”

Nova’s cheeks flush.

Chantelle clasps her hands in front of her and bounces on her toes. “So? What do you say? Want to give it a shot?”

Nova purses her lips to the side, and I can see she’s fighting back a smile. “I’ll try. But no promises.”

Cheers erupt from outside, followed by a round of “Happy Birthday” coming from the other side of the trees.

Nova’s gaze snaps to mine and she settles her hands on her hips. “Holt Graves! What did you do?”

Without answering, I wrap my arm around her and guide her to the surprise party Aunt Birdie and I planned with the help of Nova’s parents.

We’re greeted by countless friends and family members as we make our way to the white tent.

My phone dings with a text and I check it.

Leaning down, I whisper in Nova's ear, "I have one more surprise for you, SuperNova."

She looks up at me with adoration shining in her eyes. "How much more can you do for me?"

I scratch the back of my neck, nervous about the huge gift I've been working on for weeks now. But her smile dissolves any of the uncertainty.

Cupping her cheek, I say, "There's no limit to what I'd do for you, my SuperNova." I lean down and press a soft kiss to her lips.

After I pull back, she blinks up at me and rests her hand on her chest.

"Let's go; your surprise is waiting in the parking lot."

She tilts her head in confusion and narrows her eyes.

With that, I grab her hand and tug her in the right direction.

"Elise?!" Nova screeches as a petite woman comes into view.

Elise runs to her and wraps her in a tight embrace. Tears stream down Nova's face when she pulls back to look at her French friend.

"What are you doing here?" Nova asks, wiping her cheeks.

Elise says in a thick accent, "Coming to celebrate my friend's birthday, of course." She tilts her head to the side and gives Nova a playful glare. "Desperate times call for

desperate measures.” She points an accusing finger at her. “You promised to stay in touch.”

Nova hangs her head. “I know, but...”

“But nothing.” Elise wraps her arms around Nova and pulls her into another hug. “You are my friend. No time or distance will ever change that.”

They hold each other for a long time before a man who I assume is Elise’s husband, Bernard, comes out of the house and greets Nova with a quick hug.

Aunt Birdie practically skips to us and greets Elise as if they’re lifelong friends and aren’t officially meeting for the first time. “Oh, it’s so nice to meet you in person! Did you get your things in your room already?” Aunt Birdie directs the question to Bernard.

He nods in confirmation.

“So this is why you wouldn’t let me see the guest book!” Nova accuses Aunt Birdie.

Aunt Birdie doesn’t look one bit ashamed. “Guilty!”

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“Well, this surprise was totally worth it!” Nova squeezes Elise again. “Thank you so much for making the trip.”

“My pleasure.” Elise rocks back on her heels looking incredibly excited. “I know I should wait, but I can’t!”

Elise digs through the purse hanging on her shoulder and pulls out an envelope before handing it to Nova.

“What’s this?” Nova asks, her expression confused.

“Open it,” Elise demands.

Nova slides a finger beneath the flap and slides it across the fold. She pulls out what looks to be a check and gasps. When she looks up, her eyes are wide and blinking rapidly. “You owe me nothing. This is crazy. Way more money than someone should get for a birthday!”

“It’s not money for your birthday. It’s money for your paintings.”

Nova covers her mouth with her free hand. “What do you mean?”

Irritation flashes in Elise’s eyes. “I caught Beau trying to sell them but swooped in before he could close the deal and told the buyers the truth. If they bought those paintings from Beau the artist wouldn’t see a dime of profit.” Then Elise giggles. “You should have seen Beau’s face when the buyer backed out. Well anyway, they came back in the next day to talk to me and bought the paintings with that check

written to you.”

Nova clutches the check to her chest. “I can’t believe this. People actually paid for my artwork.”

“Of course they did. Your paintings are incredible.”

Tears stream down Nova’s cheeks and she throws her arms around her friend. “Thank you,” she mutters over and over.

“My pleasure,” Elise replies.

Everyone’s gone except Nova, me, Elise, and her husband. We’re sitting around the fire, talking and unwinding from the big day.

“Did you have a good birthday?” Elise asks Nova from across the fire.

Nova looks to me. “It’s been an amazing birthday.” She turns back to Elise. “Having you here has been the cherry on top!”

“I’m so glad.” Elise hovers her hands in front of the fire, warming them as the night grows cooler.

We fall into a comfortable silence. Nova snuggles deeper into my side and leans her head against my shoulder, tightening the flannel blanket around her shoulders. A few minutes pass like this before she starts nodding off.

