



Dad News (Dad Habits #1)

Author: Annabella Michaels

Category: LGBT+

Description: Bryson-

What were they thinking?

I thought I had my life all figured out—five-year career plan, ten-year personal plan. But all that shatters when my best friend and her husband die in a car accident. When I agreed to be the guardian for their baby, I never imagined I'd become a single dad to a six-month old. I'm supposed to be the one who spoils her rotten and sends her home, not the one responsible for raising her. I love my goddaughter, but I don't know the first thing about babies.

Worse? I'm not Chloe's only guardian. Her Uncle Tucker is my complete opposite, but the terms of the will are clear: we have joint guardianship. How am I supposed to navigate the chaos of caring for a baby with a free-spirited world traveler who thinks I'm a stick in the mud?

Seriously, what were they thinking?

Raising a baby wasn't part of the plan, but now we're both determined to raise Chloe to the best of our abilities. Unfortunately, our talents aren't at all aligned, and we're both in way over our heads. Not to mention this pesky attraction to Tucker I'm trying my best to fight.

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I smoothed the delicate lace of Brooke's veil, my fingers trembling slightly as I arranged it just so. "There. Now you're officially the most beautiful bride in Lakeside Ridge history."

Her eyes met mine in the mirror, a mix of excitement and terror swirling in their blue depths. "Are you sure I'm not going to trip and fall flat on my face walking down the aisle?"

I chuckled, resting my hands on her shoulders. "Not a chance. I've seen you navigate the boardwalk in six-inch heels after three margaritas. This'll be a cakewalk."

She laughed, some of the tension easing from her frame. "What would I do without you, Bryson?"

The question transported me back to a cool October morning, twenty-odd years ago. I was in the third grade, and it was my first day at a new school. The school year was already a couple of months in, making it even harder to be the new kid. I heard whispers and a few giggles as Mrs. Hicks made me stand in front of the class and awkwardly introduce myself and then she seated me next to a little waif of a girl with blonde pigtails. The girl eyed me curiously but didn't say anything.

At lunch, all the other boys sat together, laughing and talking around mouthfuls of food. They'd already made friends and didn't seem particularly interested in making another one since none of them even bothered to speak to me. At recess, I found a quiet place to sit beneath a shade tree and opened my book, staring down at the pages

and trying to ignore the ache of loneliness in my chest.

A pair of black Mary Janes moved into view, stopping in front of me. “Whatcha readin?”

I looked up at the owner of the voice and saw the little girl in pigtails. “Um...it’s the new Diary of a Wimpy Kid ,” I replied.

“Is it good?”

I shrugged, noncommittally. “Don’t know. I just started it.”

“Well, then let’s read it together,” she said, plopping down next to me and tucking her skirt around her skinny legs.

My eyes widened in surprise. “Don’t you want to go play with your friends?”

She gazed out at the other kids, running and climbing, swinging and chasing each other around the playground. “I don’t really have any,” she answered softly then she turned to look at me, her blue eyes seeming almost too big for her delicate face. “I’m new too.”

“Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know. The police came and got me. Said I needed to live with my Gran from now on. I haven’t seen them since,” she explained solemnly.

“Do you miss them?” I asked.

Her mouth turned down in a frown and she shook her head. “No. They weren’t very nice. Not like my Gran. She bakes me cookies and reads to me every night before

bed.” Her frown morphed into a smile when she talked about her Gran, and I was glad she was living with her and not her mean parents.

“What about you? Where did you come from? I used to live in Tennessee. Are you from there too? Do you still live with your parents?”

My head spun at the rapid-fire questions, and I tried to decide which one to answer first. “I was born in Cleveland, but I don’t remember much about it. I never knew my dad. My mom didn’t take good care of me either, but I don’t have a Gran, so I had to go to foster care until my new parents came along and decided to adopt me.”

“Are they nice to you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. They’re great.”

Her smile was radiant, like all the light from the sun was actually coming from inside her and not from the sky. “I guess we both are happy now. Except for having no friends. But hey, you and I could be friends. Unless you don’t want to.”

She tried to hide it, but I could see the hope in her gaze, and I felt an instant connection, a kinship with this girl I’d just met. Maybe it was the things we had in common, or maybe it was the fact that she was the only person who’d talked to me all day, but I found myself smiling at her.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

And just like that, we became best friends, totally inseparable and one hundred percent loyal to each other. Her grandmother—Gran as we called her—was a sweet old lady who laughed a lot and liked to sing when she baked. She called me her honorary grandson and she became the grandparent I’d never had. Likewise, my parents had taken Brooke under their wings, loving her and treating her as if she were

their own.

I blinked, focusing back on present-day Brooke. “Crash and burn, obviously,” I teased, earning a playful swat.

“Remember when Jason Tanner broke my heart in tenth grade?” she asked, her eyes far away. “You showed up at my house with a gallon of rocky road and a copy of *My Best Friend's Wedding*.”

I nodded, my chest tightening at the memory. “And you returned the favor two years later when I came out.” The words caught in my throat, emotions bubbling to the surface. “You were the first person I told.”

Brooke squeezed my hand. “I was so proud of you that day, Bryson. I still am.”

I swallowed hard, blinking back the moisture in my eyes. “Look at us now,” I said, gesturing to her wedding gown. “All grown up and getting married. Well, one of us anyway.”

“Your time will come,” she said softly. “Someday, you'll find a guy who appreciates how amazing you are.”

I shrugged, pushing down the familiar ache of loneliness. “Maybe. But today isn't about me.” I straightened her necklace, my OCD tendencies kicking in. “It's about you marrying the love of your life. Are you ready?”

Brooke took a deep breath, her smile radiant. “I've never been more ready for anything in my life.”

As I helped her to her feet, I marveled at how far we'd come from that first day of third grade. Through every high and low, every triumph and heartbreak, through the

loss of her Gran and then each of my parents we'd been there for each other. And no matter where life took us next, I knew that would never change.

“You look amazing. Zach is one luck?—”

A commotion outside the door interrupted me. Loud footsteps approached, followed by a deep, apologetic voice. “Sorry I'm late! Traffic from the airport was a nightmare.” The door burst open, and in strode a tall, dark-haired man with piercing blue eyes and a kilowatt smile. Tucker Murphy, the best man, brother of the groom, and a pain in my ass.

I glanced at my watch, trying to keep my tone even. “You're forty-five minutes late, Tucker. The ceremony's about to start.”

His eyes flashed towards me, but his smile didn't falter. “Sounds like I'm just in time then.” He winked at Brooke. “You look stunning, sis-to-be.”

We'd met several times over the years and every time it was the same; I'd make sure everything was set up for whatever birthday or holiday we were celebrating, and Tucker would waltz in at the last second, charming everyone with his presence and annoying the hell out of me. Seriously, it was like the man didn't even know how to tell time.

I bristled at his casual attitude, but I couldn't deny the man was infuriatingly attractive. His coal-black hair was artfully tousled, and his jawline looked like it had been chiseled from marble. Despite my annoyance, I found my gaze lingering on the light scruff along his jaw.

“Thanks, Tucker,” Brooke said warmly, giving him a hug. “I'm just glad you made it.”

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to look away from the gorgeous man. “Yes, well, now that you're here, perhaps we can get this show on the road?”

Tucker's blue eyes sparkled with amusement. “Ah, Bryson Kelly. Punctual as usual, I see.” I rolled my eyes, but as I turned to guide Brooke out of the room, I felt a flutter of something in my chest.

As we took our positions on opposite sides of the aisle, I couldn't help but steal glances at Tucker. While I stood ramrod straight, hands clasped tightly in front of me, he seemed completely relaxed, looking for all the world like he was at a casual backyard barbecue rather than his brother's wedding.

I took a deep breath, trying to focus on Brooke as she glided down the aisle. But my gaze kept drifting back to the best man. His eyes were fixed on the groom, a genuine smile softening his features. Despite my irritation, I felt a familiar twinge of envy at his easy demeanor.

The ceremony passed in a blur, and before I knew it, we were seated at the head table for the reception. To my dismay, I found myself next to Tucker. “So, Bry,” he said, leaning in close enough that I caught the enticing scent of his cologne—a heady mix of sandalwood and lemongrass. “Do you ever allow yourself to relax, or are you always so meticulously composed?”

I nearly sputtered my champagne. “Pardon?”

He grinned warmly, his blue eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. “I just think you might have more fun if you let your guard down a bit.”

I felt my cheeks warm, a blend of surprise and curiosity replacing any tension. “I assure you, I’m perfectly capable of having fun,” I replied, though the perfectly aligned silverware in front of me betrayed my habitual precision.

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Is that why you’ve refolded your napkin three times in the last few minutes?”

I paused, realizing how true that was. “I just like things to be orderly,” I admitted softly.

“Life’s too short for perfect napkins, Bry,” he said, his tone gentle and playful. “Sometimes the best moments emerge from a bit of delightful chaos.”

I looked at him—really looked—and for a fleeting moment, I glimpsed something deeper beneath his carefree exterior. Then he winked, and the mystery returned, leaving me more intrigued than before. Before I could reply, he reached across the table and, with deliberate care, flicked over one of the delicate place cards I had spent hours perfecting. My eyes widened as I watched it topple.

“What are you doing?” I asked, half-amused as I picked it up and smoothed out the crease.

He shrugged, that ever-charming smile still in place. “Just adding a dash of unpredictability. Come on, Bry, live a little.”

I felt my pulse quicken. “It’s Bryson, actually. I’m sure I’ve reminded you of that at least a hundred times. And some of us find beauty in the details,” I murmured.

“Some of us also cherish the thrill of spontaneity,” he replied, his eyes alight with genuine interest. “Perhaps you’d see a broader picture if you allowed a little improvisation.”

Our faces drew so near that I could feel the warmth emanating from him. My heart raced—not solely from the tension of our repartee but also from the allure of something much more compelling. “You hardly know anything about me,” I said

softly.

Tucker's expression softened further. "Maybe I'd like to find out."

Before I could gather my thoughts, the DJ announced it was time for the best man and man of honor dance. I sighed with an amused resignation. As we stepped onto the dance floor, I felt his hand settle on the small of my back, guiding me with an unspoken familiarity. The touch sent a shiver through me.

"I'll lead," he murmured as we faced each other.

"Okay," I replied with a smile, my tone light and unguarded.

As we began to move, I became aware of every subtle connection between us—Tucker's hand on my waist, mine on his shoulder, our fingers intertwining, and the soft brush of his thigh against mine. It was the closest we'd ever been to each other.

"Relax," he whispered, his breath warm as it caressed my ear. "There's a certain magic in letting go."

I tried to ease into the rhythm, surprised by how natural it felt to be so close to him. As his scent enveloped me, I leaned in despite my usual reserve. "That's it," he encouraged, drawing me even nearer. "See? It's not so bad when you allow a little spontaneity into the moment."

As we swayed to the music, I reluctantly admitted to myself that he might be right. For the first time all day, I wasn't worrying about every little detail. I was just...here. In the moment. With an undeniably sexy man. The realization both thrilled and terrified me.

As the dance ended, I quickly stepped away from him, my heart racing. I needed to focus on something else, anything else. Thankfully, it was time for my toast. Moving back to our table, I clinked my glass, my eyes meeting Brooke's. She beamed at me, and I felt a wave of love and nostalgia wash over me.

“Brooke,” I began, my voice thick with emotion, “we've been best friends since third grade, and I still remember the day we met. You walked right up to me, introduced yourself and said we should be friends” I paused as laughter rippled through the crowd. “Little did I know how much that moment would change my life.”

Her eyes glistened with tears as I continued, “You've been there for me through everything—my first heartbreak, coming out, and every success and failure in between. You're not just my best friend; you're my sister in every way that matters.”

I raised my glass. “To Brooke and Zach, may your love story be as beautiful and enduring as our friendship.”

As applause filled the room, I caught Tucker's eye. He was watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read, something between admiration and... longing? I quickly looked away, unsettled by the intensity of his gaze.

I had barely sat down when he stood up, grinning mischievously. “Alright, everyone! Time to shake things up a bit. Let's have the newlyweds play a little game!”

My head snapped up. “What? That's not on the schedule,” I hissed.

He winked at me. “Sometimes the best moments are unplanned, Bry.”

I watched in horror as Tucker explained the rules of an impromptu “Newlywed Game” to Brooke and Zach, who looked delighted by the idea. The guests cheered, clearly loving this unexpected entertainment. Part of me wanted to be furious at him

for derailing the carefully planned reception. But as I watched Brooke laugh uncontrollably at one of Zach's ridiculous answers, I couldn't deny that everyone was having a blast.

“See?” Tucker murmured, leaning close. “A little spontaneity never hurt anyone.”

I turned to him, torn between irritation and reluctant admiration. “I suppose you think you're clever,” I muttered.

“Oh, I know I am,” he replied with that infuriating grin. “Admit it. You're having fun too.” And as I felt the corners of my mouth tug upwards despite my best efforts, I realized that maybe he was right.

As the reception wound down, I found myself leaning against the bar, nursing a glass of wine and watching the dwindling crowd. The soft glow of fairy lights cast a warm haze over everything, lending a dreamlike quality to the scene.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Brooke's voice startled me out of my reverie.

I turned to see her radiant face, her eyes sparkling with joy and maybe a hint of concern. “Just taking it all in,” I said, mustering a smile. “Married life looks good on you, Brookie. I'm so happy for you.”

She squeezed my arm gently. “Thank you for everything, Bryson. I couldn't have done this without you.”

As we stood there in comfortable silence, my mind wandered back through the years. “Remember when we used to play 'wedding' in your backyard?” I chuckled. “You always made me be the officiant because you said I was too bossy to be the groom.”

She laughed, the sound as familiar and comforting as a warm blanket. “Well, you did

take your role very seriously. Always insisting we follow the exact script.”

“Some things never change, I guess,” I said, thinking of my meticulously planned schedule for today.

“Maybe not entirely,” Brooke said, her eyes twinkling. “But I saw you laughing during Tucker's impromptu game. Admit it, you had fun.”

I felt a flush creep up my neck. “It wasn't...terrible,” I conceded.

Just then, Zach appeared, wrapping an arm around Brooke's waist. “Ready to go, Mrs. Murphy?”

“Mrs. Murphy. I love the sound of that,” she gushed.

As they prepared to leave, a bittersweet ache settled in my chest. I was overjoyed for my best friend, truly. But watching them together, so in love and starting their new life, I couldn't help but feel a pang of loneliness.

“Don't forget to catch the bouquet!” Brooke called out as they made their way to the exit.

I laughed, shaking my head. “I think I'll leave that to the bridesmaids.”

As I watched her bridesmaids scramble for the flowers, then the newlyweds got in the car and drove away, streamers trailing behind it, I felt a mix of emotions wash over me. Pride in my best friend's happiness, gratitude for our enduring friendship, and yes, a quiet longing for a love of my own.

“You okay?” Tucker's voice came from beside me, surprisingly gentle.

I turned to him, ready with a quip, but something in his expression made me pause. “Yeah,” I said softly. “Just...dreaming a little, I guess.”

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. “Nothing wrong with that. Dreams have a funny way of coming true when you least expect it.”

As we stood there, watching the taillights fade into the distance, I found myself wondering if maybe, just maybe, Tucker was right about that too.

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Chapter One

brYSON

My eyes fluttered open, waking before my alarm. I sat up, throwing back the covers and peered out the window. The sun had yet to make its appearance, and a light snow was beginning to fall, dusting the sidewalks and the cars parked along the street.

I dressed in several layers and grabbed my keys before heading out the door. The air was brisk as I went through a routine of stretches, snowflakes landing on my face and catching in my eyelashes as I reached for the sky. Winters in Columbus, Ohio could be bitter, but I preferred the cold over the sweltering heat of summer.

With my Air pods in and my favorite playlist playing in my ears, I set out. I ran through my quiet neighborhood and down familiar streets, keeping to the route I'd mapped out when I'd first moved in.

As I rounded the corner onto Elm Street, my breath visible in puffs before me, I couldn't help but smile. This was my favorite part of the day—the quiet solitude before the world woke up, when it felt like the city belonged only to me.

Forty minutes later, I unlocked the door to my condo, kicking off my snow-dusted running shoes and lining them up neatly on the mat by the entrance. I hung my keys on their designated hook and made a beeline for the shower, eager to warm up.

My condo wasn't large, but it was mine, and I'd worked hard to make it feel like home. The living room was neat and tidy, with a plush gray couch facing a sleek TV

mounted on the wall. Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with marketing texts and the occasional novel, all arranged by height and color.

In the kitchen, gleaming appliances stood ready for use, though I rarely cooked anything complicated since it was usually just dinner for one. The countertops were spotless, each item in its designated place. Even my fridge was organized with military precision, containers neatly labeled.

As I towed off after my shower, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. At thirty-two, I was in the best shape of my life, thanks to my rigorous running routine. My light brown hair was still damp, and I ran a hand through it, noting I'd need a trim soon. Hazel eyes stared back at me, a mix of green and brown that always seemed to shift depending on what I wore.

I dressed quickly in dark slacks and a crisp blue button-down, then made my way to the kitchen where I prepared my usual breakfast of oatmeal with almonds, blueberries, and just a drizzle of honey. As I waited for my coffee to finish brewing, I scrolled through my emails and daily schedule, already feeling the familiar tug of work responsibilities. The aroma of fresh coffee filled the kitchen, and I poured myself a cup, adding just a splash of almond milk.

I settled at my small dining table with my breakfast, opening my laptop to review the day's agenda. As a digital marketing manager, my days were often packed with meetings, strategy sessions, and endless email threads. I loved the challenge of my job, the way it kept my mind engaged and my skills sharp. But lately, I'd been feeling a gnawing emptiness that even the most satisfying workday couldn't fill.

My eyes drifted to the empty chair across from me, and I felt a familiar pang of loneliness. I'd always imagined sharing my mornings with someone special, discussing our plans for the day over steaming mugs of coffee. But so far, I was still single. My dating life, a series of first dates that never seemed to lead anywhere.

I shook off the melancholy thoughts and focused on my breakfast. By the time I arrived at the office, I was in full professional mode, greeting my colleagues with a warm smile as I made my way to my private office.

“Morning, Bryson!” LuAnn called, her voice bright as she breezed by me in the corridor, files clutched in her arms like prized possessions.

“Hi, LuAnn. How's the Wilson campaign going?”

“Running smooth, thanks to your pointers,” she replied with a grin, and I felt that familiar flush of pride. Dependability might as well have been my middle name.

“Anytime,” I said, offering her a smile.

“Oh, hey! Everyone's raving about the SEO strategy you outlined. You've got the magic touch, Bryson,” Matt chimed in as I reached my office door, his hand raised in a casual high-five which I returned with practiced ease.

“Thanks, Matt. Just making sure we stay ahead of the curve,” I replied, the mantle of my responsibilities settling comfortably on my shoulders.

Settling into my chair, I powered up my computer and dove into the day's tasks, the familiar glow of the screen, a beacon of focus. The click-clack of keyboards and the low murmur of discussions formed a backdrop to my thoughts, a reminder that no matter how much I yearned for personal stability, I had already built a foundation of respect and success here among my peers. And for now, that would have to be enough.