I whisper down into her ear, “All right, birthday girl, I think it’s time to get you home.”

She pulls back and looks at me with her adorable pout, and I brush a strand of hair

behind her ear.

“I’ll take you on my bike.”

Nova sits up quickly, an obvious pep back in her energy.

“Okay!”

She goes around and hugs everyone goodbye, promising Elise that she’ll meet her at the inn for breakfast tomorrow morning.

We take our time walking hand in hand to my bike. I want to draw out this night for as long as possible, since I can no longer pop over to her cabin if I see her light on. Sure, I could show up at her house like I did before, but with the temperatures dropping, hanging out outside will become more frigid as each day passes.

I help Nova into her helmet and get on my bike, taking her hand as she swings her leg over. She rests her head against my back as she wraps her arms around my waist, and I smile.

One mile separates the Storybook Inn from Nova’s house, but I make that one mile stretch out as long as possible. Before I know it, I’m pulling into her drive, and even after parking, Nova doesn’t release her hold on me.

“Am I gonna have to carry you in, SuperNova?”

“No,” she mutters before swinging her leg over and getting off.

I follow suit. Once I set both of our helmets on my bike, I take her face in my hands.

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“I hope you had a good birthday.”

She wraps her arms around me, hugging me tight. Nova tips her head back and rises to her toes to give me a kiss.

“This was the best birthday I’ve ever had.” Her arms go around my neck, and she plays with the hair at the base of my neck, sending goosebumps down my spine. She places a kiss at the base of my throat, and I tighten my hold on her. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, baby. I can’t wait to spend the rest of them with you.”

“And I can’t wait to spoil you on your birthday.” She pulls back and playfully pokes me in the chest.

I take her hand and place a kiss on the pad of the finger she just poked me with, then drop my forehead against hers.

“I love you, Holt Graves. Thank you for loving me back.”

“You’re easy to love, Nova Price. Now go get some sleep.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Nova, A few weeks later...

Someone is gripping my hand tightly as I wake up. A rhythmic beeping fills my ears, mixing with the background noise of a television that’s somewhere in the room.

I can feel a presence beside me, but when I slowly turn my head, it's not the profile of my ruggedly handsome boyfriend. It's Dad. He notices me before I can say anything.

"Why did you do it?" His eyes are filled with tears.

"Do what?" I croak.

Dad hands me a glass of water and puts the straw to my lips.

"We could have lost you. We almost did."

After drawing in several gulps of water, I answer, "We could have lost you. And after meeting with doctors and confirming I'd be a good and healthy fit, I knew God was calling me to do this." Then Dad's entire statement fully sinks in. "What do you mean you almost lost me?"

"I shouldn't have said anything. Let's wait to talk about that when you're fully recovered." Dad places a kiss on my forehead. My heart warms at his affection. He sits back but keeps my hand firmly in his.

"Why aren't you in bed?" I ask.

"It's been two days since our surgeries. They wanted me to get up and walk around. So I came straight here."

"Two days? Why am I just now waking up?"

"Focus on gaining your strength again, and I promise I'll tell you everything."

I press my lips together, but I acquiesce. "Where's Holt?" I ask.

“I told him to go home and that I wanted to be the one in here when you woke up. He wasn’t happy about it, but he obliged.”

“Oh” is all I can say.

We sit in pensive silence for several minutes before Dad speaks up again. “I’ll never be able to earn your forgiveness for my failures or pay you back for the gift you’ve just given me.”

I smirk. “It’s a good thing we don’t need to earn either of those things. I told you already, I’ve forgiven you. And as for the kidney...” I lift a shoulder. “Well, I don’t want you to miss out on the life God has planned for you. It’s a little selfish of me, too, because I want to make up for lost time. I want to do things together we never did when I was a girl because you were too busy at work.”

He frowns and shakes his head. “That’s the thing. The only way we can make up for lost time is if we can go back to the past and I can do things right the second time around.”

“Dad.” I squeeze his hand. “I’m not telling you this because I want you to feel bad. I’m telling you this so we can plan for what the future holds for our family. I mean, you’re going to be a grandfather soon. I couldn’t let you miss out on time with your grandchild just so I could keep a silly kidney.”

Dad’s eyes widen. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? Is Roxy?—”

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Just then, the door opens, cutting off Dad's words. In strolls Roxy, followed by Christian.

"Am I what?" Roxy asks, setting the ornate flower arrangement on the windowsill.

Dad's expression morphs into one of embarrassment. "Are you pregnant?"

Roxy and Chris share a look, then look at me. "Did you just ruin our surprise?" she asks, propping her hands on her hips and giving me a pointed stare.

I grimace. "Sorry! I thought you guys told him!" I lift my hand with the IV. "I blame the anesthesia still running through my veins."

Roxy smiles when Chris wraps his arm around her waist, then looks up at him. The love radiating from both of them makes me giddy.

"Yes, we're pregnant," Christian finally confirms.

"I'm not far along, so we're only telling close friends and family. We were going to tell you and Amanda at family dinner this Sunday," Roxy tells Dad.

Dad looks between the three of us as if waiting for further explanation.

"We asked Nova to be the baby's godmother, so she was one of the first to know."

I can't help but smile at the memory. Holt and I were out on his back deck with the space heater blowing on us, watching another Audrey Hepburn movie and cuddling

when Chris and Roxy showed up. I don't know if I've ever seen my brother smile so big. They were holding hands, practically clinging to each other, when Roxy blurted out, "We're pregnant!" with absolutely no preamble.

I untangled myself from Holt and sprinted to my brother and sister-in-law, wrapping them both up in a firm hug. "Congratulations!" I said as I stepped back.

Roxy's hand hovered over her middle. "I'm only about eight weeks along, but this one"—she motioned to Christian—"told me he needed to tell his sister and best friend asap. So here we are."

"Well, I'm honored you came to us first," I said, looking up at Holt, who came to stand beside me.

He pulled Roxy into a hug, then Chris into a bro-hug. "Congratulations, you two."

"Thank you," Chris said, then looked down at Roxy. "Do you want to do the honors?"

Roxy's smile was wide as she grabbed my hands. "Chris and I were wondering if you'd be the baby's godmother?" My eyes filled with tears, the magnitude of that moment an additional healing balm I didn't know I needed.

"I'd be honored," I said, then pulled my sister-in-law into another hug.

"And there's no other man I trust more than you." Chris clapped Holt on the shoulder. "Will you be our baby's godfather?"

"Of course I will."

"Well, congratulations are in order." Dad's clap pulls me back into the present. He

carefully stands, hobbling his way over to my brother and sister-in-law. Awkwardly, he spreads his arms open and gives them both a hug. That's when I notice his outfit. I rarely saw him dressed down in anything other than slacks and a button-down shirt in public. Even at home he wore khakis and a polo. Today he's in sweatpants, a T-shirt, and grippy hospital socks. He's never looked more vulnerable, yet I've never respected him more or felt more close to him in all my life.

The three of us talk of baby names, nursery plans, and nausea treatments since Roxy has been battling severe morning sickness. Mom comes in and fusses over me, excited that I'm awake. She pulls out a tuna salad sandwich she must have gotten from the cafeteria, and the smell permeates the room in the way only tuna can. Roxy covers her mouth and sprints into the bathroom.

Mom looks at Dad, Chris, and me questioningly. "What's gotten into her?"

The toilet flushes, and it's as if the sound alone triggers Mom's understanding. Her mouth drops open and she practically leaps on Roxy as she comes out of the bathroom looking slightly less peaked than when she ran in.

"You're pregnant?"

Roxy tries to smile, but I can tell even from across the room that it's forced.

"Drink some ginger ale," I offer, pointing to the unopened bottle on the bedside table.

Chris opens it and urges her to take small sips. After a few sips, Roxy's expression relaxes.

"Yes, I am pregnant," she tells Mom, then opens her arms as if she fully anticipated the hug Mom then gives her.

A woman whisks into the room. “Hey there, sweetie, I’m your night nurse, Holly.” She walks over to the computer next to my bed and logs in with a beep of her hospital ID. “I heard you gave us quite a scare.”

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“That’s what I’ve been told.” My voice is groggy.

“Take some sips of water,” she encourages, lifting the straw to my lips.

“Do you know what happened? No one will tell me.”

She glances to the other side of my bed, and I follow her line of sight. That’s when I notice the hulking man fast asleep in the uncomfortable recliner.

“Thanks to that man, you were able to get a transfusion when you started losing blood.”

My face pales at the realization. “Why wouldn’t they tell me?”

“My best guess is he didn’t want you to have another reason to call him a hero. That boy is too humble, if you ask me.”

I chuckle at that. “You’re telling me. The man saves dozens of orphans, his team, and the pet cat, but he refuses to admit the treasure he is.”

“That’s the perfect word for him. A treasure.”