The cursor blinked on the screen, a silent metronome to the rhythm of my thoughts as I scrutinized the latest campaign analytics. My role as digital marketing manager came with its own symphony of challenges—trends to follow, algorithms to decipher,

and targets to surpass. Each project was like an intricate puzzle, and I relished fitting every piece into its rightful place with precision.

“Hey Bryson, how's the Henderson pitch coming along?” Jenna's voice cut through my concentration as she stood in the open doorway.

“Almost ready,” I said, minimizing the spreadsheets to meet her gaze. “I've been fine-tuning the audience segmentation. It should increase our conversion rates by a solid margin.”

“Sounds like you've got it covered, as always.” She offered an encouraging smile that reflected both appreciation and a hint of awe—a response I had grown accustomed to over time. “You know, you could run this place if you wanted to.”

I chuckled, shaking my head slightly. “Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'm content where I am, thanks.”

“Suit yourself. Just don't work through your lunch again,” she added with a knowing look. “Even super employees like you need a break now and then.”

“I promise.” I gave her a mock salute and watched her stride away before returning my attention to the task at hand.

As the clock nudged toward noon, I saved my progress and locked the computer. Lunchtime meant a brief escape, a chance to breathe away from the figures and forecasts. I retrieved my phone from the drawer and dialed the familiar number. The phone rang twice before Brooke's smiling face filled the screen; her hair pulled back in a messy bun.

“Bryson! I'm so glad you called,” she said, her voice warm and familiar. “We were just thinking about you.”

“Hey, Brooke,” I replied, feeling my mood lift instantly. “How's my favorite family doing?”

“We're great! Zach's just getting Chloe ready. We're heading to the aquarium today.” She turned the phone, giving me a panoramic view of their cozy living room. “Zach! Bryson's on FaceTime!”

I heard Zach's muffled voice from off-screen, followed by the soft coos of a baby. My heart swelled with anticipation. “There she is!” I exclaimed as Zach came into view; little Chloe nestled in his arms. My goddaughter's chubby cheeks dimpled as she smiled, her tiny hand reaching out towards the screen.

“Say hi to Uncle Bryson,” Zach cooed, waving Chloe's hand.

I felt a lump form in my throat as I watched her, marveling at how much she'd grown since I'd last seen her. “Hi, sweetheart,” I said softly. “You're getting so big!”

“She misses her favorite uncle,” Brooke chimed in, leaning her head on Zach's shoulder. “When are you coming to visit again?”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “Soon, I hope. Things have been crazy at work, but I'm trying to clear my schedule for next month. I miss you guys too.”

“We understand,” Zach said with a sympathetic nod. “Just don't work yourself too hard, okay? There's more to life than spreadsheets and marketing campaigns.”

I forced a laugh, but his words hit a little too close to home. “I know, I know. I'm trying to find that elusive work-life balance everyone talks about.”

“Any luck in the romance department?” Brooke asked, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “I have a friend who?—”

“No setups, please,” I groaned, though I couldn't help but smile at her persistence. “I appreciate the thought, but I'm doing fine on my own.”

“If you say so,” she replied, unconvinced. “But remember, Bryson, you deserve someone special. Don't close yourself off to the possibility.”

I nodded, feeling a familiar mix of gratitude and unease at Brooke's well-intentioned concern. “I'll keep that in mind,” I said, forcing a smile. “Now, tell me more about this aquarium trip. Is Chloe excited to see the fish?”

As Brooke launched into an animated description of their plans, I felt a twinge of envy. Their little family seemed so complete, so full of joy and possibility. I pushed the feeling aside, focusing instead on Chloe's delighted squeals as Zach made fish faces at her.

“We should get going,” Brooke said eventually, glancing at her watch. “But we'll send you lots of pictures, okay?”

“Please do,” I replied, already looking forward to the flood of adorable snapshots I knew would fill my phone later. “Have a great time, guys. Love you all.” I waved goodbye to Chloe, the call ending with a soft chime that left a lingering silence in its wake.

For a moment, I allowed myself to bask in the afterglow of their happiness, a gentle reminder that there were things even more gratifying than a perfectly executed marketing strategy.

The silence in my office felt like a cavernous space after the laughter and chatter of Brooke, Zach, and Chloe had filled it. I swiveled back in my chair, staring at the clean lines of my desk, the way the pens lay parallel to each other, a silent testament to my need for order in a world that often felt too chaotic.

The reflection in my computer screen showed a man approaching his thirties, successful in his career, yet there was an absence of someone to share it all with. A partner's smile to greet me at the end of a long day, a shared laugh over some silly inside joke—these were the things that turned a house into a home.

Anxiety twisted in my gut, the fear that maybe I'd always be the one looking in from the outside, godfather but never father, uncle but never husband. It wasn't that I hadn't tried; dates had come and gone, leaving behind a trail of what-ifs and not-quotes.

But the right person—the one who could navigate the intricacies of my structured world and love me for them—that person seemed like a mythical creature, as elusive as a unicorn. Shaking off my thoughts, I stood up and made my way to the break room in search of food.

After a quick salad, I was ready to plunge back into the flurry of my afternoon schedule. There was a sense of comfort in the predictable rhythm of it all, a cadence I knew by heart. My phone beeped and Jane, our receptionist's voice came over the intercom, reminding me of my upcoming meeting. "Mr. Kelly, Mr. Adams is on line two."

"Thanks, I've got it, Jane."

"Mr. Kelly, so good to hear from you," the client's voice filtered through the speakerphone, upbeat and expectant.

"Likewise, Mr. Adams. I've got some exciting ideas for the upcoming campaign that I can't wait to share with you," I said, slipping into the confident tone of a seasoned manager. The pitch flowed from me, years of experience distilled into persuasive points and strategic insights.

Afterwards, I dove into the sea of emails that waited for me. Each message was a

problem to be solved, a deadline to be met, and I tackled them with a relentless focus that had become second nature. My hands were steady, my breathing even; this was the part of my life where I excelled, where control was mine to wield. The clock ticked away, hours passing in a blur of productivity until the office lights dimmed, and the hum of computers grew fainter.

Stepping out of the office building, the cool evening breeze was a gentle reminder that life existed beyond spreadsheets and strategy meetings. “Another day down,” I murmured to myself, staring at the orange streaks painted across the dusky sky as I strolled across the parking lot and climbed in my car.

It was in these quiet moments of solitude that my mind would wander to the corners of my life still untouched by success or certainty—love, companionship, the dream of a family. I longed for arms that would hold me without reservation, eyes that would see past the facade of composure I wore so well.

“Is he out there?” The question drifted through my mind as I drove home, stirring a restlessness deep within. Unlocking the door to my condo, the familiar scent of lemon-scented polish and fabric softener greeted me, a testament to my most recent cleaning spree. I slipped off my shoes, aligning them perfectly beside the others.

Making my way to the kitchen, I began the soothing ritual of preparing dinner. The vegetables were chopped with precision, each slice uniform. The sizzle of the stir-fry filled the room, and I found comfort in the rhythmic activity.

After dinner, I changed into a pair of sleep pants and a comfortable T-shirt then stretched out on the living room couch to read. My favorite author had just released a new book, and I was dying to get into it. But an hour later, I could hardly keep my eyes open.

Yawning, I went through my nightly ritual, locking doors, turning off lights, and

brushing my teeth. I sighed sleepily when I finally slipped between the covers of my bed, barely remembering to set my alarm before my eyes drifted shut.

The shrill ring of my phone jarred me from a deep sleep. I fumbled in the dark, the blue light of the screen seeming overly bright to my sensitive eyes. I checked the time. 1:00 AM. The caller ID flashed unknown, yet something in the pit of my stomach clenched with dread.

“Hello?” My voice was groggy.

“Hello. I’m trying to reach a Mr. Bryson Kelly.” The voice on the other end was crisp, official, and it sent a chill down my spine.

“Speaking.” I sat up, suddenly alert, heart pounding in my chest as if preempting the blow.

“This is Officer Daniels with the Lakeside Ridge Police Department. I'm afraid there's been an accident.”

The words hit like a physical force, leaving me breathless. “An accident? Who?—”

“A Mr. Zach Murphy and Mrs. Brooklyn Murphy,” he said, and the room seemed to spin. “Your name and number were listed as an emergency contact in Mrs. Murphy’s phone. Could you please state your relationship to the two of them?”

“They’re my best friends. My family,” I said around the lump in my throat. “Are they—” I couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't give voice to the fear that clawed at my throat.

The officer's voice softened, a hint of compassion breaking through the professional veneer. “I'm sorry, Mr. Kelly. They... they didn't survive the accident.”

The words hung in the air, heavy and suffocating. I felt as if all the oxygen had been sucked from the room, leaving me gasping. My mind reeled, unable to process the information. Brooke and Zach were gone? It seemed impossible, cruel, a cosmic joke that couldn't possibly be real.

“No,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “There must be some mistake. I just spoke to them around lunch time. They were going to the aquarium...”

“I'm truly sorry, sir,” Officer Daniels said, his tone gentle but firm. “The accident occurred on their way home. A drunk driver crossed the center line and hit them head-on.”

I felt like I was drowning, the officer's words washing over me in waves I couldn't comprehend. My mind raced, grasping at straws, desperate for this to be some cruel mistake. I closed my eyes, feeling tears begin to form.

“Mr. Kelly?” Officer Daniels' voice pulled me back from the edge of despair. “Are you still there?”

I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice. “Yes,” I managed to croak out. “I'm here.”

“I know this is difficult, but there's something else you need to know,” he said, hesitation clear in his tone. “Their daughter... she was in the car with them.”

My heart lurched. Chloe. My goddaughter. The image of her chubby cheeks and bright smile from our FaceTime call flashed through my mind, bringing a fresh wave of pain. “Chloe,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “Is she okay?”

“She's been taken to Children's Hospital of Michigan in Detroit,” Officer Daniels explained. “Fortunately, her car seat took the brunt of the impact. The doctors say she'll be just fine, but they want her to stay overnight for observation. I understand

this is a lot to process, but we need someone to come to the hospital. Are you able to..."

"Yes," I interrupted, already swinging my legs over the side of the bed. "Yes, I'll come right away. I'll be there as soon as I can."

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Chapter Two

brYSON

The speedometer needle trembled past seventy, pushing eighty, as I pressed the gas pedal closer to the floor. White lines on the asphalt blurred into a single streak beneath the tires of my car. Columbus faded behind me; Lakeside Ridge loomed ahead.

“Come on, come on,” I muttered, glancing at the clock. Each tick felt like a hammer against my chest, my heart matching its relentless rhythm. My grip on the steering wheel was white knuckled as I ignored every rule of the road. My focus was singular. I needed to get to the hospital. Chloe needed me.

When the hospital's angular form finally came into view, a surge of adrenaline shot through me. Barely waiting to put the car in park, I scrambled out and bolted towards the entrance, my breath forming ragged clouds in the crisp Michigan air.

The sliding doors whisked open, and I surged into the sterile calm of the hospital. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, a stark contrast to the storm raging inside me. I skidded to a stop at the reception desk, chest heaving, words tumbling out before I could catch my breath.

“Chloe Murphy. I need— Where is she?”

The nurse's gaze met mine, unflappable amidst my panic. She offered a small, reassuring smile, her voice a calming balm to my frazzled nerves. “Please take a

moment to breathe, sir. Can I have your name, please?"

"Bryson Kelly. I'm her godfather. I also have papers her parents filled out in case of emergency," I explained, handing over the papers they had asked their lawyer to draw up when Chloe was born.

She looked them over, typed something on her keyboard then smiled at me. "There is a social worker in the room with her. You'll need to show these to her as well. Chloe is in Pediatric Ward B, room 204. Take the elevator to the second floor, turn left, and it'll be the third door on your right."

"Thank you," I tossed over my shoulder, already sprinting toward the elevators, the nurse's directions echoing in my mind. My hands shook as I jabbed the button repeatedly, willing the doors to part faster. When they finally did, I slipped inside, alone with my racing thoughts and the silent prayer that Chloe was okay.

"Please be all right," I whispered to no one, as the elevator ascended with agonizing slowness.

The sterile chill of the hallway did nothing to cool my overheated mind as I approached room 204. The door swung open with a gentle nudge, revealing a doctor clad in powder blue scrubs, his expression a practiced blend of professionalism and empathy. Beside him, stood a woman in a navy pants suit. She had a kind smile.

"Mr. Kelly?" he inquired, his eyes searching mine.

"Yes, that's me. How's Chloe? Is she..." My voice trailed off, the question was too heavy to finish.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm Ms. Lewis from Child Protective Services. I'll need to see some identification and paperwork before we can give you any information or allow you to

see her. Do you have any documentation of your relationship to Chloe?"

"Oh, yes. Here," I said, handing her the paperwork. She took a few moments to look it over then, seemingly satisfied, she nodded to the doctor. I had never been more grateful for my best friend's foresight and attention to detail, not that she ever could have imagined...

"Chloe's doing fine, Mr. Kelly," the doctor said. "A few tiny bumps and bruises, but no serious injuries," he assured me. His words were a lifeline thrown into the dark sea of my fears.

"Thank God," I exhaled, the weight of dread lifting from my shoulders, replaced by a relief so powerful that it made my knees wobble. Yet, beneath that relief, there lurked pain and grief. I forced myself to push them aside for the moment.

"Can I— May I see her now?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"Of course." They stepped aside, allowing me to enter the pastel haven of Chloe's hospital room.

I tiptoed closer, the quiet hum of medical equipment barely audible over the soft cadence of her breathing. There she was, an angelic figure nestled among cotton sheets, her chest rising and falling with a reassuring rhythm.

Sitting beside her crib, I let my gaze linger on her peaceful face, and a smile tugged at the corner of my mouth despite the somber mood. It was impossible not to think back to the day Brooke had asked me to be Chloe's godfather.

"Are you sure you're ready for this, Bryson?" She had teased; her grin contagious as we sat in her living room. "It's a big responsibility, being someone's godfather."

“Please, I was born ready,” I’d quipped, smiling down at the newborn sleeping in her mother’s arms. “Besides, how hard can it be? I’ll just shower her with gifts and teach her the fine art of sorting laundry by color and fabric type.”

She had laughed, her eyes sparkling with mirth. “Perfect! Nothing says ‘I love you’ like an organized closet.”

“Seriously though, are you sure I’m the right choice? I’ve never really been religious,” I reminded her.

Brooke’s smile softened. “There’s no one we’d trust more. I mean that. Besides, to us, having you as a godfather is more of a promise that you’re going to take an active role in Chloe’s life and if—God forbid—something was to happen to me and Zach, you promise to always watch over her and keep her safe.”

“That’s the easiest promise I’ll ever had to make. I’m already crazy about this little girl,” I said, reaching out to softly touch Chloe’s hand and marveling at how delicate her fingers were. “I promise to always be in her life and to love and protect her as if she were my own.”

Brooke’s eyes swam with tears as she leaned into me, and I wrapped an arm around her. “Thank you,” she whispered.

That memory, so full of love, stood in stark contrast to the dim room where I now sat. But the promise I’d made that day—to be a constant in Chloe’s life—was as strong and unwavering as ever.

I reached for Chloe’s tiny hand through the bars on the crib, her fingers curling instinctively around mine—a reflex, they’d told me, but it felt like so much more. Her breaths were soft and even, a balm to the chaotic rush of my heartbeat. I couldn’t help but let my guard down, the walls that held back my emotions crumbling in the silence

of the room.

“Brooke, I'm sorry,” I whispered, not sure if I was speaking to her spirit or simply voicing my thoughts aloud. “I promised you I'd always be there for her, and I will. But God, I'd give anything to have you here instead.”

The words caught in my throat as I finally allowed my tears to flow freely, mourning the loss of my friends, my family, and grieving the fact that Chloe now had to grow up without her parents. I felt my heart shatter all over again at the thought and I vowed then and there that as long as I had breath in my body, Chloe would be showered with love.

Not only that, but I would make sure she knew how very much her parents had loved her. I stayed like that for what felt like hours and when I finally peeled my hand away from her grasp, it wasn't with reluctance, but with a renewed sense of purpose.

The next day brought sunlight and a whole new set of challenges. With Chloe still sleeping, I called my boss and explained the situation and said that I would be staying in Lakeside Ridge for a while. She told me to take all the time I needed, and I promised to keep her up to date.

As soon as I hung up, the door opened and the doctor walked in, along with Ms. Lewis and a man in a police uniform. The officer was tall with salt and pepper hair and kind eyes. He walked over and shook my hand. “I'm Officer Daniels. We spoke on the phone last night. I'm very sorry for your loss.”

I winced at the reminder of that terrible phone call. “Thank you,” I said. My voice sounded gruff, and I tried clearing it.

“I wanted to follow up on Chloe, see how she's doing this morning,” he explained.

We both turned our attention to the doctor who was finishing a quick examination of Chloe. The disruption woke her, and she blinked her eyes open, searching the room. At the sight of the doctor and police officer, she started to cry, and I rushed to her side. Seeing me seemed to soothe her and the doctor was able to finish his examination.

“Other than the bruising—which will begin to fade soon—she looks perfectly healthy. I have some paperwork to fill out and then you should be able to take her home.”

Tears sprung to my eyes. I squeezed them shut as I kissed the side of her head and said a quick prayer of thanks that God had decided to spare this precious little girl. “Thanks,” I managed to choke out.

The doctor gave my shoulder a sympathetic pat before walking out of the room. As the door shut behind him, Officer Daniels turned to me, his tone gentle. “I know you and Ms. Lewis spoke last night and she’s given me a copy of the emergency paperwork, but I brought some forms of my own, things I’ll need you to fill out before you can take your goddaughter home.”

“Of course,” I said with a brisk nod. I sat down with Chloe in my lap as he pulled out a file and set it on the rolling tray. He slid it over to me and handed me a pen. I filled everything out as quickly as possible, name, address, contact information, etc. Once I’d finished, Ms. Lewis scheduled an in-home visit for the following day and then they both left. By then Chloe was starting to squirm in my arms, ready for a diaper change and her breakfast.

A nurse came in and helped me feed and change her, showing me how the diaper went on and instructing me on how to clean her, so she wouldn’t get an infection—who knew babies could get UTIs. Once the doctor was finished with the release papers, it was time to go.

“Okay, little one,” I said, trying to wrangle the car seat straps around her. “This is like trying to lasso a very delicate, very important... squirming... kitten.” I huffed out a laugh, partly out of nerves, partly because I imagined Brooke would have found my fumbling hilarious.

“Here, like this,” the nurse said, showing me how to properly tighten the straps. She made it all look so easy, and I just prayed I would remember everything she’d told me. She must have noticed the anxious look in my eyes because she laid a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Try not to worry. Babies are very resilient. Even if you make a mistake, she should be just fine.”

I nodded, but didn’t say anything. Her words, meant to comfort, only added to my stress. I didn’t want to make any mistakes. Not when the safety of the most important person in my world was at stake. My eyes searched the hospital room, making sure I had everything. “Right, diaper bag,” I muttered to myself, patting down my pockets before realizing I didn’t actually need my car keys just yet.