I gently brush my hand up the arm he has draped next to me. He doesn’t rouse.

“Lucky for you, he has the same blood type as you.”

I turn my attention back to the nurse. “Luck had nothing to do with it. Like

everything else in my life, God had all of this worked out before I even knew I was going through with it.”

She smiles so big her eyes shine. “That’s right, sugar. God is always working for us.” She lifts her right hand, and in a beautiful soprano, sings, “Praise Him!”

“Praise Him,” I repeat in my normal voice.

After checking my vitals, my fluids, and making sure I drink more water, Nurse Holly tells me everything looks good and exits the room.

I turn Holt’s hand so it’s palm up and brush my fingers over the SEAL trident tattooed on the inside of his forearm. Then I allow my hand to slide up to his inner bicep, where he has the word “brother” in the same place where my brother now has a matching tattoo in braille.

I had asked Chris about his newest tattoo while I waited for the anesthesiologist to come into my room. He told me he got the tattoo after he saw Holt for the first time after the explosion. They weren’t sure if Holt would be able to see again. The blast destroyed his left eye but left damage to the optical nerves of his right eye. Thanks to the surgeons and lots of community prayer, his vision was restored in the surviving eye. Chris went and got the tattoo so it would be ready before Holt got out of the hospital. Then Holt got his shortly after.

Even though the two men chose very different paths in life, they’ve stuck together like brothers from the first day they met.

A low humming sound comes from Holt, followed by the words, “I could get used to waking up next to you.” Without warning, he turns fully in his seat to gently grip my face and pull me into a heart-stopping kiss. My eyes flutter closed, and I get lost in the moment. Lost in Holt.

He pulls back, and I pout like I always do when he's the one to break our kiss. Holt chuckles, low and deep. "Sorry, Priceless, but I want you to be out of here before doing what I really want to do."

My face flames at his words. The brazenness I once felt with previous boyfriends is long gone, and even though those desires are stronger than ever with Holt, I know I need to keep them in check. So instead of focusing on my body's reaction to this gorgeous man and his kissing expertise, I ask, "Priceless? Is that my new nickname?"

Holt's lips quirk up to one side. "I think it has a nice ring to it." Gently, he strokes down my cheek, tilting my chin up to search my face. "It's twofold. One, you are my priceless treasure, and two"—his smirk grows wider, and I find myself leaning forward to kiss the scar on his quirked lip. Before I can do more, he pulls back and goes on as if nothing happened. "And two, pretty soon your last name is gonna change and you won't be Price anymore, hence Price-less."

My lips part, and I go breathless, unable to form a coherent response.

His voice drops a few octaves. "One day very soon I hope to make you Mrs. Graves."

My pulse kicks up at that declaration, and I'm finally able to think straight. "Is that a proposal?"

"Oh no, baby. You'll know when it's a proper proposal. I wouldn't dream of giving you anything less."

Chapter Thirty

Holt, Next fall

I've never felt more proud of anything in all my life as I stare at the home I've been

working on over the last few months. The once crumbling house that sat abandoned for years has been restored and is now the base of my newly-built log cabin. There was a bit of a hiccup at the end of construction, but I now realize the timing was perfect.

I couldn't have done it without Aunt Birdie's encouragement, Christian's generous donations, and Nova's natural eye for design. The rustic structure stands tall and proud, flanked by two massive ponderosa pines on either side. A covered wraparound porch holds several benches and rocking chairs where we can sit outside and sip sweet tea or coffee. There's a section around back with an open roof where I have a firepit surrounded by benches that Axel helped me make.

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A strong yet soft hand slides down my arm. Nova stares up at me, that smile I've always loved lighting up her face. I can't help but bend down to place a kiss to her lips. Titan and Tootsie both bark, making sure I know they are also present. Nova knew this would be one of my last mornings at this house alone and gave me a little more time than usual to come out and bring the pups before setting up for the grand opening party.

"This is absolutely...spectacular," she whispers, then nuzzles into my side.

There's a chill in the early morning air that reminds us that winter is right around the corner. I'm grateful for Tootsie's warmth as she leans against my leg. Titan sits dutifully on the other side of Nova, his new favorite human.

"Thank you for helping me make this dream a reality."

Nova motions with her free hand toward the cabin. "I didn't do this. This was all you."

Tootsie and Titan trot off to take their places on their doggy beds on the porch. I pull Nova into a full hug and bend down to bury my face in her hair, breathing in her calming scent and soaking in the feel of her in my arms. I place a gentle kiss on her neck, and her girly giggle brings a smile to my lips.