I slung the bag over my shoulder, nearly knocking over the tray of food one of the nurses had brought me. She’d been so kind, I hadn’t had the heart to tell her I didn’t feel like eating, especially after Brooke and Zach’s attorney had called to set up a time to go over the will. I knew all of that would need to be taken care of, but I wasn’t ready to think about any of it just yet. All I cared about right then was getting this tiny angel home.

The nurse walked outside with us, making sure Chloe was securely fastened in the back seat before wishing me luck and walking away. I climbed in behind the steering wheel and buckled my seatbelt with shaking hands. I couldn’t help but feel like we were both buckling in for a lot more than just the drive back to Lakeside Ridge.

The bottle seemed to mock me from its perch atop the counter, its contents too cool for Chloe's liking. She let out a wail, hungry and short on patience since I was apparently taking too long.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm not very good at this, but I'll have it warmed up in no time," I promised. I bounced her on my hip as I filled a pot with water and set it on the stove. My hands shook slightly as I adjusted the flame—a little too high, I realized, when bubbles began dancing wildly across the surface.

"Brooke, you made this look so easy," I said under my breath, grateful for her well-organized kitchen which had made finding all the supplies much easier.

I tested the formula's temperature against my wrist like I'd seen Brooke do—too hot. I cursed softly, as I unscrewed the lid and set it on the counter to let it cool. "Chloe, your godfather might just be in over his head," I confessed as she continued to sob.

I tried swaying her from side to side while making a gentle whoosh sound, but it did nothing to soothe her. Between the stress and the noise, it felt like a marching band was making their way across my skull. Screwing the nipple onto the bottle, I tested the temperature again. Perfect, thank God.

Taking a deep breath, I cradled Chloe in my arm and offered her the bottle. Her tiny lips puckered, and she took a tentative sip, then another, and for a moment, I felt like I was getting the hang of it. But my triumph was short-lived; burping her proved to be another hurdle. She fussed and squirmed as I patted her back, each attempt more awkward than the last. "Come on, little burp," I coaxed, second-guessing every pat. Was I doing it too hard? Too soft? Should I rub instead of pat?

Finally, a delicate burp bubbled up, and I exhaled in relief. "We did it, kiddo!" I praised both of us, surprised by the success. I flashed her a weary smile, hoping I was doing at least something right.

The swing was supposed to be my ace in the hole—an automatic soother according to Brooke. Yet as I settled Chloe into it and started the gentle sway, her face scrunched up into an expression that was far from soothed. “Huh, not a fan?” I asked, stopping the motion. Her cries escalated, piercing the quiet of the room.

“Okay, no swing. Got it.” I lifted her out, feeling the weight of frustration bear down on me. Determination set in as I bounced her lightly in my arms, walking back and forth across the living room. Each step was a silent promise—to Chloe, to Brooke, to myself—that I would get this right, no matter how many tries it took.

“Alright, little one, I’ve aced tests, navigated tough clients... but this—this is the final boss level,” I muttered as I laid her gently on the changing table. Her tiny legs kicked in the air, oblivious to the battle of wits that was about to unfold between man and diaper.

“Right, so the tabs go... where exactly?” I fumbled with the new diaper, turning it this way and that, trying to make sense of the cartoon animals that seemed to mock my confusion. “Are you supposed to be facing up or down? Because frankly, Mr. Monkey, you’re not helping.”

I took a deep breath, steadying my hands that were more accustomed to typing than this gentle art of swaddling. “And we’re going for lift-off,” I announced as I lifted Chloe’s bottom and slid the diaper underneath.

“Oops, sorry, sorry,” I winced as her feet plopped back down, a little too fast for my liking.

“Okay, Chloe bear, let’s get this over with before either of us loses our...” My voice trailed off as I quickly secured the diaper, patting it smooth, hoping against hope I’d done it right.

“Look at that, we survived! High-five?” I offered my palm, but Chloe just gurgled, clearly unimpressed by my efforts. With a chuckle, I scooped her into my arms, ready for the next round.

But the peace was short-lived; the crib was no solace, and my bouncing brought no joy. Chloe's cries filled the room, each wail a tiny dagger to my heart. With a weary sigh, I began to pace the house.

“Alright, how about some music,” I suggested, although I hadn’t sung in years—at least not in front of anyone else. Still, I cleared my throat and started with the first thing that came to mind. “I’m a genie in a bottle, you gotta— I crooned, the song ending as abruptly as it had begun.

“Uh, maybe not that one.” My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, even though Chloe couldn't possibly judge my poor choice in melodies.

“Let's make up our own song, shall we?” I said, swaying with each step, her nestled against my chest. “Hush now, baby Chloe, it's time to sleep, your godfather's here, no need to weep.”

It was silly, it was nonsensical, but I poured all the love I could muster into every made-up line. Despite my exhaustion, I found a rhythm, a gentle melody that seemed to slow her tears and I sent up a silent prayer that she’d be able to fall asleep.

The knock on the door felt like a lifeline, a chance that whoever was on the other side might know more about babies than I did—which wouldn’t be that difficult since I clearly knew nothing. I stumbled to the door, Chloe's wails piercing my brain. Swinging it open, I almost wept at the sight of Tucker standing there, his coal-black hair tousled and those blue eyes so vibrant despite the exhaustion I could see in them.

“Please,” I gasped, the word a desperate plea. “Help.”

Tucker blinked as he looked from me, to Chloe, to the living room behind me, taking in the chaos of baby paraphernalia strewn about like a tornado had just swept through. “Wow, looks like you've been having quite the party.”

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. “If by 'party' you mean a one-man circus trying to entertain a very tough crowd, then yes, it's been a blast,” I deadpanned.

As if on cue, Chloe decided that moment was perfect for another performance. A gurgling sound bubbled from her tiny lips, and before I could react, she expelled a fountain of formula onto my shirt. My heart lurched, my OCD instincts kicking into overdrive. This was not control; this was chaos embodied in a spit-up stain spreading across my chest.

“Ah, one of the many joys of spending time with a baby,” Tucker chuckled. His laid-back demeanor stood in stark contrast to my horror as I stared down at the milky mess.

“Joy? I feel as if I’m under siege,” I sputtered, my mind racing through the mental checklist of cleaning protocols I would need to employ.

“Come on, Bryson. It's just a little baby vomit.” Tucker chuckled, plucking Chloe from my rigid arms with ease. “You'll get used to it.”

“I doubt that very much,” I muttered.

His eyebrows rose. “Oh, that’s right. I forgot how... particular you are about things. Why don’t you go clean up and I’ll see if I can get my niece to sleep.”

I didn’t give him a chance to change his mind because I needed to get out of these clothes and cleaned up before I lost mine. I headed toward the bathroom, calling out over my shoulder, “Good luck with that. I’ve been trying all day.”

The hot water cascaded over me, washing away the remnants of curdled formula and the stench of my own inadequacy. In the solitude of the shower, I let the steam envelop me, a comforting shroud for the raw nerves and exposed feelings that I usually kept in check. The rhythmic beat of water on the tiles was a soothing balm to the chaos that had been my introduction to godfatherhood.

“Sorry, Brooke,” I whispered so low that no one could hear my confession. “I’m trying, I swear.” My words were lost amidst the mist, but the promise lingered, tangible as the water that traced paths down my back. “I won’t let you down. I’ll keep her safe, happy... even if it means learning to deal with a little vomit.”

Turning off the shower, I wrapped a towel around my waist, the fabric soft and fluffy against my skin as I looked in the mirror. Dark smudges lined the delicate skin under my eyes and my skin looked sallow, the result of no sleep and a broken heart.

I dressed quickly. Despite him teasing me about my quirks, I felt guilty for thrusting a baby onto Tucker as soon as he walked in the door. I hadn’t even asked him how he was holding up, but from the look of him, this had all been as rough on him as it was on me.

Padding softly into the nursery, I paused at the doorway, struck by the scene before me. There was Tucker, stretched out in the rocking chair, his long legs finding room where there seemed to be none, cradling his niece in his arms like she was the most precious artifact he’d ever come across on his travels. Her tiny chest rose and fell in peaceful slumber, oblivious to the world’s sharp edges.

I leaned against the doorframe, watching them. “Never thought I’d see the day,” I murmured, not realizing I’d spoken aloud until Tucker’s blue eyes flickered up to meet mine, crinkling at the corners with an unspoken understanding.

“Life’s full of surprises,” he said, his voice a gentle rumble in the quiet room. “Like

how perfectly she fits right here.” He adjusted Chloe slightly, emphasizing his point without waking her.

A surge of warmth flooded through me, chasing away the lingering stress of the day. “Thanks for taking her so I could get cleaned up,” I said, gratitude mingling with a newfound respect for the man who seemed to embrace each twist and turn life offered. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Anytime, man.” His gaze returned to the baby in his arms, protective and tender. “It takes a village, right?”

“Right,” I replied, feeling a little bit of hope and a whole lot less alone than I had earlier.

I backed out of the nursery, wanting to give Tucker a little time with his niece. My feet felt leaden as I shuffled toward the living room, each step muted against the soft carpet. The couch beckoned—a beige, overstuffed sanctuary that had seen countless late-night heart-to-hearts between me and my best friend. Its familiarity was a balm to my frayed nerves.

I sank into it, feeling the cushions envelop me like a long-awaited hug. The room was dim, save for the gentle glow from a lamp with a sea glass base, casting dancing reflections that played across the walls.

I drew my knees up, curling into the smallest version of myself. My hands were still faintly scented with that lavender baby wash Brooke swore by, and I breathed it in. The edges of my vision blurred as I let my eyelids droop, each blink heavier than the last. The weight of the last twenty-four hours—the devastating phone call, my mad dash to the hospital, Chloe’s sweet face pinched in a sob as I made mistake after mistake—settled around me.

As exhaustion claimed me, tugging me into its depth, I surrendered to the notion that tomorrow was another day—one more chance to get it right, one more opportunity to keep my promise to Brooke. With that thought cradling my consciousness, I drifted off into a restless sleep.

Chapter Three

TUCKER

I blinked awake, the world a blur of shadows and hushed sounds, my mind still tethered to dreams. I squinted against the dim light that seeped through curtains I didn't recognize, casting a pale glow across the room. My heart beat a staccato rhythm as I tried to piece together where I was and why the air smelled faintly of baby powder.

The weight in my arms shifted, a tiny sigh slipping into the quiet, and my disorientation shattered like thin ice underfoot. Chloe. Her small frame curled against my chest, her breathing even and deep in sleep's embrace. Memories flooded in, unbidden, cruel—Zach and Brooke's smiling faces, their laughter, all snuffed out in a single, shattering moment.

A lump formed in my throat, thick and suffocating, as the reality of their absence hit me anew. My brother, my confidant, the guy who knew me better than anyone was gone. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, a silent testament to the gaping hole left behind. I tightened my hold on Chloe, this tiny reminder of their love, and my chest ached with a mix of sorrow and fierce protectiveness.

"Hey there, little one," I whispered, my voice cracking. "Uncle Tucker's got you." It was a promise, a vow whispered into the darkness of a room that suddenly felt too large, too empty. Swallowing hard, I brushed a kiss atop her head, her baby-fine hair tickling my lips.

In the cocoon of that unfamiliar room with its unfamiliar sounds, holding my niece, Zach's daughter, I let myself feel it all—the pain, the loss, the love. And I knew, no matter how far I roamed or what adventures awaited, this sweet little girl would always be a priority.

A sigh escaped me, a mix of exhaustion and relief. The flight from Bangkok to Michigan had been the longest of my life—not in hours, but in the weight of anticipation pressing on my chest. From taxiing runways to bustling airports, every step was a race against time, each mile bringing me closer to Chloe. I needed to see her, hold her, ensure she was alive and safe.

Leaning back, I closed my eyes, allowing my mind to drift through the jet lag. It was hard to believe just days ago I navigated the crowded streets of Bangkok, the air thick with the scent of spices and the vibrant sounds of the city. And now, here I was, in the quiet hush of a Michigan evening, a world away from everything familiar.

“Safe,” I murmured, tracing a finger along Chloe's soft cheek. “You're safe.” The words were a mantra, a conviction I clung to amid the chaos that had upended our lives. My promise to protect her felt as innate as breathing—she was the last piece of Zach, and I'd guard her with my life.

Death and I had met before, a couple of times. My thoughts wandered, unbidden, to another loss. Mom and Dad had been the heart of our family, the ones who taught Zach and me about love and loyalty. When cancer took Mom, it was like watching a vibrant flame reduced to embers. Dad followed soon after, his heart literally broken. Those twin blows had shaken our world, but in their aftermath, Zach and I found solace in each other.

Our weekly Skype calls were filled with laughter, life updates, and the comfortable silence that comes from shared understanding. His voice, always so full of life, echoed in my head—a cruel reminder of conversations that would never happen

again.

I shifted slightly, careful not to disturb Chloe, and let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. The loss of my parents had taught me to seize life with both hands, to chase every experience life had to offer because we only got one chance. The nomadic life had been an easy choice—a choice to chase sunsets across continents, to lose myself in languages I couldn't quite pronounce, and to code from cafes that knew me by my order rather than my name.

“Life's too short for just one view,” I'd argue whenever Zach ribbed me about my wandering ways.

“Just make sure you keep in touch, okay?” he'd remind me.

“Always,” I'd assure him, because no matter where I roamed, home was never a place—it was people; it was Zach, then it grew to include Brooke and, eventually, it was Chloe too.

But now, in the hushed stillness of the nursery, my adventures were lost behind the tidal wave of grief. I gazed down at my niece, this tiny being with Zach's nose and Brooke's eyes. My heart clenched, a mix of sorrow and love knotting together in a silent promise.

With Chloe cradled gently in my arms, I leaned over the white oak crib, its bars cool and smooth under my touch. The room was steeped in moonlight, casting a serene glow across her delicate features. Carefully, I lowered her down onto the cloud-soft sheet, her tiny fists uncurling like petals as she settled into sleep.

“Sweet dreams,” I whispered, adjusting the plush rabbit so it watched over her. Watching her chest rise and fall with each breath, I felt anchored for the first time in what felt like forever. The wanderlust that had etched itself into my bones was

quieted by this newfound purpose—here, in Lakeside Ridge, with Chloe's innocence filling the room with a purity that rivaled any foreign sunrise I'd witnessed.

I had no idea what the future held—who my brother would have chosen to raise his daughter in his stead. One thing I did know for certain was that I would always be a part of her life. No matter where she went or who she was with, Chloe would always have her Uncle Tucker there to watch over her.

Stepping out of the nursery, I pulled the door closed behind me, just enough to keep the light from the hallway from disrupting her slumber. The living room was draped in shadows, the only sounds were the house settling and the soft snoring coming from the couch. Bryson was sprawled there, one arm hanging off the side, his chest rising and falling in an exhausted rhythm that spoke volumes of the day he'd had.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as I remembered his earlier flustered attempts at pacifying Chloe's cries; his usually neat hair had stood on end, hazel eyes wide with a mix of panic and determination. For someone who thrived on order and predictability, he had dived headfirst into the chaos of caring for a grieving child with a courage that was both touching and comically endearing. I couldn't help but feel a warmth towards him—a brother-in-arms type of bond forming amidst the messiness of our shared sorrow.

“Sleep well, Bryson,” I murmured, my voice carrying none of the weight it had in the nursery. Instead, it was infused with a touch of humor. As I turned to go outside, I realized that despite the heartache, the laughter we'd shared was a balm, a tentative step towards healing in a world that had tilted off its axis.

I grabbed my bags from the rental car and quietly carried them inside, trying not to wake Bryson as I shut the door, but his eyelids fluttered open, his gaze blearily attempting to make sense of his surroundings. I set my bags down and leaned against the door frame, arms folded across my chest.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” I teased gently, “How about we crack open a couple of cold ones? Kinda feels like we could use it.”

His lips quirked into a soft smile, and he rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand, the dimple in his left cheek making a brief appearance. “Sounds good. Lord knows I could use something to take the edge off today.”

In the kitchen, I reached for two beers, the cool glass fogging up instantly in my grasp. There was something reassuring about the ritual, simple as it was. Bryson shuffled in after me, slumping into a chair at the table with an exhausted sigh.

“Thanks,” he said, wrapping his fingers around the bottle I slid towards him.

“Anytime.” I took the seat opposite him, the familiar, slightly bitter scent of hops filling the air between us.

“Chloe finally asleep?” His voice carried a tinge of worry.

“Out like a light,” I confirmed, tipping the bottle back for a sip. The beer was refreshingly crisp, chasing away some of my weariness. “You did good with her today, you know, despite how rough it got.”

“Did I?” Bryson hesitated, the self-doubt clear in his expression. “I feel so out of my depth, Tucker. Like I'm fumbling in the dark trying to do right by her, but nothing I do seems to help.”

“Hey, you're doing better than you think. Chloe's been through a lot. We all have,” I whispered the last part.

He nodded, taking a slow drink. “It just... it doesn't seem real, you know? Her parents... Zach and Brooke...” His voice trailed off, the weight of the words too heavy

to carry on.

“I know,” I murmured. “We’ll get through the next few days together.” And with those words, the bond between us seemed to tighten just a fraction more, an unspoken promise that neither of us would have to face the coming days alone.

We both fell silent for a moment, the only sound between us, the gentle clink of glass on wood as we set down our drinks. The quiet hum of the refrigerator played softly in the background, a comforting domestic drone in the stillness of the night.

“Chloe’s probably missing her parents right now,” I said softly, breaking the silence. It was a truth that hung in the air, unspoken yet ever-present, like a delicate glass ornament that threatened to shatter at the slightest touch.

Bryson’s eyes met mine, and I saw the pain there, raw and real. “Yeah,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “I can’t even imagine what that feels like for her.”

“Neither can I,” I admitted. “But we’re here for her, and that’s what matters.”

A profound sense of understanding passed between us. We were kindred spirits in that moment, bound by the love for a little girl who had unwittingly brought us together.

“Thanks, Tucker,” he said after a moment, his voice steadier. “For everything. For coming all this way... for Chloe.”

“Family sticks together,” I replied simply. And there it was—the crux of it all. Family, whether by blood or by bond, was where we found our strength.

The rhythmic tap at the door snapped us out of our reverie, and I glanced at Bryson,

his brows lifting in a silent question. I shrugged and stood up, making my way to the entrance as another series of knocks followed, this time with more insistence. Pulling open the door revealed an older woman, her arms laden with what smelled like heaven. Her shoulder length hair was streaked with gray and the smile on her face was warm.

“Evening, boys,” she greeted, her eyes crinkling with concern and kindness. “I heard about Zach and Brooke—God rest their souls—and thought you could use some of this.” She motioned to the casserole dish swaddled in a thick towel.

“Thank you, uh....”

“Susie. I live next door,” she informed us, shoving the casserole dish into my hands. “And you must be Zach’s brother. You look just like him, but even more handsome.”

Her words made me chuckle, knowing Zach would have rolled his eyes at her description. “Tucker Murphy. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Thanks for the food,” I replied, taking the dish and catching a whiff of cheesy potatoes—a small town comfort staple if there ever was one.

“Can't have you two wasting away,” she said, stepping past me into the house as if it were her own. Her presence filled the room with an instant coziness that seemed to push away the chill of loss, if only for a moment.

“Hi! You must be Bryson. I’ve heard so much about you,” she called out, moving toward him. “You look beat. Sit down, sit down. No reason to stand on my account.”

Bryson offered a tired smile and obeyed, collapsing back onto his chair. “Susie, you're a lifesaver,” he said, his voice heavy with exhaustion. “We haven't really thought about food much.”

“Which is exactly why I’m here. And listen,” she continued, pulling a piece of paper out of her pocket and handing it to me. It had a phone number on it. “If you need anything—day or night—you call me, okay? I’ve got plenty of time on my hands, and Chloe is just the sweetest little thing. I’d be delighted to help out.”

“Really appreciate it. We’ll keep that in mind,” I told her, grateful for the offer.

She patted my hand then busied herself with scooping food onto plates and handing them to us, along with forks. It was obvious by the confident way she moved around that she was familiar with the kitchen and where everything was.

The three of us chatted while we ate, weaving some much-needed threads of normalcy through the evening. When we were finished, Susie made her exit with promises to check in soon. I watched her go, the door closing softly behind her, and turned back to Bryson. The lines of strain on his face seemed even more pronounced in the wake of her departure, as if her energy had been a temporary shield against reality.

“Hey,” I said gently, moving to sit beside him. “You should get some sleep. I can take the night shift with Chloe.”

His eyes met mine, a flicker of resistance there before it was washed away by sheer fatigue. “You sure? You’ve been traveling all day.” he said, rubbing at his face in a way that told me he was running on fumes.

“Positive,” I assured him, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve got this. Go crash.”

He nodded slowly, the gratitude in his gaze mingling with something deeper—a recognition of shared grief and the unexpected solidarity we found in each other. It was a bond neither of us had anticipated, but as we both looked toward the hallway where Chloe slept, I realized it was one that was needed in that moment.

“Thanks, Tucker. Really,” Bryson murmured, pushing himself to his feet. “For everything.”

“Anytime, man,” I replied, watching as he trudged toward the guest room.

I settled back onto the couch, the cushions hugging my form as I listened to the quiet creak of the floorboards as Bryson's footsteps faded away, and I was left alone in the dimly lit living room, with only the ticking of the wall clock for company. The house felt alive with a gentle energy, a testament to the lives it had cradled within its walls.

As I gazed out the window at the soft glow of the streetlights in Lakeside Ridge, a sense of warmth enveloped me. It was strange how life's cruel turns could lead to unexpected connections. I'd come to Michigan on a wave of panic and desperation, but now, sitting here, there was something like solace in the silence.

The reflection of my own face stared back at me from the darkened glass—a man who had thought he understood what it meant to live fully, to grasp each moment before it slipped away. But holding Chloe in my arms, I wondered if maybe there was more to it than traveling all over the world.

As I sat there in the quiet of the night, my thoughts drifted to the life I'd been living before this moment. The thrill of stepping off a plane in a new country, the rush of adrenaline as I navigated unfamiliar streets, the satisfaction of closing a deal from a beachside café halfway across the world. It had all seemed so important, so vital to who I was.

But now, with the weight of loss pressing down on me and the responsibility of Chloe's future resting on my shoulders, those adventures felt... different. Not less significant, exactly, but somehow less urgent. The world I'd been chasing suddenly seemed to have shrunk down to the size of this town, this house, the little girl sleeping in the nursery.

Chapter Four

brYSON

I 'd organized the kitchen countertop into stations: formula preparation to the left, bottle sterilization center, and feeding accessories arranged by size to the right. But now, with Chloe's piercing wails echoing off the tile backsplash, my careful system was crumbling faster than the powdered formula I'd just spilled across the granite.

My hands trembled as I screwed the top on the bottle and fumbled with the bottle warmer I'd ordered online yesterday for overnight delivery—a contraption that suddenly seemed designed by sadists rather than for the convenience for caretakers, as advertised. The warmer ticked mockingly as Chloe's cries reached a new pitch.

“Come on, come on,” I muttered, jabbing at buttons with increasing desperation. The swing in the corner of the kitchen rocked furiously, as if the machine itself was panicking along with me. Chloe's tiny face had turned an alarming shade of crimson, her little fists punching the air in protest.

The formula canister slipped from my sweaty grip as I went to put it away, scattering white powder across my meticulously clean floor. I stared at the mess, momentarily paralyzed. The neat freak in me wanted to grab the vacuum, but the increasingly frantic cries from the swing kept me locked in place, torn between my need for order and the more immediate crisis at hand.

“For God's sake, Bryson, it's just a little mess,” I scolded myself, though the sight of it made my skin crawl. I bent down to scoop up what I could with my hands, wincing

as the powder stuck to my damp palms. Chloe's crying had transformed into something primal now, a sound that seemed to bypass my ears and strike directly at some ancient caretaking instinct I apparently lacked.

“Please, sweetheart,” I pleaded, glancing over my shoulder at the red-faced infant. “Just a few more minutes. I'm trying.”

The bottle warmer beeped, but when I grabbed the bottle to test it on my wrist, the liquid felt cold. I'd done something wrong again. Water pooled in my eyes as frustration mounted. That's when I heard the front door open, followed by a familiar voice calling my name. Relief washed over me so intensely that my knees nearly buckled.

“In the kitchen!” I called out, my voice cracking with stress. “Hurry!”

Tucker appeared in the doorway, his coal-black hair windswept and his blue eyes immediately taking in the scene before him. He wore the same rumpled t-shirt from this morning, and his jaw carried that perpetual dark scruff that somehow made him look put-together even when disheveled.

“What the hell happened? I only stepped outside for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, well, I'm glad you're back,” I exclaimed, gesturing wildly between the crying baby and the formula disaster. “She won't stop crying and this bottle is taking an eternity to warm up. I don't know what to do.”

Tucker's response was to shrug off his jacket, revealing tattooed forearms that made my stomach flip despite the ensuing chaos. He crossed the kitchen in three long strides, bypassing me entirely, and headed straight for the swing. “Hey there, little monster,” he cooed in a voice I'd never heard him use with anyone but Chloe. “What's all this fuss about, huh?”

With practiced ease, he unbuckled her and lifted her against his chest, one large hand supporting her head while the other patted her back in a gentle rhythm. Almost immediately, her crying softened to hiccupping sobs.

I stood frozen, the half-prepared bottle dangling uselessly from my fingers. “How do you do that?” I asked, not bothering to hide the mix of awe and envy in my voice.

He shrugged, continuing his slow bouncing motion. “Babies can smell fear, Bry. You're radiating panic like it's your cologne.”

“I'm not panicking,” I insisted, even as I noticed formula powder coating the front of my carefully ironed shirt. “I'm just... methodically concerned.”

That earned me a laugh, the kind that crinkled the corners of his eyes in a way that simultaneously irritated and charmed me. “Man, even your freakouts come with an instruction manual.”

I felt my cheeks heat as I plopped the bottle back in the warmer and turned to get the broom and dustpan. “So, how's the funeral arrangements going?” I asked, as I began sweeping the floor.

“Fine. I have a few questions for you about what you think Brooke would prefer, but I've got everything else figured out.” He had shifted Chloe to his shoulder now, where she nestled contentedly, her previous distress apparently forgotten. “But clearly I missed all the excitement here.”

“Yes, well,” I cleared my throat, “taking care of this little girl is turning out to be more complicated than anticipated. I just wish I was better at this.” I dumped the mess in the garbage then turned to face him. “The parenting books all say that babies need to be on a schedule, so I came up with one: breakfast at six followed by story time and of course, tummy time. Nap from eight to nine, then a bottle, cuddles, and

playtime until it was time for?—”

A loud snort from Tucker interrupted me. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

My eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means babies don’t follow rigid schedules, Bry. Sure, you can get them used to a routine, but the timing will still fluctuate based on their mood,” he replied calmly.

“Oh, suddenly you’re an expert on babies?” I muttered once I’d turned my back on him, testing the bottle temperature again. Perfect this time.

“What was that?”

“I said her bottle is ready,” I lied, reaching my hands out to take her from him.

“Uh, you might want to hold that thought,” he said, wrinkling his nose. He lifted Chloe’s rear end up to his nose and took a whiff, shuddering in response. “Jesus, kid! How can anything so cute produce a smell that bad?”

I couldn’t help but smirk as Tucker’s face contorted in disgust. “Well, Mr. Expert, looks like it’s your turn to shine. Diaper duty awaits.”

His eyes widened in panic. “Wait, what? No, I—I was just about to hop on another call. Very important. Can’t miss it.”

“Nice try,” I said, crossing my arms. “But I distinctly remember someone telling me that babies don’t follow rigid schedules. So, I’m sure whoever you were going to call won’t mind waiting while you tend to our little bundle of joy.”

With a dramatic sigh, Tucker carried Chloe to the changing station I’d set up in the

living room. I followed, bottle in hand, eager to witness how the self-proclaimed baby whisperer would handle this particular challenge.

“There we go, Chlo-bear,” he cooed, laying her down gently on the changing pad, his confident demeanor faltering slightly as he surveyed the array of supplies I’d meticulously arranged. “Okay, how hard can this be?” he muttered, more to himself than to me.

I leaned against the doorframe, trying not to look too smug. “Remember, wipes, cream, new diaper. In that order.”

He shot me a look. “I got this, Bry. No backseat diaper changing.”

I held up my hands in mock surrender and watched as he fumbled with the tabs on the diaper. His nose wrinkled as he peeled it back, revealing the mess within. “Holy shi— I mean, cow,” he corrected himself quickly. “What is in that formula?”

I bit back a laugh as his confident facade crumbled. He reached for the wipes with one hand while attempting to hold her legs up with the other, resulting in a precarious balancing act that was doomed from the start.

“Uh, little help here?” he pleaded, his eyes wide with panic.

I stepped forward, unable to resist. “I thought you ‘got this’?” I teased, but I grabbed a handful of wipes and passed them over.

He took them gratefully, then proceeded to use about half the package on Chloe’s tiny bottom. “Better safe than sorry, right?” he muttered, his forehead creased in concentration.

I watched in fascinated horror as he fumbled with the tube of diaper cream, squeezing

far too much onto his fingers. “Tucker, that's way too—” But it was too late. He slathered the excess cream onto her bottom with the enthusiasm of a toddler finger-painting. I winced as I watched him struggle to wrangle her squirming legs while simultaneously trying to keep the white goop contained.

“You're using enough cream to frost a cake,” I said, unable to hold back any longer.

He glanced up at me, a smear of white across his forehead where he'd obviously run a hand through his hair. “Is there such a thing as too much? I mean, we want to prevent diaper rash, right?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, torn between exasperation and amusement. “Yes, but at this rate, she'll slide right out of her onesie.”

His brow furrowed as he surveyed his handiwork. “Huh. Maybe you have a point.” He reached for another wipe, attempting to clean up some of the excess cream, but only managed to smear it further.

I couldn't help but chuckle as I watched him, the mighty world traveler, reduced to a fumbling mess by a tiny infant. “Okay, I think I've got it under control now,” he announced, reaching for a fresh diaper with a look of determination. I bit my lip to keep from laughing as he held it up, squinting at it as if it were some alien artifact. “Wait, which side goes where?”

“The tabs go in the back,” I offered, unable to resist.

“Right, right. I knew that,” he muttered, flipping the diaper around. He lifted Chloe's legs with one hand, sliding the diaper underneath with the other. It was almost graceful, until he let go and her legs flopped back down, causing the diaper to shift askew. His brow furrowed as he tried to straighten it, but she chose that moment to start kicking her legs with renewed vigor.

“Whoa there, little bit,” he chuckled nervously, trying to wrangle her squirming form. “Let's not make this harder than it needs to be.”

I couldn't help but snicker as I watched him struggle. “Having some trouble there?”

Tucker shot me a glare, his perfect jawline clenched in frustration. “I've climbed Kilimanjaro. I've navigated the Amazon. This should not be beyond my capabilities.”

“And yet,” I gestured to the disaster before us, “here we are.”

He huffed, blowing a strand of his coal-black hair out of his eyes. “Alright, smartass,” he grumbled, “if you're such an expert, why don't you show me how it's done?”

I hesitated for a moment, suddenly aware that my own diaper-changing skills were largely theoretical. But I couldn't back down now, not after giving him such a hard time. “Fine,” I said, stepping forward and lowering myself to the floor. “Watch and learn.”

Gently nudging him aside, I tried to ignore the warmth that radiated from his body as we brushed against each other. Focus, Bryson, I chided myself. You've got a point to prove.

I surveyed the scene before me: Chloe, still kicking and squirming, lay on a changing pad that looked like a war zone. Wipes were strewn about, the tube of diaper cream lay discarded, its contents oozing onto the carpet, and the new diaper hung precariously off one of her legs.

“Okay, sweet girl,” I cooed, trying to channel Tucker's earlier calm. “Let's get you sorted out.”

I reached for a fresh wipe, determined to clean up the excess cream he had so

liberally applied. As I leaned in, Chloe's tiny foot connected with my hand, sending the wipe flying across the room. It landed with a wet splat on the TV screen.

Tucker snorted beside me. "Smooth move, diaper master."

I shot him a glare then turned back to Chloe, determined to prove I could handle this. "Alright, let's try this again," I murmured, reaching for another wipe. This time, I managed to dodge her flailing limbs and began to clean up the mess he had made.

"See? It's not so hard," I said, more to myself than to Tucker. But as soon as the words left my mouth, she decided to up the ante. With a mischievous gurgle, she let loose a stream that with the angle of her legs caused it to spray through the air like a miniature fountain.

"Oh my God!" Tucker yelped, jumping back to avoid the spray. I wasn't so lucky. I stood there, frozen in shock, as warm liquid soaked through my carefully ironed shirt.

His laughter filled the room. "Well, I guess she showed you, huh?"

I gritted my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing me lose my cool. "It's fine. This is fine. We can handle this," I said, my voice strained but steady. "Let's try this one more time."

His laughter died down as he watched me strip off my soiled shirt. I could feel his eyes on me, but I focused on the task at hand. "Pass me those wipes, would you?" I asked, not looking at him.

I reached my hand out, but when he made no attempt to move, I turned my head in his direction. "You okay?" I asked.

Bright blue eyes darted from my bare chest to my questioning gaze. He swallowed

hard, an almost guilty expression on his face. “Yeah, sorry. What did you say?”

“I asked you to hand me the wipes,” I repeated. I had no idea what was going through his mind, but I had more pressing matters to deal with, namely, wrangling this tiny human into clothes before anything else came out of her.

Tucker suddenly sprang into action. “Here, let’s tag team this,” he said, handing me the wipes and shuffling up by her head. He grasped her tiny ankles in each of his hands and carefully lifted her bottom off the changing pad.

I nodded gratefully, rushing to wipe both her and the changing pad. He continued holding her legs up as I slid a new diaper under her. Chloe, apparently quite pleased with herself, cooed and giggled, her little legs kicking in the air.

“You think you're pretty clever, don't you?” I couldn't help but smile at her, despite the mess. Her eyes—so like her father's—sparkled with mischief.

He grinned. “That's my girl.”

“You’re a troublemaker like your uncle, aren’t you?” I teased, flashing him a wink. I reached for a fresh onesie. “Alright, let's get you dressed before you decide to christen anything else in this room.”

I maneuvered the onesie over Chloe's head while Tucker kept her legs steady. Her tiny arms flailed as we tried to guide them through the sleeves, making me feel like I was wrestling an octopus rather than dressing an infant.

“Okay, on three,” I said, meeting his eyes. “One, two?—”

“Three!” We chorused together, each of us grabbing a limb and swiftly guiding it into its designated hole. I quickly snapped the material between her legs and leaned back

with a satisfied sigh.

Chloe giggled, apparently enjoying our clumsy efforts. Her laughter was infectious, and I found myself chuckling along with her, the stress of the earlier disaster melting away.

“Now for the rest,” Tucker grinned, nodding toward the tiny yellow pants and shirt combo with little duckies across the chest. “You ready for this?”

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. “As I’ll ever be.”

Chloe squirmed and giggled, making the task far more challenging than it had any right to be. But somehow, through a combination of teamwork and sheer determination, we managed to get her fully dressed.

“We did it!” He exclaimed, his face lighting up with a grin that could rival the sun. He held up his hand for a high five, which I returned with perhaps a bit more enthusiasm than necessary, our palms connecting with a satisfying smack.

“Yeah, we did,” I agreed, unable to keep the pride out of my voice. I looked down at Chloe, now contentedly sucking on her fist, blissfully unaware of the chaos she’d caused. “You know, for a moment there, I thought we were going to need hazmat suits and a power washer.”

He laughed, the sound rich and warm. “I think we managed just fine without them. Though I wouldn’t say no to a shower right about now.”

I glanced down at my bare chest, suddenly aware that I was still shirtless. “Yeah, I should probably have one too.”

His eyes lingered on me for a moment, before he quickly looked away, clearing his

throat. “Right, well, I’ll take care of feeding the future gold medalist here if you want to go first.”

I nodded, grateful for the offer. I quickly cleaned up the mess we’d made while he settled into a chair with Chloe and began feeding her. Grabbing a burp cloth, I slid it under her chin to catch dribbles then I headed towards the hallway. When I reached the doorway, I turned back to him.

Something warm settled in my chest when I saw him curled around his niece, a look of pure adoration on his face as he spoke softly to her. He abruptly looked up and caught me watching him. “You okay?”

“Just thinking. It was good to hear her laughing again,” I answered.

“Yeah, it was. I guess we didn’t totally mess things up, huh?” My eyes were drawn to his mouth as his lips pulled up into a sexy smirk.

I suddenly stiffened, giving myself a mental shake. This was Tucker Murphy, for God’s sake. The least organized, most aggravating person in the world, not to mention the man I was trapped in a strange custody situation with. I had no business noticing his lips—no matter how kissable they may appear.

“I’m gonna... um... yeah, go shower,” I said, hiking a thumb over my shoulder as if he didn’t know where the bathroom was. Tucker gave me a strange look and I turned and fled the room before I could embarrass myself further.

As I raced up the stairs, I heard him say, “Your Uncle Bry-Bry can be an odd fellow sometimes, Chloe.” Sadly, he wasn’t wrong.

Our brief victory over the diaper change had been short-lived and the rest of the afternoon had followed suit with one catastrophe after another until we were ready to

pull our hair out. The doorbell chimed, startling both of us. Tucker and I exchanged puzzled glances before I went to answer it, grateful for the interruption from our mounting frustrations.

On the porch stood a plump, middle-aged woman with kind eyes and graying hair tucked beneath a blue kerchief. She beamed at me, thrusting forward a covered casserole dish. “Hello there! I'm Margie from down the street. Thought you boys might need a home-cooked meal.”

Before I could respond, she bustled past me into the house, her floral dress swishing as she moved. “Now, where's that sweet little one?” she cooed, spotting Chloe in Tucker's arms.