When I lean back, I make sure to keep my arms firmly around her. "This was a community effort. But you, my SuperNova, were the one who took my ideas and transformed them into this reality." I love the way her cheeks turn pink.

“It’s been my pleasure. I’ve loved every second of this process.” She turns to face the massive cabin once more. “Even on the hard days, I knew this day would be worth it.” A smile is on her lips as her eyes scan the building. She paces a few steps away, taking in each of the areas around us where the boys will learn different life skills: a garage to show them how to change oil, a tire, and other basic car mechanics; a fire pit and wood pile where they’ll learn how to split wood and build a fire. As well as other areas designed to teach other life skills. “You are going to change lives here.”

“We are going to change lives here. You’ve already transformed mine.”

A shy smile curves her lips. “I have?”

I bridge the gap between us and wrap my arms around her once more. “You know you have.”

“And you’ve changed mine. This last year has been incredible.”

Just before I can touch my lips to hers, Tootsie jumps up and barks, Titan quickly copying. They wait until the quads and side-by-sides are parked before darting over to the ATVs and greeting our friends.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Thor asks, helping Clover from the back of his quad.

Nova tucks her head against my chest, hiding what I know to be completely red cheeks.

“Drats,” I whisper, then place a kiss on top of her head. “I guess our moment of privacy is gone.”

She tilts her head back and laughs. It’s not a soft giggle; it’s a full-blown guffaw. She

stumbles back and bends over, resting her hands on her knees as she tries to gather her composure.

Roxy gets out from the driver's side of the side-by-side and I'm wondering why she drove until I see the baby girl Christian is wearing in a baby carrier on his chest. The couple looks from me to Nova with curious expressions.

Caius, Tallulah, Des, Maya, Thor, and Clover all stop what they're doing to stare at the spectacle that is Nova Price.

It's as if she doesn't even notice them. "Did you just say drats?" She puts the word in air quotes.

"I did." I scratch the back of my head, feeling my ears heat.

Nova takes a step back and rests her hands on her slender hips. "When did you start using such foul language, Mr. Graves?"

I lean down and rest my forehead against hers. "Since my friends just interrupted a moment I was sharing with my girl."

She shivers. "Your girl. I like that." Her eyes drop to my lips. "A lot."

I hum low in my throat and wrap my arms back around her as if we're alone once more. "Me too." Then I kiss her.

Christian clears his throat, and when I look over his sister's head to meet his narrowed gaze, he looks less intimidating than normal as he wears a pink carrier and sways back and forth. I can tell he's only giving us a hard time for his own entertainment.

“If you two wouldn’t mind, I think it would be good if we got everything set up.”

Nova jumps out of my hold. “Sure thing, Boss Man.”

Then, out of nowhere, she rises to her tiptoes and kisses her brother’s cheek. Chris looks as shocked as I feel, then he narrows his eyes at his sister.

“When did she get so affectionate?” Chris asks, I assume rhetorically.

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Thor comes up from behind him, clasping his shoulder. “I have a guess.” He wiggles his eyebrows and looks at me.

“No.” Chris holds up his hand. “Just...no.”

Thor and I laugh together as Christian stalks off to help Cai with the white canopy.

Not long after my crew is there, Aunt Birdie, Van, and Emma park their side-by-side. They have a trailer on the back with the final things we need for the party. Axel shows up on his dirt bike just in time to help them unload.

The next few hours are spent setting up tents, tables, and chairs, cooking, baking, and prepping the grill for hamburgers and hot dogs. It’s a whirlwind of activity before the intercom system notifies me that the first guests have arrived.

It’s Van’s job to taxi them back here from the inn. He has another secret job he works on in between bringing guests back. Each time I see him sneak out of the surprise behind the house, the excitement builds.

Once the party is in full swing, I take my place on the porch, tapping the microphone to get everyone’s attention. Everyone turns toward the stage, and I smile down at all of them.