Tucker shot me a bewildered look over Margie's head as she fussed over the baby. I shrugged helplessly, still holding the casserole dish in my hands, unsure what to do next. Before I could decide, the doorbell chimed again.

This time, a tall, lanky man with short, cropped hair stood on the porch, holding a large bowl of what looked like potato salad. “Howdy, neighbors!” he called out cheerfully. “Name's Frank. Heard you folks might need some grub.”

I stepped aside, dumbfounded, as Frank strode in, nodding approvingly at the casserole in my hands. “Ah, I see Margie beat me to it. That woman's faster than a jackrabbit when there's cookin' to be done.”

As if on cue, a steady stream of visitors began arriving, each bearing some form of culinary offering. A woman named Mrs. Patel brought seven-layer salad, the Johnsons from across town arrived with a towering chocolate cake, and Genevieve, the church secretary, brought two more casseroles. Soon our kitchen counter was overflowing with an eclectic mix of dishes.

“I—we can't thank you all enough,” I stammered, overwhelmed by the outpouring of kindness from these virtual strangers. Tucker stood beside me, equally awestruck, Chloe nestled contentedly in his arms.

Frank shrugged his shoulders. “It’s just what we do around here.”

“If one of us needs help, we all pitch in,” Genevieve explained.

Mrs. Patel patted my arm affectionately. “Welcome to Lakeside Ridge, honey.”

“We’ll get out of your hair now. I’m sure you’ll be getting more visitors over the next few days, but you boys be sure and let us know if you need anything at all. And I mean that. We all cared a great deal for Zach and Brooke and we’re happy to help in any way we can,” Margie insisted, eyeing us closely.

Tucker’s voice was rough with emotion. “I know they cared a lot about all of you and this town. Thank you again.”

As the last of our unexpected visitors filed out, we stood in stunned silence, surveying the mountain of food that now occupied every available surface in the kitchen. The scent of home-cooked meals mingled with the lingering aroma of baby powder and formula, creating an oddly comforting atmosphere.

“Well,” Tucker said, breaking the silence, “I guess we won't have to worry about cooking for a while.”

I nodded, still processing the whirlwind of neighborly generosity we'd just experienced. “I can't believe they did all this for us. We're practically strangers.”

He shifted Chloe to his other arm, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement. “Looks like small-town hospitality isn't just a myth after all. Who knew?”

I couldn't help but smile, feeling a warmth spread through my chest that had nothing to do with the steaming casseroles. "I guess not. It's... nice. Different from what I'm used to, but nice."

He nodded, his expression softening. "Yeah, it is. Kind of makes you feel like you're part of something, doesn't it?"

I hadn't thought about it that way, but he was right. There was a sense of belonging, of community, that I'd never really experienced before. It was both comforting and slightly overwhelming.

"So," he said, breaking into my thoughts, "what should we tackle first? The seven-layer salad or the chocolate cake?"

I shot him a look. "Tucker, it's barely noon. We can't have cake for lunch."

He grinned, that mischievous glint back in his eyes. "Says who? We're adults. We can have cake whenever we want."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips. "Fine, but we're having something healthy first. How about we start with Mrs. Patel's salad."

"Ugh, you're such a buzzkill," Tucker groaned, but he was smiling too. "Alright, salad it is. But I call dibs on the biggest piece of cake afterward."

Chapter Five

TUCKER

The sun was a traitor this morning, streaming in through the window with a warmth that had no right to exist. I blinked my eyes open, and for a split second, the world was as it should be—a room painted in soft golden hues, the promise of coffee brewing somewhere nearby. But then reality crashed over me like a rogue wave, and I remembered. The funerals were yesterday. Zach and Brooke... gone.

I sat up, the sheets pooling around my waist, the weight of grief settling on my shoulders like a heavy blanket. My heart ached, an echo of the tears that had been shed by everyone who'd come to say goodbye. So many strangers with their own memories of my brother and sister-in-law, their kind words and condolences all blurring together until I could no longer make out any of their faces.

Dragging myself out of bed felt like climbing a mountain. I threw on a pair of jeans and a shirt that wasn't too wrinkled. I caught sight of myself in the mirror, the unruly dark scruff along my jaw somehow feeling disrespectful to the day's grim errands. But I left it—trimming was a routine for a normal day, and nothing about today was normal.

Bryson was waiting for me in his car when I stepped outside. He gave me a quick nod as I slid into the passenger seat, the air between us thick with apprehension. His hazel eyes met mine for a moment as I snapped the seat belt into place, and I could see the seriousness etched into the lines of his face. Bryson, always dependable, always in control, now just as adrift as I was.

“Chloe over at Susie’s?”

“Yeah. She said to take our time,” he responded softly.

We drove to the lawyer's office mostly in silence. It was the kind of quiet that wasn't uncomfortable, not exactly, but more like we were both lost in our own thoughts, trying to brace ourselves for whatever came next. Once parked, I glanced over at him, searching for some kind of reassurance. I found only his solemn expression, his jaw set in determination.

“Ready?” I asked, my voice sounding foreign even to my ears.

“Let’s do this,” Bryson replied evenly, but the fidgeting of the keys in his hand betrayed his nerves.

We climbed out of the car and headed toward the building. With each step, I felt the gravity of the situation pulling us forward. The door to the lawyer's office clicked shut behind us, a soft, final sound that seemed too gentle for the gravity of the moment. The man who rose from behind the mahogany desk was older, his hair more salt than pepper, but his eyes were kind as they settled on us.

“Mr. Kelly, Mr. Murphy,” he said, extending a hand that Bryson and I took in turn. “I’m Harold Jenkins. Please accept my deepest condolences for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Bryson murmured, the words barely audible. I echoed the sentiment, feeling the sincerity of the lawyer's words.

“Please, have a seat,” he gestured toward the chairs in front of his desk, and we complied, the leather creaking under the shift of our weight.

As Mr. Jenkins began to read the will, I leaned back and tried to make sense of the

dense legal jargon spilling over us like heavy rain. Words and phrases— “estate,” “assets,” “trustee”—buzzed in my ears, each one piling atop the last until I was lost in a haze of confusion and disbelief. It felt surreal, sitting here, listening to the dry, formal language that was supposed to parcel out pieces of lives, now ended.

And then, like a bolt from the blue, the lightning struck. “...and to Tucker Murphy and Bryson Kelly, we name as joint guardians of our daughter, Chloe Elizabeth Murphy.”

The air left my lungs in a rush, and I stared at Mr. Jenkins, certain I had misheard. But the grave look on his face told me it was all too real. Joint guardians. Bryson hadn't made a sound, and I turned to him, searching his face for any hint of what was going through his mind. His expression was unreadable, but I saw the flicker of shock in his eyes before he shuttered them away, replaced by that familiar mask of control.

“Joint guardians,” I repeated dumbly, the words clumsy in my mouth. “You mean, both of us? Together?”

Mr. Jenkins nodded solemnly. “Yes, Mr. Murphy. It's clear from Zach and Brooke's wishes they intended for you both to care for Chloe together.”

Together. The idea loomed before me, immense and terrifying. I glanced again at Bryson, his face still a study in stunned silence. What were we going to do? How could we possibly?—

“Are there any questions I can help clarify?” the lawyer asked, breaking into my spiraling thoughts.

Questions? I had a million of them. But the only one that mattered, the only one that filled my throat and threatened to choke me, remained unasked: How do two men who were complete opposites, become the guardians of a tiny, precious life?

What had they been thinking, naming me as guardian? My nomadic lifestyle was hardly ideal for caring for a baby. And besides that, what did I even know about raising a baby? I'd never even had a houseplant I needed to care for. I'd spent the last few years of my life wandering the globe, going wherever the wind carried me and answering to no one. Now, I was responsible for a tiny human?

While I'd vowed to always be in her life, I'd assumed Chloe would go to someone else, someone whose lifestyle was more stable... someone like Bryson. But the two of us together? We were like oil and water, like night and day, complete opposites in every way. There was no way this wasn't going to end in disaster. I just hoped Chloe didn't get hurt in the fallout.

Mr. Jenkins leaned back in his chair; his hands folded together as if he were about to recite a litany. "There will be a trial period," he began, his tone informative but not without empathy, "during which time you'll both serve as temporary guardians for Chloe under the supervision of Child Protective Services. After six months, you'll need to stand before a judge who will assess the situation and decide on permanent guardianship."

I felt my stomach twist. Six months. It was both an eternity and a heartbeat when faced with raising a child. The room suddenly felt small; the air too thick to breathe.

"Furthermore," he continued, oblivious to the internal chaos he'd set off, "Zach and Brooke left specific instructions regarding their estate. The house—along with all assets—are to be placed in your joint names. This is to ensure that you have the means to provide for Chloe's well-being."

My head swam with the weight of it all. The house where I'd spent countless visits, now a symbol of a life I'd never envisioned. Beside me, Bryson shifted uncomfortably.

“Are there any concerns you wish to discuss?” Mr. Jenkins asked, peering at us over the rim of his glasses.

“Concerns? Where do I even begin?” I muttered.

Bryson suddenly spoke up. “Mr. Jenkins, if you don’t mind, I think we’re going to need some time to let this all sink in, maybe discuss some logistics, that kind of thing.”

“Of course. Go home, talk it over and get back to me as soon as you’re ready. We can sign all the necessary paperwork then.”

The front door creaked as I pushed it open. Bryson trailed behind me, his footsteps hesitant on the wooden porch. “Feels different somehow, doesn’t it?” I said, letting the door close with a soft thump behind us.

“Everything does,” he replied, setting his keys on the small entryway table where Brooke always tossed hers. We made our way into the living room, the silence of the house greeting us like an unwanted visitor. I flopped down onto the couch, my mind a jumbled mess.

“Look, Tucker,” Bryson started, perching on the edge of the armchair across from me, “I know we’re both out of our element here, but...”

“Out of our element?” I cut in, a bitter chuckle escaping me. “Bryson, I’m a guy who lives out of a suitcase. The closest thing I’ve had to responsibility in years was making sure I caught the right plane.”

“Okay, I get that.” He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “But isn’t this what family does? Step up when they’re needed?”

“Yes,” I murmured, rubbing a hand over my face. “But I assumed it would be someone else caring for Chloe and I would still get to be fun Uncle Tucker who takes her out for ice cream and buys her loud toys that would drive her guardian nuts. I never thought I’d be the guardian, did you?”

Bryson rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “Well, yeah, I did. Sort of.”

“You did?” I jerked to an upright position, nearly shouting. “You knew they were going to leave Chloe to the two of us?”

He held his hands out in front of himself in an attempt to calm me down. “Not exactly.”

“Explain,” I demanded.

Bryson’s tone remained calm. “Brooke and I discussed it once. You know, what it meant to be a godfather. She said it was a promise to always be in Chloe’s life and keep her safe. It was an easy promise to make. I mean, never in my wildest dreams did I think any of this would happen or that they’d want me to raise her with...”

“With me?”

“I assumed I’d be the one taking care of her full-time,” he continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “I have a stable job, a routine. I’m not the one jetting off to far-flung places on a whim.”

I bristled at his tone. “Hey, my work may not look like yours, but it’s still work. I’ve built a successful career that allows me freedom.”

“Freedom that a baby doesn’t exactly fit into,” Bryson pointed out.

I opened my mouth to argue, but he wasn't wrong. The thought of giving up my nomadic lifestyle made my chest tighten. "And what about your job? You can't exactly work 60-hour weeks with a baby at home."

His shoulders slumped slightly. "I know. I've been thinking about that too. I'd have to cut back my hours, maybe work from home more."

"And your clients will be okay with you interrupting a meeting because Chloe needs a diaper change? And what about the rest of the time? Is she just supposed to sit quietly in the corner until your workday comes to an end?"

Bryson's jaw tightened. "I'll figure it out. I have to." A heavy silence fell between us, filled with all the doubts and fears we weren't voicing. The enormity of what we were facing loomed over us like a storm cloud.

"Look," I said finally, "I know we're both trying to wrap our heads around this, but maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves. We don't even know if we can make this work. I mean, you and me? Living together and raising a baby?"

Bryson met my gaze, a flicker of uncertainty in their hazel depths. "It does seem... challenging."

"Challenging?" I let out a humorless laugh. "Bryson, we're complete opposites. You probably alphabetize your spice rack, and I can't remember the last time I unpacked a suitcase fully."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "There's nothing wrong with being organized," he said defensively. "And for the record, I arrange my spices by frequency of use, not alphabetically."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Of course you do."

The tension between us eased slightly, but the weight of our new reality still hung heavy in the air. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. “I know we both want what's best for Chloe. But are we really the best thing for her? I mean, two guys who barely know each other, trying to raise a baby together?”

Bryson sank down in a chair, his expression thoughtful. “It's not ideal,” he admitted. “But Zach and Brooke must have had their reasons for choosing us. They trusted us with this—with the most important person in their world. Surely, that means something.”

The tension hung thick between us until there was a knock at the door. I rose to answer, finding Susie on the other side, Chloe cradled in one arm and a sizable dish in the other.

“Hey, boys,” she greeted us with a warmth that seemed to fill the space, her smile reaching her eyes in a way that eased some of the heaviness in the room.

“I saw you pull in and thought I’d save you the trip of coming to get this little angel,” she said, stepping inside and gently transferring Chloe into my suddenly unsure arms. “I also brought you some more food that was dropped off—Ms. Glenda’s famous chicken pot pie. Everyone begs for the recipe, but I swear she’s going to take it to her grave.”

I shuffled behind Susie as she opened the fridge. The cold light spilled out, revealing stacks upon stacks of Tupperware. “Every casserole, pie, and soup you could imagine,” she said, her voice brimming with pride. “Quiches for breakfast and enough lasagna to feed an army. The ladies from church, the neighbors... everyone's been cooking up a storm.”

“The freezer is fully stocked too. Everyone’s been so kind,” I told her.

“It’s the least we can do,” she assured. “Little one needs her uncles right now. And you two need to eat.”

“We really appreciate it,” Bryson added, his voice soft. “We have enough on our plates right now without having to figure out what to make for dinner too.”

Susie closed the fridge and turned to us, her eyes filled with compassion. “Did everything go all right with Mr. Jenkins?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “That depends on your definition of all right.”

Susie's eyes darted between us, concern etching lines around her mouth. “Oh dear, what happened?”

I bounced Chloe gently in my arms, her warm weight both comforting and terrifying. “Well, it turns out Zach and Brooke named us as joint guardians for Chloe.”

Susie's eyebrows shot up. “Both of you? Together?”

“Yep,” Bryson said, his voice tight. “Apparently, they thought we'd make a great team.”

Her expression softened. “Well, I can see why they'd think that. You both love her so much, and you each bring different strengths to the table.”

I snorted. “Different is right. We're about as compatible as oil and water.”

Her eyes twinkled with a wisdom that seemed to come from years of observing life. “You know, sometimes the most unlikely combinations turn out to be exactly what's needed. Like salt in coffee—sounds crazy, but it brings out the sweetness.”

I raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "I'm not sure Bryson and I are going to magically blend into the perfect cup of coffee, Susie."

She laughed, a warm sound that seemed to brighten the room. "Maybe not, but you might just surprise yourselves. Remember, you're not alone in this. This whole town is behind you both."

As if to emphasize her point, she gestured towards the overstuffed fridge. "All those casseroles and pies. That's what small town living is about. Neighbors helping neighbors in their time of need. You don't have to do everything alone," Susie continued, her voice gentle but firm. "Things are always better when you have people you can count on. And you two? You've got a whole town ready to lend a hand."

Her words hung in the air, a comforting source of support I hadn't realized we needed. As she turned to leave, she paused at the door, her eyes twinkling. "Just remember, boys, that little girl is what really matters. Everything else is just details."

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving Bryson and me in a silence that felt different from before. Less tense, maybe. Or perhaps just filled with a new kind of uncertainty.

I looked down at Chloe in my arms, her tiny face, peaceful in sleep. Without thinking, I brought her closer, inhaling the sweet baby scent of her hair. Something in my chest tightened, fierce protectiveness washing over me. I glanced up to find Bryson watching us, his expression softening.

"She's right, you know," he said quietly. "About Chloe being what matters."

I nodded, gently swaying with the baby. "Yeah, she is."

Bryson took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders. "So... I guess we're doing this?"

The weight of the decision settled over us. I looked down at Chloe again, her tiny hand curled against my chest. “I guess we are,” I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

“It won't be easy,” Bryson warned, but there was a hint of something else in his tone. Determination, maybe.

I couldn't help but chuckle. “When has anything worth doing ever been easy?”

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Fair point.” He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture I was starting to recognize as a sign of his nervousness. “So, where do we start?”

I glanced around the living room, suddenly aware of how much our lives were about to change. “I guess we start by figuring out how to live together without driving each other crazy.”

Bryson nodded, his expression serious. “We'll need to establish some ground rules, create a schedule for Chloe's care, figure out how to balance our work commitments...”

I held up a hand, feeling overwhelmed. “Whoa, slow down there, spreadsheet. Let's take this one step at a time.”

He frowned at the nickname, but didn't comment on it. “We can do this, right? For her?”

I swallowed hard, my throat tight with emotions I hadn't expected to feel. The nomad in me balked at the idea of roots, but the uncle—the brother—in me knew there was no other choice.

“Yeah, we can,” I replied, my voice steadier than I felt. “She needs us, Bryson. And—” I hesitated, glancing down at the little life that had unwittingly tethered our futures together. “And I think we might need her too.”

He nodded, the corners of his mouth twitching in a semblance of a smile. “We’ll figure it out, Tucker. We have to.”

“Even if it means enduring each other’s company on a permanent basis?” I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

“Even then,” he chuckled dryly, looking down at Chloe, who cooed softly as if in agreement.

“Deal.” I extended my hand, and after a moment’s hesitation, he shook it, his grip firm and resolute.

“Deal.”

As the agreement sealed our fate, I turned away from Bryson and looked out the window. Lakeside Ridge, with its small-town charm and close-knit community, had always been a place for family, for settled lives and rooted dreams. I wondered how my wandering heart would cope with the sudden change in course.

Yet as I watched the pink and purple hues of sunset, a sense of peace began to settle over me. Yes, the road ahead was daunting—full of sleepless nights, diaper changes, and the terrifying responsibility of shaping a young life. But Susie’s words echoed in my mind, reminding me that we weren’t alone in this.

I let out a long breath, feeling the weight of my new role as an instant parent press down on me. It was a weight I never anticipated carrying, but for Chloe—for the bright-eyed niece who had my brother’s smile—I’d learn to bear it. For Chloe, I

thought, I'd become whoever I needed to be. Because she was worth everything.

Chapter Six

brYSON

The cry of a tiny banshee broke my concentration, and I dropped my head onto the keyboard in defeat. I'd been struggling to finish this marketing report for two hours. I could feel the row of W's imprinting my forehead when the door opened, and Tucker walked in. He'd been outside on a work call but must have heard her crying.

"Don't worry, I got her!" he called over his shoulder as he climbed the stairs, the picture of calm. I sighed, closing my eyes for a second. I needed three of me... and maybe a thousand more hours in the day.

I heard Chloe's cries fade into hiccupping sobs, and I fought the urge to go upstairs and check if everything was under control. I couldn't seem to sit still, obsessively straightening the pens on top the makeshift desk I'd set up in the living room and tapping my foot on the floor. I took a deep breath, trying to find some sense of calm, but everywhere I looked, there was chaos. A stray sock on the floor. A stack of baby clothes haphazardly teetering on the chair. Even the tiny pacifier on the coffee table felt like a personal affront. I squeezed my eyes shut and counted to ten.

Tucker appeared in the doorway, Chloe finally quiet in his arms, looking as untroubled as ever. "She just needed some love," he said with a grin, bouncing her lightly. Chloe gurgled and grabbed at his hair. I wished I could bottle their tranquility and chug it. I was in a state of perpetual drowning, and they seemed to be riding the current like it was a fun wave.

I forced a smile, trying to brush off the stress as he plopped her onto my lap and walked away. “She's certainly vocal about it,” I replied, glancing at my open laptop, the cursor blinking at me like a silent scream.

I held Chloe, her tiny fingers wrapping around mine, and guilt tightened in my chest. Shouldn't I be enjoying this more? I sighed, walking into the kitchen where Tucker was rummaging through cabinets. “So, what’s on the agenda today?” he asked.

“Survival,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. Chloe snuggled against my shoulder, and I couldn't help but smile at the warm weight of her. Maybe if I worked while she napped, and made calls with clients after Tucker took her for a walk, I could catch up.

He laughed, shaking Cheerios into a bowl with abandon. I was surprised he didn't spill half the box on the floor. “What else?”

“Try to squeeze in some work while she naps,” I replied, shifting from foot to foot. I already felt behind, like I was losing a race against time. “You know, the usual chaos.”

“Usual chaos,” he repeated, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Maybe for him, it was. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was the weak link in our little trio, and it gnawed at me.

I sat Chloe in her highchair and fished out her baby food, aligning everything neatly on the tray. The table was covered in yesterday's mail and a sea of colorful toys. How could anyone think straight in this mess? I tried to clear some space, shoving a pile of envelopes aside while spooning mushy peaches toward Chloe's mouth.

“Oops,” Tucker said, picking up a dripping Cheerio that had catapulted out of the bowl. I stared at the little ring of milk left behind. Too late for that .

After breakfast, I locked myself in my bedroom for a client call, hoping to get at least one task crossed off my list. But every time I started to concentrate, Chloe would squeal, and Tucker's loud exclamations— “Who's a happy girl?” “Someone needs a diaper change!”—came echoing in, slicing my attention in half.

Lunch was much the same. Tucker juggled Chloe on his hip while slapping together sandwiches and making more of a mess than an actual meal. The kitchen was a war zone of crumbs and spilled juice.

With a clenched jaw, I set to work cleaning up, stacking plates in the sink and wiping counters obsessively until every trace of stickiness was gone. I stood there for a moment, letting exhaustion seep into my bones, feeling like I should be soaking in every precious minute of this chaos instead of drowning in it.

Eventually Chloe went down for a nap, and the house was finally still. I dove back into work, grateful for the brief sense of control. Without interruptions, I blitzed through a couple of projects, relief easing some of the tension in my shoulders. But as soon as I started feeling like maybe—just maybe—I had a grip on things, the cries started again, insistent and demanding. Naptime had flown by.

Tucker must have still been working, so I went to the nursery and picked her up, her tiny body warm against mine. I rocked her back and forth, my heart swelling and breaking at the same time. “Hey, I'm right here,” I whispered, trying to soothe us both.

Tucker appeared after a few minutes, scruffy and smiling. “How's it going?” he asked, tilting his head, unconsciously giving his magazine cover jawline some extra definition.

I wanted to say, “I don't know if I can do this,” but instead I looked at him, as calm as ever, and said, “Think you can take over for a bit?”

He nodded and reached for her, his touch as steady as his voice. “No problem. She's in good hands.” I watched him walk away, feeling a sharp pang in my chest. I couldn't help but feel like I was failing both Chloe and Brooke.

Several hours later, I stared at the walls, wishing I could block out the world as easily as I could close my bedroom door. A cheerful shriek cut through the quiet, and I jumped, almost sending my coffee cup sailing. I glared at my phone, flashing with more demands from work, and dropped my head in my hands. The report was only halfway done, and I couldn't get past the blinking cursor, the emails, the noise. I wasn't sure if I was more frustrated with Tucker for making everything seem so easy or myself for feeling so out of control.

I rubbed my eyes and picked up the phone, cradling it between my cheek and shoulder as I scrolled through another spreadsheet. I couldn't focus, couldn't think. My mind drifted as my boss droned on about KPIs and performance metrics. When I was working, I felt guilty for not spending time with Chloe, and when I was with Chloe, I felt guilty for not working. It was a vicious catch twenty-two.

Tuning back into the conversation, I bit back my impatience, trying to sound calm and capable as I interrupted. “Yeah, absolutely. I'll have that to you by tomorrow morning.” The deadline seemed laughable, but I'd figure it out somehow. I had to.

The door cracked open, and Tucker poked his head in. He held Chloe under one arm, a giggling, wiggling bundle, and he mouthed, “Want to take a break and play with us?” before flashing me a grin. He looked completely at ease, and my heart sank at how simple he made it all seem.

“Can't right now,” I whispered, holding my hand over the mouthpiece and motioning toward my computer in a way that I hoped communicated imminent catastrophe.

He shrugged, a laid-back acknowledgment of my panic, and closed the door without

another word. I ended the phone call with my boss and turned back to the spreadsheet, feeling the minutes tick by like a bomb, everything about to explode. If only I could wrap my head around this last section. If only I could finish the proposal without?—

Another loud laugh ricocheted through the walls, and I jumped, nearly knocking my coffee cup onto the floor. How was I supposed to focus when I couldn't hear myself think? How was I supposed to get any of this done? Everywhere I turned, there was more chaos, more evidence of my inability to handle any of this. Tucker seemed to embrace it all, but I felt like I was slipping further and further behind.

With my frustration mounting, I stormed out of my room and stomped down the stairs. In the living room, Tucker was building a makeshift tower with empty boxes, Chloe on his lap, reaching for the toppling mess with gleeful abandon. He looked up at me as I charged into the room, the smile sliding from his face when he noticed my scowl.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked, those piercing blue eyes, full of calm.

“Hey,” I replied, my voice more strained than I wanted. “I need...” my words drifted off as I took in the disastrous sight in front of me. Toys, books, and clothes strewn all around the room, like a tiny cyclone had come through, picked everything up and just tossed it. My head pounded as I felt my blood pressure rise. “You know what? I think I do need a break after all. I need to get out of this house for a while.”

He made a clicking sound with his mouth. “Have you looked outside? It’s been snowing most of the day.”

“I don’t care,” I said, trying to tamp down the hysteria that was building up in my chest. The walls felt like they were closing in on me and I knew if I didn’t do something soon, I was going to snap. “You’re welcome to stay here, if you want, but

I'm going to get some fresh air."

Tucker eyed me cautiously and I wondered if I looked as unhinged as I felt, like a caged animal about to break free. "Okay. We'll go with you. Just give me a minute to get Chloe's coat on her."

I waited until he walked out of the room before releasing my pent-up breath. My hands shook as I reached up and smoothed down my hair. I was glad he'd decided to go with me. I didn't necessarily want to venture out alone, I just needed to get away. Away from this house and the stress and the chaos that had become my life. I needed to be somewhere I could breathe.

I parked the car in front of the restaurant and looked around. The streets of Lakeside Ridge had transformed into a winter postcard scene while we'd been immersed in the whirlwind of instant parenthood. The sidewalks were lined with old-fashioned lampposts, their warm light casting a golden glow on the freshly fallen snow.

Next door to the restaurant, The Bookworm's Delight beckoned with its golden light spilling onto the sidewalk. Stacks of books lined the windows, their spines creating a colorful mosaic. A handwritten sign in looping cursive advertised an upcoming author visit, promising and signed copies and homemade cookies.

Across the street, Duncan's Donuts and More sat between a tattoo shop and an insurance company, its bright pink door and cheerful pink and white striped awning standing out boldly amongst the more subtle shops along the street. A rainbow flag blew proudly in the wind, and I made a mental note to stop in there one day.

I watched my breath cloud in the frigid air as we stepped out of the car. "Are you sure about this?" I asked Tucker, who was unbuckling Chloe from her car seat with the determination of a man tackling a formidable task. "We could just order delivery. Babies and restaurants don't typically mix well."

He scoffed. “Stop worrying. She's fed, changed—correctly this time—and the car ride here already has her half-asleep. Besides,” he added, glancing at me with those cobalt blue eyes that had a tendency to make my heart stutter, “if we don't get out of that house, one of us is going to start screaming louder than Chloe.”

I couldn't argue with that logic. Grief, lack of sleep, and the stress of learning to care for a baby had begun to take its toll, though Tucker wore his exhaustion with the same easy grace he applied to everything. His cheeks were flushed from the cold, his thick head of hair catching snowflakes that melted almost instantly, and despite the dark circles around his eyes, he looked unfairly attractive.

“Fine,” I conceded, reaching into the back to grab the diaper bag. “But if she starts crying, we leave immediately.”

“Deal.” He grinned, that kilowatt smile that made him look like he'd stepped off a magazine cover rather than survived a tumultuous day with an infant. “Now come on—I'm starving enough to eat a moose.”

Lucky's Bar my throat tight with emotion. “Yeah, they did.”

Chapter Seven

TUCKER

We sat at opposite ends of the kitchen table, typing out of sync while Chloe napped in the other room. Bryson's leg bobbed with nervous energy, making the table tremble as he checked his phone, drumming his fingers and grumbling about poor Wi-Fi. My email opened after three tries, and I felt his eye twitch from across the room. It was almost cute, watching him try to hold it all together.

I turned my attention back to my email but before I got too far, Chloe wailed, her cries sounding tinny through the baby monitor.

"I'll get a bottle ready," I offered.

Bryson's focus was glued to the baby monitor. "Are we letting her sleep too long? I feel like we're letting her sleep too long. "

I headed to the counter. "She's a baby. She needs lots of sleep."

"The books all say we need to start sleep training," he retorted.

I rolled my eyes; thankful that my back was turned to him. Over the last couple of weeks, Bryson had become a walking, talking encyclopedia of child rearing, quoting all the so-called experts and wielding the parenting books he'd ordered like they were the Bible. It was only through supreme willpower that I hadn't already set fire to the entire stack of them.

Grabbing a clean bottle and the canister of formula, I set to work. Chloe's voice got louder, impatient with our seemingly laissez-faire approach to infant hunger. "What's the ETA on that bottle?" Bryson called, stretching his neck like he might just dash down the hallway himself.

"Working on it. I've got the bottle in the warmer now, boss!" I answered in a clipped tone. I dumped formula into the bottle and started shaking it, dribbling powder over the counter.

"You're making a mess is what you're doing." He slammed the laptop shut, and it echoed in the small room. "A mess I'll be stuck cleaning up."

"So don't clean it. I'll get it later." I shrugged, letting a heap of powder hit the floor like a rebellious little snowfall.

His hazel eyes narrowed. "You know I can't leave things like that."

We were on familiar ground, and it was somewhere between a minefield and a swamp. The same tired argument popping up with more and more frequency. "Well, I can't help it if I don't clean everything according to your specifications."

Bryson's chair scraped as he stood. "We need to split responsibilities. If you won't keep things tidy, maybe we need to make a chart. The books all say?—"

"Enough with the books already. I don't give a fuck what the books say," I snapped, regretting it the moment it slipped out. We glared at each other in tense silence before another cry broke the awkward staring contest.

"I'll get her," I muttered, grabbing the bottle out of the warmer and turning on my heel.

I walked down the hall, feeling Bryson's eyes drilling holes in the back of my head. Chloe's cries hit a new level of intensity as I opened the nursery door and scooped her from the crib, holding her close while she squirmed, fists flailing in protest. "We're going to get reported to Baby Protective Services, aren't we?" I whispered, rocking her gently in my arms.

She gurgled, calming just enough to remind me how much she owned me. Her grip on my finger was stronger than my hold on reality these days. I sat in the rocking chair; her warmth tucked against my chest and eased the bottle to her mouth. "Here you go," I said, trying to keep the mood light while she guzzled like a frat boy at keg night.

I rocked her slowly, watching her eyes flutter. "You've got two new guardians," I said, whispering like I was telling her a secret. "One who's pretty much perfect and one who's—" I chuckled to myself. "Well, you'll figure it out soon enough."

I'd traveled halfway around the world and seen just about everything, but nothing prepared me for this tiny human and how she made everything feel terrifying and right at the same time. Watching her drift back to sleep, her grip relaxed, letting my finger slip from her grasp. I laid her in the crib, smoothing the soft hair on her head.

I made my way back to the kitchen, dreading the argument that was surely waiting for me there. But Bryson was seated, tapping his foot and attacking his laptop keys like they'd personally offended him. The powdery mess was gone. He didn't look up as I came in, so I flopped back into my chair, making more noise than was probably necessary.

I opened my laptop and tried to focus, but I kept stealing glances at him and the tight set of his jaw. I hated the friction between us, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. We were so different. The only thing I was sure of was that we needed to figure it out quickly because living with this much tension wasn't good for any of us, especially

Chloe.

The mail came, the afternoon dragged, and we settled into that restless period between lunch and dinner. I found Bryson in the living room, holding a fresh diaper in one hand and bracing himself for battle with the other. Chloe squirmed on the couch, cooing innocently. He worked fast, changing her in under thirty-second flat, like he was trying out for some speed diapering competition.

“There. We did it,” he said, fastening the last tab. He picked up Chloe, smiling at her like they shared some kind of secret, then laid her down on the rug.

Her little hands reached for the colorful toys he’d lined up in perfect order around her. A ring stacker, a soft book, some teething rings, all carefully selected and placed within easy crawling distance. He turned his attention to cleaning up the mess, organizing everything neatly in the clear tub labeled diaper supplies and folding the dirty diaper into a neat little package.

I leaned against the doorframe, shaking my head. “You know it’s just going to get messy again in about five minutes, right?”

“It’s called being prepared.” He looked up, meeting my gaze with a hint of challenge.

I tried not to grin, even though we both felt the joke behind my smirk. “Does that count as OCD?”

He hesitated, something almost like amusement in his eyes. “It counts as surviving you.”

Chloe’s giggle broke through, a high-pitched squeal that pulled our attention back to her. She wiggled on her stomach, determinedly ignoring the toys and focusing instead on the one thing she shouldn’t have: a stray sock halfway under the couch.

“I swear that wasn’t mine,” I said, in case Bryson tried to charge me with littering.

Her legs kicked, arms flapping like she might take flight, and then, just as we thought she’d give up, she pulled her knees under her and launched forward with wobbly, awkward grace.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed, nearly tripping over myself as I ran to the floor. “Did you just see that?”

Bryson froze, his face breaking into the biggest smile I’d ever seen. “She’s crawling!”

I knelt beside him, and we watched in disbelief as she kept going, the world’s cutest little escape artist. “Chloe’s on the move!”

He clapped his hands, the sound of pure joy filling the room. “You did it, baby girl! You did it!” She stopped, turning her head to see what the fuss was about, eyes wide and curious.

“Keep going!” I encouraged, shaking a rattle just out of her reach.

We laughed, cheering her on, our earlier tension completely forgotten in the face of this tiny miracle. Chloe made another lurch forward, landing nose first into the rug, but she pushed up again, determined to get the hang of it.

“This is huge,” he said, his voice full of wonder. He looked at me, his expression softer than it’d been in days.

We sat on the floor, side by side, basking in the glow of this new milestone. “Chloe Bear,” I said, “We need to get you on the go!” I handed Bryson his phone off the coffee table, motioning for him to record.

He held his phone steady, capturing the moment for posterity, but Chloe had already decided to take a break. She rolled to her back, sucking on her hand.

“I think she’s done for now,” he laughed, tucking the phone back into his pocket.

“But not for long.” I knew it wasn’t just about the crawling. “She’s going to be everywhere.”

His eyes sparkled with excitement and, maybe, the faintest trace of panic. “I’ll have to start babyproofing the house.”

“I’ll help.” I reached out, putting my hand on his arm. He nodded, and the simple gesture said more than any words could. Our little cold war was over, at least for the moment.

Chloe watched us, eyes darting from one face to the other. She stuck out her tongue and made a fart noise. The laugh that escaped him made something unfurl inside my chest.

We took turns picking her up and encouraging her to keep moving, our excitement infectious and childlike. It was the kind of spontaneous joy you couldn’t plan for, even if you tried. Bryson seemed lighter, like seeing Chloe crawl had also freed him from some invisible weight. He smiled at me, genuine and full of relief, and I knew we’d be okay. At least until the next mess.

Quietly, I slid the door of the nursery shut and walked downstairs. Bryson sat in the living room, his sleeves rolled up, and the soft glow of a lamp, casting half his face in shadow. I stood in the doorway and watched him for a moment, feeling the day settle on us like a blanket, warm and a little suffocating. The silence pressed down, so I broke it with the pop and hiss of two cold beers, bringing them over and handing one to him.

“Peace offering?” he asked, a cautious smile tugging at his lips.

I dropped onto the couch beside him, my body easing into the cushions. “Maybe.”

We sat in silence for a few beats, both unsure how to start this conversation. He turned the beer in his hands, fingers restless against the cold glass. He stared at it like the words he needed might be written on the label.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally, his voice low, carrying the weight of the last few weeks. “For being so... rigid all the time.”

“I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have snapped at you that way,” I responded honestly.

“I just—” He hesitated, searching for the right way to explain. “I can’t stand mess. Growing up...”

He trailed off, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. I’d never seen him so unsure, so vulnerable. I wanted to fill the quiet with something easy, but I knew better than to break the moment.

“When I was five, I was placed in foster care. My biological mom was an addict. Drugs, alcohol, sex—you name it, and she was addicted to it. She’d go on these benders, throwing parties at our house, loud music at all hours, and a different guy in her bed every night.” The words tumbled out, each one a little more fragile than the last.

“You don’t have to—” I started, but he cut me off, shaking his head.

“I want to,” he insisted. “You should know who you’re dealing with.”

He set the beer on the coffee table, drawing his knees up to his chest like he needed to

protect himself from something that might sneak in and make another mess of his life.

“All I remember from that time was chaos. Broken bottles, dirty needles, and trash lying all over the place. It was years before I felt safe enough to walk barefoot. I have no idea what happened to her. One day she left for work and...just never came back. A neighbor heard me crying and called the police. A social worker came and got me, but because there was no other family, I got placed in the system.

I watched his face, seeing all the little cracks beneath his perfect exterior. “I always felt... lost,” he continued. “I didn’t belong in any of the families I lived with. Foster care was unpredictable, and I got shuffled around quite a bit. I learned pretty quickly that controlling my environment was the only way I could cope. Luckily, I was adopted after just a year and I couldn’t have asked for any better parents than the ones I got, but those early years... had left a lasting impression.”