“Thank you all for coming today. This has been a humbling experience, to say the least. God has shown me time and time again that He has orchestrated this, and all I need to do is walk on the path He’s set before me.” I turn my attention to Aunt Birdie. “Thankfully, He also sent me a guide who has helped keep me on the straight and

narrow.” She beams up at me. “But Mount Restoration has been a labor of love and selflessness from my family and friends.” I motion to the white screen behind me and use the remote to click on to the slideshow Nova made. “As you can see, where I am currently standing was nothing but a crumbling four walls this time last year.” I move through the next several slides slowly. “Then, as the months passed, the walls were made firm and strong enough to hold the cabin you see here today.” I motion behind me. “That is my goal for each kid who comes to my door. When kids don’t get the care and love they need, they suffer. Not just emotionally, but physically and spiritually. Here, they will grow into men who contribute good into society. They’ll learn how to do basic mechanics, build a fire, survive in the wilderness, cook, clean, shave, tie a tie, and whatever else they need. My goal with this program is to mold boys into men who don’t just survive, but thrive. This is a faith-based system because only God can fully restore what the world breaks. My Uncle Walter taught me that, and I really don’t know where or who I’d be without my relationship with Jesus.” I swallow the growing emotion in my throat. “Not everyone has an aunt and uncle like I did. My hope and prayer is that this will be my uncle’s legacy. That I and the other men working with me can be to these boys what my uncle was to me.”

The small crowd breaks out into applause, and I praise God that He has given me this group of people—my community, my family, my tribe of people with hearts for service.

Over the next few hours, I receive more monetary donations than I know what to do with, and I thank God for His hand in all of this. As the party winds down and each guest says goodbye, the nervousness of what’s coming next pulses through me.

Van is the last one to leave after taking each guest back out through the forest to their cars parked at the inn. He claps me on the shoulder and says, “It’s ready” low enough that Nova can’t hear him.

Thankfully, she’s too occupied playing tug of war with Tootsie to notice the strings

of lights turn on.

Van hugs her goodbye and waves to us both. “Night, guys.”

“Good night. Thanks for all your help today!” Nova says.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” I confirm.

Van tips his hat and hops on the side-by-side, leaving Nova and me alone.

She spins in a semi-circle until her eyes land on the strings of lights illuminating the gravel path behind the house.

“I didn’t know you put these lights up.”

“You want to see where they take us?”

There’s a curiosity in her expression. “You know I do.”

We walk hand in hand down the gravel path, Tootsie and Titan following us. It takes several minutes for us to come to a wall of shrubs with a wooden door placed in the hedge. There’s a natural canopy of vines growing between pine trees where her surprise awaits.

“What is this?” she asks, looking between me and the wooden door.

“Open it and see.”

Nova is practically bouncing on her toes when she pulls it open and gasps. “Oh my...” She covers her mouth with both hands as she stares at the fairy tale-worthy cottage I built for her, hidden behind the trees. There’s a stone walkway that takes us

to the door. Several small rose bushes line the outer wall, creating an even more fairy tale-like feel.

I nod toward the cottage's front door. "Go in."

"Holt, this is insane. It's too much. You've built another house?"

I shrug a shoulder as if building this cottage with my own two hands and a few power tools was no big deal. When Chris offered to help fund hiring a team to build the main house, I didn't turn him down. I've spent my life never taking advantage of my friend or his money. The last time I did was when we were twelve and he bought me ice cream because I didn't bring any money. But when Kent and Chris both approached me separately and told me they wanted to help fund the project, I couldn't turn them down. They're not only investors in this program but foundational blocks to its success. Thanks to their generosity, this entire endeavor has been brought to completion. Not just with my program, but creating this place for Nova too.

Nova places a hand over her chest, clearly overwhelmed already. She has no idea what else is in store.

"Go in."

She releases a deep breath before opening the door. A sob leaks from her lips before she turns and flings herself into my arms, burying her face in my chest.

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I can barely make out the words she mumbles into my chest. “This is more than a dream come true. This is absolutely amazing.”

Titan and Tootsie come in and sit dutifully by the door. I close it behind us.

Nova turns and slowly walks around, taking in the space designed specifically for her. In the far corner is a personal library with six floor-to-ceiling bookshelves full of her favorite books, the place made complete with a rolling ladder she can move around to reach the top shelves. A fireplace separates the otherside of the room where all her paint supplies are neatly organized. It looks like Kent gave her a larger easel. Her original easel is also there, but it’s covered in paint, and the new one is twice the size and has a big bow on top. Nova walks over and opens the note propped there.

Her eyes quickly scan the lines and tears leak down her cheeks. I had no idea Kent was doing this, and even though they’ve come a long way in their relationship, it’s hard for me to fully believe he’s changed. But this donation definitely pushes me to believe in his transformation even more.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

She turns around and nods, clutching the note to her chest. “He told me he’s proud of me and that he wants me to paint a mural in their house.”

That’s one of the biggest compliments her dad could give her. I wrap her in my arms and hold her tight, feeling her tremble with happiness.