I put my hand on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath the fabric of his shirt. “I’m so sorry you went through all that. You deserved so much better,” I said softly.

He met my eyes, searching for something, but I wasn’t sure what. “I get it though. We all cope with things differently. I lost my parents, too,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “Not in the same way, but still...” I paused, looking for the right words. He didn’t flinch or turn away. He held my gaze like he knew this was harder for me than I’d ever let on.

“My freshman year of college, my mom died of cancer. Six months later, my dad had a heart attack. It made me want to experience everything life has to offer before it’s too late,” I continued, feeling the cracks open up in me, too.

Bryson reached for my hand, a tentative but grounding touch. “But now...”

“Now what?” he urged.

“Now, I wonder if maybe I didn’t miss out on even more by not being here—not spending more time with my brother, not being here every day to get to see Chloe grow.”

“But you can. You have all the time you could possibly want with her now.”

I nodded. “That’s why I decided to cut back on work,” I explained, feeling the urgency to make him understand. “I want to be here. Really be here.”

He squeezed my hand, his eyes wide and a little surprised. “That’s great. But are you sure? What about work?”

I leaned back, letting my head rest on the back of the couch, looking at him sideways. “I have plenty of money from my apps and besides, nothing is as important as being with her. You see how fast she’s growing. She fucking crawled today! I don’t want to miss anything else.”

He smiled, a genuine smile that felt like the sun, breaking through clouds. “We’ll make this work.” The words were so simple, but they settled between us with profound certainty. We’d both been broken in our own ways, but together, with Chloe, we felt whole.

Bryson and I sat on the couch, the air between us more relaxed than it’d been in weeks. The light was soft and forgiving, and I caught him glancing at me like he might have some deep revelation, but instead he only said, “You’re messy.”

I laughed, the day’s tension bleeding out of me. “You love it,” I replied, watching his face.

“I suppose I can learn to tolerate it.” His voice carried a teasing edge, the kind I hadn’t heard in too long.

It felt good to be here, together and at ease, without the weight of earlier hanging over us like a cloud. I stretched my legs out on the coffee table, my feet brushing against his. He didn’t move away, and that was enough to keep me optimistic.

“Chloe really nailed it today, didn’t she?” I said, more statement than question.

“She’s a little rock star.” He leaned back, letting himself relax. “Thank you for—” he started, then stopped like he didn’t need to finish.

“For?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“For sticking with me. For putting up with my... quirks.”

“Thanks for always cleaning up my messes,” I retorted, my lips quirking up at the corners.

“Could be worse.” He shrugged, smiling.

We sat together in easy silence, the words resting comfortably between us like they had nowhere better to be. I thought of all the places I’d been, all the amazing things I’d seen and done. They were enough to keep me on the road for years, but not enough to keep me there forever.

Chapter Eight

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The door closed behind us with heavy finality, and for a moment, I wanted to yank it open again and go back. Back to the diaper changes and spit up, the familiar chaos that was somehow comforting. But we kept walking, the sidewalk lined with the slushy remains of snow. I shifted Chloe to my other hip, readjusting the blanket wrapped around her tiny legs.

Tucker walked beside us, his dark jeans, black leather jacket, and scruff along his jaw giving him bad-boy vibes that would've had teenage me blushing wildly. Thankfully, grown up me was able to keep such things in check—mostly. There was that one moment when I first saw him and nearly swallowed my tongue, but he certainly didn't need to know that.

“You know we're only going to be gone a couple of hours, right?”

I glanced at him, my forehead scrunching. “Yeah, why?”

“Because there are enough diapers, wipes, and bottles to last a week in here,” he said, raising the diaper bag which looked ready to burst at the seams.

“I like to be prepared,” I responded, kissing Chloe on the tip of her nose. She giggled then reached up and grabbed ahold of my ear lobe to play with.

“Tell the truth, you were a boy scout, weren't you?” he teased. I murmured a

response. “What was that?” he asked, amusement coating his words.

I turned my head towards him, one eyebrow raised in challenge. “I said, I was an eagle scout,” I answered succinctly.

Tucker hooted a laugh, but it wasn’t a mean laugh. This one was warm, familiar, like the laugh of someone who’d known you for years, someone who knew all your idiosyncrasies and liked you anyway. I tried to ignore the fluttering in my belly at the thought.

“Of course, you were. I imagine you have always excelled at everything you’ve done,” he noted.

I shot him a disbelieving look. “Have you even been paying attention the last few weeks?” I asked, nodding my head towards the baby in my arms.

Tucker stopped walking, his expression sobering as I turned to face him. “I have. I’ve watched you completely upend your life to take care of your best friend’s baby. And not only that, but you’ve taken the time to read up on child development, so we can make sure she doesn’t miss any important steps along the way. That’s something I never would have thought to do.”

“Wow! Thank you,” I said softly, trying to swallow the emotions that were clogging my throat.

He shrugged like it was no big deal. “I just thought you should know, I do see everything you’re doing, and I appreciate it.”

It was quiet for a few moments as we started walking again but then I bumped his shoulder with mine. “I appreciate you too. You’re amazing with Chloe and you help me see the lighter side of things when I start to get too up in my head.”

I swallowed hard when he grinned at me, all sparkling blue eyes and cover model smile. I smiled back, something passing between us, an unspoken understanding between two people who were facing the same challenges together.

“You made it!” Susie called cheerily from her porch, effectively putting an end to the moment. She moved forward as we climbed the steps, wrapping her arms around Chloe and me at the same time. “Don't you two look handsome, all dressed up for a night out.” She scooped Chloe from my arms, and I felt the instant loss of her tiny weight.

“Thanks. You might have your hands a bit full with this one, tonight,” Tucker warned.

“Yeah, she's been pretty fussy all day and she won't quit drooling. I don't know what's going on, but I packed some extra bibs in case she soaks through that one.”

“Ah, yes,” she responded knowingly. “Sounds like she's teething. But don't you worry, I have my ways of soothing her.”

“Teething! Why didn't I think of that?”

Susie patted my arm. “Because this is your first experience with a teething baby, but it's okay. There's a learning curve.”

“Okay, well, you have both of our numbers in case you need us,” Tucker reminded her.

“And we'll be at Lucky's. If you try to call and we don't answer, you can reach us there,” I added.

“We'll be just fine,” she assured us.

We took turns kissing Chloe then slowly began making our way down the porch steps. When we reached the bottom, I spun back around. “She might want a bottle soon. And there’s some baby cereal in there if she wants any.”

Tucker jumped in next. “Her jammies are in there too. Oh! And her little yellow bunny. She can’t go to sleep without Floppy.”

“We’ll check in after a couple of hours,” I promised, feeling like I was being peeled away from something vital.

“Go have fun,” Susie ordered. “And don’t even think about coming back for at least two hours.”

Her laugh followed us all the way to the car, cheerful and warm. We walked back to our house in silence and climbed into Tucker’s rental. I shivered as a blast of cold air hit me in the face as he started the car. I shifted the vents away from me until the car had a chance to warm up.

“She’ll be fine, you know,” he said, backing out of the driveway.

“I hope so. I feel like I just left my heart back there on that porch,” I answered sullenly.

“Yeah, but the books say it’s good for us to have some time apart. It gives us a chance to unwind and teaches Chloe to trust that when even though we go away sometimes, we’ll always come back for her.”

I stared at him in shock. “The books said that, huh?”

He visibly swallowed as he realized what he’d said. “Uh... well... you left one of them just lying around in the nursery and I was up with her one night, so...”

“So, you read my book.” I laughed, giddily.

“Shut up,” he grumbled, but I could see his lips twitching as he tried not to laugh.

My laughter died down, but a smile remained on my face as we drove down the quiet streets. The sky was clear, the moon shining brightly above. I was having fun with him and a part of me almost wished we were going somewhere else, just the two of us.

I glanced down at the clock on the dashboard. “Crap! We’re going to be late.”

“That’s all right. We’ll just show up fashionably late and make them all think we’re way cooler than we are.”

I shot him a doubtful look. “Social gatherings have never really been my thing. I’m not all that outgoing, and I tend to be a little awkward with people I’ve just met.”

He made a face, feigning shock. “Really? You don’t say.” He hit another button on the radio, filling the space between us with upbeat music. “Seriously though, Langston seemed cool, and the others are all friends of his, so I’m sure they’re nice too. And I’ll be right there with you.”

I stared at him, amazed at how effortlessly he could glide into these situations, how he seemed to wear life like a comfortable old shirt. “That’s easy for you to say,” I argued. “You could make friends with a potato.”

He threw his head back in laughter, an unguarded sound. “Depends on the potato,” he teased. “I hear the small ones are kind of cliquey.”

His energy was hard to resist, and I felt my worry giving way to something less defined, less certain. “Have you always been like this?” I asked. “Good with people?”

He shrugged. “Pretty much. It’s served me well on my travels, getting to know people all over the world.”

“Yeah, well, not all of us are blessed with a traveler’s charm,” I said.

He looked at me with that penetrating gaze, and I thought I saw something else there, a deeper note to his playfulness. “Try not to worry so much. You already have one friend there.”

I looked at him, caught off guard. “Is that what we are? Friends?”

“Well, sure,” he said, a hint of vulnerability in his voice. “We spend all our time together, we rely on each other, and we’ve been getting along really well. What would you call it?”

He had a point, and I let it settle in, finding its place inside me. “Hmm. I guess we are friends then.” I said it softly, unable to hide the smile on my face.

His grin was wide and easy. “There you go,” he said. “And if I’m wrong about these other dads, we’ll bail. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said.

The weight of the door seemed symbolic, heavy and imposing, as I pushed it open and led us inside Lucky’s. A group of men sat at a large round table in the corner, their laughter echoing through the space and a familiar figure rose to greet us.

“Welcome, boys! I’m glad you finally decided to join us.” Langston’s handshake was firm, his smile friendly.

“Sorry we’re late,” I said, my voice sounding strained even to my own ears. “We had

a bit of separation anxiety leaving Chloe with the sitter.”

Langston chuckled, his dark eyes twinkling with understanding. “No worries, we've all been there. Come on, let me introduce you to the gang,” he said, guiding us towards the table.

“Everyone, I'd like you to meet Bryson and Tucker, our newest members,” he announced, gesturing to us. “Boys, let me introduce you to the gang.”

He pointed to a man with messy blond hair and a friendly smile. “This is Duncan Harris, owner of Duncan's Donuts & More. He makes the best apple fritters in the world.”

Duncan reached out to shake our hands. “Welcome, fellas! Always great to see new faces. And don't let him fool you—my cinnamon rolls are the real showstoppers.”

“And this is Noah Hale, our local contractor extraordinaire. You need anything built or fixed, he's your man,” Langston continued, gesturing to a rugged-looking man with warm brown eyes.

Noah gave us a warm smile and a firm handshake. “Nice to meet you guys. How old is your little one?”

“She's seven and a half months,” I answered.

“Ah, the fun is just beginning then,” he chuckled. “Wait till she starts crawling.”

“She actually just started,” Tucker said, his voice filled with pride.

As we settled into our seats, I couldn't help but feel a mixture of anxiety and excitement bubbling in my chest. Tucker sat beside me, his presence a comforting

anchor in this unfamiliar setting. I glanced around the table, taking in the friendly faces of the other dads.

“So, tell us about yourselves,” Duncan said, leaning forward with genuine interest.

I hesitated, unsure where to begin. Tucker, sensing my discomfort, jumped in. “Well, we're both new to town,” he said, flashing that easy smile of his. “I'm a software developer, and Bryson here works in digital marketing.”

“What led you to our little town?” he asked curiously.

“Tucker is Zach Murphy's brother,” Langston answered quietly as he set a pitcher of beer in the middle of the table and started pouring us each a glass.

Understanding dawned quickly on Noah and Duncan's faces. “We're sorry about your loss. They were really nice people.”

“Thanks. It's good to know they were surrounded by such a friendly community. I can see why they decided to start their family here,” Tucker said.

“And how long have you two been together?” Duncan asked, his eyes twinkling.

I felt my face flush as Tucker and I exchanged a panicked glance. “Oh, we're not—” I started.

“We're just friends,” Tucker finished. “Roommates, actually. We're raising my niece together.”

Duncan's eyebrows shot up. “Oh! I'm so sorry, I just assumed?—”

“No worries,” Tucker said smoothly. “It's a unique situation.”

I nodded, trying to ignore the way my heart had sped up at Duncan's assumption. "Yeah. Brooke was my best friend and Chloe is my goddaughter. We actually didn't even know we were going to be raising her together until the reading of the will."

"I bet that was quite a shock," Langston interjected.

I snorted a laugh. "That's an understatement."

Tucker, ever the social butterfly, smoothly steered the conversation in a new direction. "So, tell us about your kids," he said, leaning forward with genuine interest.

As the other dads began sharing stories about their children, I found myself relaxing, the tension in my shoulders slowly melting away. Duncan's eyes lit up as he talked about his foster son, Jessie.

"He's ten and absolutely brilliant," Duncan gushed. "The other day, he built this incredible robot out of stuff he found around the house. I swear, that kid's going to be an engineer someday."

Noah chimed in next, a proud smile on his face. "My Curtis is eight. He's really into sports right now. We spend most weekends at the baseball field or basketball court."

"What about you, Langston? You mentioned you have twins, right?" I asked, feeling more comfortable as the conversation flowed.

His face lit up with a proud smile. "Ah yes, my little troublemakers. Millie and Maya are seven now. They keep me on my toes, that's for sure."

"Twins must be a handful," Tucker remarked.

"You have no idea," Langston chuckled. "Last week, they decided to give our dog a

'makeover' with some of their dress up makeup. Poor thing looked like he was auditioning for RuPaul's Drag Race.”

The table erupted in laughter, and I found myself joining in, the tension in my chest easing further.

“So, how are you two adjusting to parenthood?” Noah asked.

I hesitated, glancing at Tucker. He gave me an encouraging nod, so I took a deep breath and dove in. “It's been... an adventure,” I admitted with a nervous chuckle. “There are moments when I feel like I'm drowning, and others where I can't imagine doing anything else.”

Tucker jumped in, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “You should have seen him the first time Chloe projectile vomited all over him. I thought he was going to pass out.”

The table erupted in laughter, and I felt my cheeks flush. “Hey, in my defense, I didn't know babies could do that!” I protested, but I was laughing too.

“Oh man, I remember those days,” Noah said, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “Curtis once managed to pee on me, the ceiling, and somehow my laptop all at once.”

As the laughter died down, I found myself relaxing even more. The initial awkwardness was fading, replaced by a sense of camaraderie I hadn't expected. These men understood the chaos, the joy, and the overwhelming responsibility of single fatherhood in a way few others could.

“So, any advice for us newbies?” Tucker asked, leaning forward with genuine interest.

Duncan's eyes twinkled as he raised his beer. “Sleep when the baby sleeps is bullshit.

Sleep when you're dead.”

We all chuckled, and I nodded in agreement. “I’ve definitely learned that one the hard way.”

“Oh, and invest in good stain remover,” Noah added. “You’ll need it for everything from spit-up to finger paint disasters.”

As the conversation flowed, I found myself opening up more, sharing stories about the first time Chloe laughed out loud at something I did, and I felt a warmth spread through my chest. The memory was still so vivid—her tiny face scrunching up, eyes crinkling at the corners, before a burst of giggles erupted from her little body. It had been such a simple thing. I was making silly faces at her while changing her diaper—but in that moment, it felt like the most incredible sound I’d ever heard.

“I swear, I nearly cried,” I admitted, a soft smile playing on my lips. “It was like... suddenly everything clicked into place. All the sleepless nights, the constant worrying, it all became worth it in that single moment.”

Tucker nudged my shoulder gently. “You did cry,” he teased, but his eyes were warm.

I felt my cheeks flush at Tucker’s revelation, but I couldn’t deny it. “Okay, fine. I cried,” I admitted with a sheepish grin. “But come on, it was a big moment!”

The other dads nodded in understanding, their eyes soft with shared memories.

“Those are the moments that make it all worth it,” Langston said, raising his glass in a toast. “To the joys of fatherhood, big and small.”

We all clinked glasses, and as I took a sip of my beer, I felt a surge of gratitude wash

over me. Here I was, surrounded by men who understood the unique challenges and rewards of single fatherhood. Men who didn't judge me for getting emotional over a baby's laugh or for packing too many diapers in the diaper bag.

As the night wore on, the conversation flowed easily. We shared more stories, laughed over parenting mishaps, and exchanged tips on everything from dealing with diaper rash to finding reliable babysitters. At one point, I glanced over at Tucker, surprised to see him watching me with a soft smile. When our eyes met, he quickly looked away, but not before I caught a hint of something in his gaze that made my heart skip a beat.

Before I knew it, several hours had passed and it was time to leave. We said goodnight to our new friends then Tucker and I walked outside, his shoulder occasionally brushing against mine as we made our way to the car. The contact sent little sparks of warmth through my body, and I found myself hyper-aware of his presence.

“So,” he said, breaking the comfortable silence between us, “what did you think?”

I considered the question for a moment, replaying the evening in my mind. “It was... nice,” I admitted, surprised by how much I meant it. “Really nice, actually. I wasn't expecting to feel so... comfortable.”

Tucker's face lit up with a brilliant smile that made my heart do a little flip. “You were in your element, especially when you started talking about all those baby milestones you've been tracking.”

I felt a flush creep up my neck, remembering how animated I'd gotten discussing Chloe's development. “Was I too much? I tend to get carried away sometimes.”

“Not at all,” he assured me, his blue eyes twinkling in the moonlight. “It was...

endearing, actually. You should've seen your face light up when you were talking about her first laugh. It was beautiful.”

The word 'beautiful' hung in the air between us, and I found myself at a loss for words. Tucker cleared his throat and quickly unlocked the car, breaking the moment.

I gazed out the window as we drove home, lost in thought, replaying moments from the evening in my mind. The warmth of acceptance, the shared laughter, the feeling of finally belonging somewhere—it all swirled together, leaving me with a sense of contentment I hadn't felt in a long time.

He hummed softly along with the radio, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on the steering wheel. I found my eyes drawn to his hands, noticing the way his long fingers moved with an easy grace. There was something mesmerizing about the casual confidence of his movements, the way he seemed so at home in his own skin.

“You know,” I said, breaking the comfortable silence between us, “I think I needed this more than I realized.”

Tucker glanced over at me, a soft smile playing on his lips. “Yeah? How so?”

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, watching the streetlights cast fleeting shadows across his face. “I guess... I've been so focused on Chloe, on trying to do everything right, that I forgot how important it is to connect with other adults. To be reminded that we're not alone in this.”

He nodded sagely, his eyes back on the road. “I get that. It's easy to get lost in the day-to-day stuff and forget to come up for air sometimes.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, feeling a surge of warmth at how easily he understood. “And seeing all those other dads, hearing their stories... it made me feel like maybe we're

not screwing this up as badly as I sometimes fear we are.”

Tucker chuckled, the sound low and warm in the quiet car. “We're definitely not screwing it up, Bryson. You heard those guys—we're right on track with all the craziness.”