“Do you think you have it in you for one more surprise?” I whisper huskily.

She pulls back and peeks up at me. “I honestly don’t know. Today has already been amazing.”

I motion to the space around us. “If you can’t tell, I really want you around a lot more. I don’t expect you to hang around with me while I teach the boys through the day, so I thought this would be the perfect place for you to escape to while I’m busy if you don’t have anywhere else you want to go.”

She does another slow spin. “I don’t know if I’ll ever want to be anywhere else. This place is absolutely...a dream come true.” She faces the library.

I drop to my knee. “And you’re my dream come true.”

She spins to face me, a smile on her face before her gaze drops to me. She covers her mouth with her hands and a gasp escapes her lips.

I blow out a slow breath. “Nova, if the last year has taught me anything, it’s this—I need you in my life. I am so stupidly in love with you. I’d love it if you spent your days here or wherever you want to be. But at night, I want you in my home, sleeping next to me.”

Her expression falls.

I rush to finish when I realize what she must be thinking. “What I’m clumsily trying to ask here is will you be my wife?” Any of her confusion or uncertainty disappears. “Soon?” I add for good measure.

I have a few more points I’d like to make, but Nova doesn’t give me the chance. She tackles me to the floor, and I have only a second to brace myself and take the brunt of our fall. She doesn’t hesitate; the moment we’re down, she’s kissing every inch of my face until her soft lips press to mine. I wrap my arms around her and she melts into

me. It takes every ounce of willpower I have, but I lift her off me so we can both sit up.

“Listen, baby, I think you showed me the answer, but I’d really like to hear it verbally from those pretty lips. Will you be my wife?”

“I love you so much, Holt. More than I thought I could love anyone. You’ve shown me love countless times over our lives in so many different ways. You know I’ll marry you!” she answers.

“I love you, Nova Price.”

Titan and Tootsie both bark in warning, and I know we only have mere seconds before we’re tackled by the duo. Nova scrambles off my lap, and we help each otherstand before the pups have a chance to knock us back down.

“She said yes, pups,” I say to them. That’s when it dawns on me. “You didn’t even see the ring.” I tuck my hand into my pocket to pull out the vintage box I completely forgot about when I dropped to one knee.

“You could make me a ring out of a dandelion stem and I’d still say yes.”

I flip open the box and stare down at the vintage ring my great-great grandfather gave to the love of his life.

Nova gasps. “I mean, I’d say yes of course, but you went to all the trouble of picking it out, figuring out my size...”

The circular diamond surrounded by smaller diamonds on a plain golden band looks like a flower made of diamonds. I originally planned on buying an engagement ring, but when a rock fell out of the stone fireplace and I shined a light into the darkness to

figure out where to put it back, the gold trim on the ring box caught my eye. I pulled it out and discovered the ring and what I believe is the final journal entry Frederick Graves ever wrote folded and tucked behind it.

If you are finding this letter, two things are true: I am most certainly dead and you have discovered the hidden treasure of Rocosa. My beautiful wife wore this ring every single day of our married lives until I had to put her underground. In truth, Ella Mae was my treasure, but she loved this ring and I want to honor her by giving it to who I hope is one of my future grandchildren. It may sound odd to you, but hiding this ring here felt like a quest from God. Hopefully, you have a strong faith in Jesus. He is the cornerstone of my life, and this fireplace is a sort of cornerstone of this home. So its placement here felt fitting.

The rest of the treasure is buried behind the pine tree marked with our initials, F.D.G. and E.M.G., at the trunk. Use it wisely. Wealth isn't about money, but I'm not naive enough to think money can't help those in need. So if you find it, please use it to do just that.

Sincerely,

Frederick Graves

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Giving this ring to Nova is my own way of honoring Ella Mae. And after digging up the treasure worth 50,000 dollars, I used it to make this place even more than what I originally planned.

Nova pressing her lips all over my face draws me back to the present. This experience that is real and not just a dream. With a woman who far exceeds my dreams.

“This is actually part of the hidden treasure of Frederick Graves.”

A little gasp escapes her. “You mean, this is what you’ve been looking for?”

“Part of it. The other part was buried under a pine tree a few hundred feet back.” Her eyes widen, and I continue. “All of it has been right in front of me all along.” I slide the ring onto her finger and smile at how perfectly it fits. Looking up at her, I add, “Just like you’ve been in front of me all along. I just needed the right nudge.”

“It’s a perfect fit,” she mutters, staring down at it, and then looks up at me. “You’re my perfect fit.”

“And you’re mine.” I take her face in both of my hands and lower to her level, planting a quick kiss to her lips. Sealing this day as the most perfect one yet.

Epilogue

Nova

Watching Dad’s face as Mom walked down the aisle was the most heartwarming

thing I've ever witnessed. Their marriage has grown leaps and bounds over the last few months. With a lot of prayer, counseling, and intentional communication, their failing relationship has made a complete one-eighty.

The vow renewal ceremony at the Rocosa Community Church went off without a hitch. I stood as Mom's maid-of-honor, Reese and Roxy as her bridesmaids. Chris was Dad's man-of-honor, Holt and Des the other groomsmen. My research on vow renewals didn't show many ceremonies with a wedding party, but after talking with my parents, they told me they wanted us all included.

Now we're at the Denver Performing Arts Center, which is decorated to the nines...and then some. White tulle is draped across the ceiling with hundreds of twinkle lights. Flower arrangements of varying colors and styles decorate the tables covered in white linen tablecloths. Each chair has its own silver cover with an expertly crafted bow.

Over two hundred guests mill about, eating, dancing, and talking. Mom, Dad, and I have eaten our fill of this place's catered delicacies and the wedding cake that took Mom and me five days to choose.

"I knew you were amazing and creative, but you have completely outdone yourself," Holt says in a low voice in my ear as he leads me around the ballroom's dance floor.

"It was a good test run for next month, I think."

Holt hums low in the back of his throat. "Just three more weeks until I can call you 'wife.'" His hot breath in my ear sends a shiver racing down my spine.

I look up into his handsome face and trace his scar with the tip of my finger. "I don't think I could be more proud to be your wife. My hero." I overflow with gratitude, and I tuck my face against his chest. Holt leads me around the dance floor, humming

along to the song “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran. My insides turn gooey at his sweetness.

As the song “Perfect” fades away, “Butterfly Kisses” by Bob Carlisle starts playing. Holt looks behind me, a gentle smile on his face.

“I think this dance is for you two,” he says, twirling me into Dad’s arms.

Dad nods his thanks, and we sway to the song I listened to countless times and played in my room in hopes that one day my relationship with Dad could heal.

“Do you like the song?” Dad asks.

I pinch my lips closed, trying to hold back the waterworks that are ready to flow down my cheeks. “I love it.”

He smiles down at me. “I do too.” Dad places a kiss on my forehead. The broken girl inside of me heals a little more.

“Did you pick it?” I ask.

“I may have made sure the DJ had it on today’s playlist.”

“Thank you.”

Dad shakes his head. “No, Nova. Thank you.” He removes his hand from mine and motions around the ballroom. “For all of this. I don’t think the most expensive event planner could have pulled off what you did today. It couldn’t have been more perfect.” Dad wraps both arms around me and we sway to the song. “I couldn’t be more proud of the woman you’ve become.”

“You’re going to make me cry.”

Dad gently tucks my head against his chest. “It’s okay to cry sometimes, Nova girl. I was wrong to ever say otherwise. And I’m sorry I ever did.”

I don’t think my heart could be more full. “Butterfly Kisses” fades into “You Make My Dreams Come True” by Daryl Hall and John Oates. Dad releases me, and I dance my way over to the biker table, motioning for the whole group and Reese to come out onto the dance floor.

Only Maya and Roxy get up.

“Come on, guys, you know you want to.”

Holt comes up from behind me, putting his hand on the small of my back. “Yeah, come on. Just one song.”

They look around at each other, all shrugging and giving in to our request.

Our group takes over the dance floor. The other guests laugh and clap as some of us give our all into some ridiculous dance moves while others awkwardly sway offbeat. Mom comes out and spins me around. We throw our heads back and give in to the moment of pure excitement and joy.

My life is far from perfect. My relationship with my parents has healed a lot, but we still have our struggles. A lifetime of hurts and misunderstandings from poor communication will not heal in just a year. But with our lives now centered on Christ, I know that even the hardest days won't break us. Because it's the hard days where we need to lean into Jesus more. It's in those hard days where we grow closer into becoming the people God made us to be.

Just over a year ago, I called myself the prodigal daughter. Because that's exactly who I was. A girl who ran away from home and made countless mistakes on the journey to finding herself. I gave myself away to guys who only wanted to use me, and I never felt that I truly belonged with any of them. But today I can confidently say I know who I am, and most importantly, know who I belong to. I know with every ounce of my heart I am a child of God who has been redeemed and restored.