I laughed softly, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders. “I suppose you're right. It's just... sometimes I worry that we're not enough, you know? That Chloe deserves more than two clueless guys fumbling their way through parenthood.”

Tucker was quiet for a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. When he spoke, his voice was gentle but firm. “Bryson, look at me.”

I turned to face him, surprised by the intensity in his eyes as he glanced between me and the road. “Chloe is loved. She's safe, she's happy, and she's thriving. We may not have it all figured out, but we're giving her everything we've got. That's more than enough.”

His words wrapped around me like a warm blanket, soothing the doubts that had been gnawing at me. I felt my eyes sting with unexpected tears, overwhelmed by the sincerity in his voice.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “I... I needed to hear that.”

Tucker reached over and squeezed my hand briefly, the touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. “Anytime, Bryson. We're in this together, remember?”

I nodded my head. For the first time, I truly felt the truth in those words.

Chapter Nine

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The pen tapped steadily against the clipboard in my hands, an outward sign of my frazzled nerves. I'd already filled out the forms and attached a copy of the affidavit from the lawyer stating that we were Chloe's guardians. I glanced down at my watch, sighing when I realized it had only been two minutes since the last time I'd checked.

Tucker had Chloe cradled in his arms, her tiny head leaning on his shoulder, cheeks red with fever and her eyes watery. I'd never seen anything quite so heart-wrenching and adorable. "Feels like her fever's gone up," he said, feeling her forehead with his cheek.

"Hopefully, it's just because she's cutting teeth. I read that can happen," I replied, though neither of us really knew.

A door opened, and a nurse gestured us back. She led us into an examination room, where she weighed Chloe, took her temperature—which was a worrisome 102.3—and asked us a series of questions. "The doctor will be in soon," she assured us before slipping out of the room.

Tucker sat in the bright yellow chair beside the exam table, shifting Chloe in his lap. I found myself watching them as if I were miles away, the way he bounced his knee to keep her entertained, her small hand tugging at his collar. A tightness grew in my chest, the kind you get when something's both beautiful and terrible. He looked up and smiled in a way that hit me like sunshine. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I managed a nod.

A few minutes later, there was a gentle knock, and the door opened, revealing the doctor who was younger than I'd expected, maybe late twenties, her eyes kind and her smile disarming. "Hello. I'm so sorry to hear about Chloe's parents," she said as she quickly washed her hands at the sink. She dried them then turned to shake our hands. "My name is Dr. Tillman. I've been Chloe's doctor since she was born."

I liked her immediately. There was a softness about her that made me feel like Chloe was in very good hands. We took turns introducing ourselves and then she asked us what was going on with Chloe.

"She's been fussy, not sleeping much, and she woke up this morning with a fever. We thought maybe it was from teething, but it seemed too high for that," Tucker explained, worry etched across his face. It was all I could do not to jump in with a million details, just in case he missed something.

"Let's have a look, shall we?" Dr. Tillman made a silly face at Chloe as she pressed the stethoscope against her chest. Chloe whimpered, and Tucker flinched. "Her heart and lungs sound good. Any vomiting or diarrhea?"

"Some loose stools," I said, because that was the kind of disgusting thing I found myself saying now.

"Appetite?" Dr. Tillman glanced over at me, a trace of amusement in her eyes.

"She's been cranky," Tucker answered. "Not much interest in the bottle."

The doctor pulled some sort of instrument out of her pocket. It had a light on it, and she used it to peer inside Chloe's nose and mouth. When she moved to her ears, Chloe started to cry, waving her hands in the air as if trying to push the doctor away.

My hands fisted in my lap as I fought the urge to snatch the little girl up and run out of the room with her.

“I see what’s going on,” Dr. Tillman said, leaning back. “And you’re right about the fever, it’s from a double ear infection.” My heart dropped like a lead balloon. “She’s eating less because it probably hurts to swallow. Teething doesn’t help, but we’ll have her feeling better in no time. She’s healthy otherwise, just needs some antibiotics.”

Healthy. It was the first word I’d let myself cling to since I’d woken that morning and discovered her fever. Tucker kept talking to the doctor, his calm confidence both reassuring and annoying, but I remained stuck on the word healthy. My mind drifted to all the worst-case scenarios I’d been obsessing over, checking her temperature like a maniac, imagining CPS knocking on the door because we couldn’t get her to stop crying. I rubbed my face, the scrape of the stubble I hadn’t bothered to shave that morning, rough against my palms.

Dr. Tillman’s voice broke through my fog. “...doing a great job with her.”

I must’ve looked skeptical because she stopped and gave me a serious look, the kind you’d give a kid who swore Santa wasn’t real. “Bryson,” she said, and my name sounded so much like relief that I couldn’t help but believe her. “I know how worried you must be, but I promise, she’s going to be just fine.” Tucker reached over and squeezed my hand, and for the first time all morning, I started to breathe.

We wrapped up the appointment with a prescription and instructions to give her Tylenol for the pain. Tucker jotted everything down on his phone, and I couldn’t help but hover, sure he’d miss some details, and I’d have to call the doctor’s office in a panic. Dr. Tillman said to let Chloe eat as much as she could, but not to worry if she didn’t have much of an appetite for the next day or two.

“Once she’s better, you can start introducing more solids,” she said, pointing to a pamphlet about table foods. It was the first time I’d considered feeding her anything more complicated than formula or watery baby cereal, and a wave of inadequacy crashed over me.

“Simple things,” Dr. Tillman said as if reading my mind. “Start with mashed bananas, maybe some pureed fruits and vegetables.”

“And this has information on all of that?” I was definitely that parent, the one with too many questions and not enough confidence.

“It’s all in there,” she promised. “And you can always call.”

Chloe whimpered as we stood to leave. She looked so small in Tucker’s arms, and it was still weird to think of her as our responsibility. A huge responsibility. The hugest. He rubbed her back gently, and she settled, eyes closing but not quite asleep.

“Thanks,” I said to Dr. Tillman, feeling inadequate but hopeful. “I just—thanks.”

She reached out and squeezed my arm. “You’re welcome. And try not to worry so much. Brooke and Zach were fantastic parents. They wouldn’t have left Chloe with you two unless they truly believed you could handle it.”

I shot her a watery smile, blinking back tears as her words found a home deep inside my heart. She was right, Brooke and Zach would never have entrusted us to raise Chloe unless they were sure we would do the best job possible. Something settled inside me, and I walked out of the doctor’s office with a newfound confidence.

Chloe squirmed like a wild animal, her cries increasing in volume, and my earlier confidence lagged in the face of a sick baby. The changing table felt too high, too unstable, like she might slip through my hands, and a stress headache had formed at

the back of my skull. I had to close my eyes for a second to block it all out. A long second.

“Need help?” Tucker called from the doorway, twisting open the bottle of medicine. His sleeves were pushed up, forearms looking unfairly sexy for a guy giving medicine to a baby.

“Maybe just a little?” I admitted, pressing my lips to Chloe’s forehead. She was still so warm. The smell of artificial strawberries hung thick in the air as he crossed the room and handed me the stopper. Chloe kicked and cried, and pink syrup shot everywhere, running down her chin and into the crease of her neck. I wasn’t even sure how much had actually made it into her mouth.

“It’s all over my shirt!” Tucker yelped, but he was laughing as I glanced down at myself.

“Mine too. Guess we’ll have to do more laundry.”

“I just started a load. I’ll throw these in with the next one,” he offered.

I shot him a grateful look as I grabbed a wipe and began cleaning her face. She was still whimpering, and every sound felt like a dagger to my heart. I hated feeling so helpless when she was hurting, but we were doing everything Dr. Tillman suggested.

I wiped at the pink liquid on my shirt, but all I managed was to make more of a mess. Tucker picked up Chloe, cradling her close despite the goo all over him, and I had to smile at the sight. It was endearing, his whole-hearted way of being, like nothing fazed him and he could handle whatever the world threw at him.

He grinned at me, blue eyes bright and mischievous. “You should leave it. I kind of like the pink tie-dye look on you.”

I rolled my eyes and took Chloe back, stripping off her stained onesie. “I think I prefer a more classic look, thank you very much.” We got her cleaned up and changed, new jammies that were pale lavender with tiny clouds all over them. I was a sticky mess, my shirt looked like a three-year-old’s finger painting, and I hadn’t felt more exhausted in my entire life, but somehow, I couldn’t find it in myself to care. All that mattered was making sure Chloe was comfortable.

“Nice job, Uncle Bry,” Tucker said, offering his fist for a bump.

I knocked it with my own, a reluctant laugh escaping me. “Think I should quit my day job?” I asked as I slipped out of my shirt, leaving me in just a white under shirt.

“Definitely.” He ran a hand through his dark hair, ruffling it in a way that somehow made him even more handsome.

I settled into the rocking chair, Chloe resting against my chest. Her cries softened to little whimpers, then to the occasional hiccup as her eyes started to close. Tucker left the room, only to return a few moments later with a bottle and a couple of waters tucked under his arm.

He handed me the bottle and took a long drink from his water, sitting on the floor with his back against the dresser. I noticed he’d changed into a pair of sweats and a soft looking blue t-shirt that paired nicely with the color of his eyes.

I watched Chloe, her little chest rising and falling as she drank the last of her bottle, the warmth of her like an anchor. Her face was still pink with fever, but she was peaceful as she finally fell asleep, and I wondered if this was what love felt like. If it was possible to love someone this much and still be afraid you’d never get it right.

Tucker took another drink, watching us like he was part of some exclusive club and didn’t know how he’d gotten in. “You’re a natural, you know.”

I wanted to argue, to tell him I was barely hanging on, but he looked so sincere that I couldn't. Instead, I whispered, "Thanks. It helps that she's so perfect."

"Agreed," he whispered back, his grin making his eyes crinkle at the edges. There was no denying it—Chloe had us both well and truly wrapped around her little finger.

By the time I laid her down in the crib, her fever was still holding strong, but so were we. We were really in this together. The house was quiet, the only sounds were the occasional car passing by and a dog barking in the distance. It was peaceful and I realized I was no longer just here because I needed to be, but because I wanted to be.

The night was long as we kept vigil, neither of us able to sleep for fear we might not hear Chloe if she needed us. The tiniest sound came over the baby monitor as she stirred and Tucker was up and moving, crossing the living room with quick steps that belied his usual calm. "I've got her," he said.

I listened for signs of relief, held my breath until it hurt, and then I heard it—soft, familiar shushing sound as he tried to sooth her. "Still have a fever, don't you, baby girl," he cooed.

I checked my watch. Time for more medicine. I was up in a flash, grabbing the Tylenol off the counter and racing up the stairs. Chloe was still pretty sleepy, so we managed to get the medicine in without losing too much. I checked her diaper which was still dry then stood there, watching her as she fell back to sleep.

I stayed there until Tucker pried me away with a gentle hand on my arm. "Come on, let's let her sleep."

"Do you think the meds are working?" I asked when we were back downstairs. I hated how vulnerable I sounded.

“Fever’s still there, but it’s down some, so they must be,” he assured me. “You think this gets easier?” he asked, rubbing his hands over his face as he plopped down on the couch.

I joined him on the couch, feeling the heat from his body. “God, I hope so.”

He laughed, a low rumble. We passed the hours like that, taking turns checking on her and keeping each other company, and with each pass between the nursery and the living room, we moved more in sync. Soon enough, we’d settled into a rhythm that made it feel like we’d been doing this forever.

“You ever think about this...” I trailed off. Tucker watched me, his head cocked curiously as he waited for me to finish. “Before, I mean. Did you ever think about all of this?” I asked. “Family. A kid. Settling down.”

“Honestly? I don’t know.” He leaned back, looked up at the ceiling, then back at me. His smile was slow, thoughtful. “But I’m liking it more than I thought.” I nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. “What about you?” he asked.

I shrugged, grabbing one of the throw pillows and pulling it into my lap, so I’d have something to do with my hands. I smiled softly at the memories that filled my head. “Brooke and I used to play dress up all the time as kids. She would be the mommy, and I was the daddy, and we had anywhere from ten to fifteen kids, depending on the day.”

Tucker’s laugh rumbled up from his chest, deep and rich. “Holy shit! That’s a lot of kids.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, it was. There was always a lot of crying and somehow, I always wound up having to change their diapers when they pooped.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway, I guess playing house like that just kind of got stuck in my head and I grew up expecting it to come true. That one day I’d meet a man, fall in love, start a family, and we’d live happily ever after. Only...”

“Only what?” he asked, watching me intently.

I stared down at my lap, avoiding his stare as I traced my fingertip over the patterns on the pillow. “Only I hadn’t factored in my constant need for order, my need to establish some semblance of control over each and every situation.”

“What does that have to do with you getting your happily ever after?”

I huffed out a humorless laugh. “Turns out that when a guy strips and you’re about to have sex, he doesn’t like it when you stop and ask him to fold his clothes and placed them neatly on a chair first, so you can concentrate.”

Tucker’s eyes grew comically wide as he barked out a laugh. “You did not.”

“I did,” I answered with a wince.

His laughter faded as he studied my face. “Hey, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed. That must have been really tough.”

I shrugged, trying to play it off. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s kind of funny when you think about it.”

“Maybe,” he said softly. “But it clearly hurt you.”

His perceptiveness caught me off guard. I swallowed hard, fighting the lump in my

throat. “Yeah, well. Let's just say my dating history is pretty sparse. Most guys aren't into neurotic clean freaks who need everything organized.”

He was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was firm. “Then they weren't worth your time anyway.”

I looked up, startled by the conviction in his tone.

“I'm serious,” he continued. “If a guy can't handle something as simple as that, then he's not worth having around anyway. There's nothing wrong with you or the rules you set for yourself. The right person will understand and appreciate those parts of you.”

His words washed over me, soothing an ache I hadn't realized was still so raw. “Thanks,” I managed, my voice rough.

He reached out, squeezing my shoulder. The warmth of his hand seeped through my shirt, and I found myself leaning into the touch. “I mean it, Bry. You're an amazing man. You deserve someone who gets you. All of you.”

Our eyes met, and something electric passed between us. My breath caught in my throat as I noticed how the soft light from the lamp caught the flecks of grey in his eyes. I felt a flutter in my chest as he held my gaze. There was something in his eyes, warmth and understanding that made me want to lean in closer. The moment stretched between us, charged with possibility.

A cry from the baby monitor shattered the silence. We both jumped, the spell broken. “I'll go,” he said, standing quickly.

I watched him head up the stairs, my heart still racing. What was that? I shook my head, trying to clear the fog of attraction and exhaustion. This was Tucker—my best

friend's brother in-law, my co-guardian. Sure, I found him incredibly attractive, but I couldn't be developing actual feelings for him. Could I?

I distracted myself by tidying up, straightening pillows and folding blankets. When he returned, he was wearing a triumphant grin. "Her fever finally broke!"

Relief washed over me as I reached out to feel Chloe's forehead for myself. It was cool under my palm. "Thank god." I breathed out a long breath, like I'd been holding it all of this time.

Tucker gently swayed, rubbing Chloe's back. "I think the worst is over," he said softly. I nodded, unable to take my eyes off them. He looked so natural with her, his large hand spanning her tiny back, his eyes soft as he gazed down at her. A wave of tenderness swept through me, catching me off guard with its intensity.

"Want a turn?" he asked, noticing my stare.

"Yeah," I said, carefully lifting Chloe into my arms. She grinned at me and I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, inhaling her sweet baby scent.

"I'm going to warm a bottle. Why don't you try and get some sleep when I get back?"

"Are you sure? You've been up as long as I have."

"Yeah, I'm sure," he said, reaching out to rub a finger along the baby's soft cheek. "I need some more time with her. Make sure she's really all right before I go to sleep."

I nodded, understanding completely. As Tucker headed to the kitchen, I sank into a chair with Chloe, marveling at how much lighter my heart felt now that her fever had broken. She cooed softly, her tiny hands reaching up to pat my face. I couldn't help but smile, overwhelmed by the rush of love I felt for this little girl.

When he returned with the bottle, I reluctantly handed her over. Our fingers brushed as we made the exchange, and I felt that same spark from earlier. I watched as he settled into the chair, cradling Chloe close as he offered her the bottle. The tenderness in his expression made my breath catch.

“You should get some rest,” he said softly, his eyes never leaving the little girl’s face. “I’ve got this.”

I nodded, suddenly aware of the bone-deep exhaustion that had settled into my body. As I turned to head upstairs, I caught sight of myself in the hallway mirror. My hair was a mess, my eyes ringed with dark circles, and there was still a faint pink stain on my neck from the medicine mishap. But my heart felt fuller than it ever had.

Chapter Ten

brYSON

The morning routine went like this: Chloe's cry was my alarm clock, so regular it didn't even startle anymore, and I got out of bed first to feed her breakfast and get her dressed while Tucker woke and had a shower. Once he was ready and had drunk his first cup of coffee, I'd head out for a run—a part of my routine I'd been sorely missing.

I would run in a steady circuit and by the time I was back, he'd have her playing with her toys and breakfast waiting for me. Tucker working less had settled a lot. Life felt orderly, peaceful, right and the funny thing was it seemed to suit him as much as it did me.

I opened Chloe's bedroom door to find her sitting up, tiny fists gripping the rails of the crib, eyes wide and expectant. Her excitement made me laugh, and when she saw me, she did that high-pitched shriek that must've sounded like music to herself. I scooped her up, smoothing her rumpled hair.

"Someone's an early bird this morning," I said, giving her cheek a gentle nuzzle. "You know what they say about early birds? They get fed first." She wiggled around, making it nearly impossible to change her diaper, but I managed to get her into the baby blue romper Brooke had gotten her the week before the accident. A pang hit me, fast and unexpected, but I forced it away, focusing on Chloe.

She babbled on about some important matter as I carried her downstairs and I

responded with the appropriate “really?” and “you don’t say!” A bottle warmed on the counter as I sat Chloe in her highchair, giving her a toy to play with while I made her breakfast.

“Here you go, Miss Chloe,” I said, presenting the bowl with a flourish. “Chef Bryson’s finest cuisine. A hearty rice cereal with hints of strawberry applesauce.”

She giggled as I sat down in front of her and scooped a glob of the sticky mixture onto the spoon to feed her. Just a few weeks ago, it had been hard to imagine we'd find any sort of normal in all of this, but now here we were. Even Chloe seemed more at ease. She had just finished the last bite when I heard footsteps above me.

“Who’s that?” I asked animatedly. She grinned, showing off her single tooth. “Is that your Uncle Tucker? He’s going to come down and play with you, isn’t he?”

Chloe clapped her hands when she heard his footsteps on the stairs. “Morning,” he said as he strolled into the kitchen, his voice a low, pleasant rumble. His hair was still damp from his shower, and he smelled divine, like clean soap, minty toothpaste, and just a hint of spice. “How’s my favorite girl?” he asked. Bending down to kiss her on the head then he turned to me. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“Yep. It just finished brewing. I already set your favorite mug out.”

“You are a prince among men, Bryson Kelly,” he declared dramatically as he made his way over to the counter and poured himself a cup.

He sipped it slowly but then set it aside when I passed Chloe to him. “Thanks. She finished all of her cereal, so she just needs her bottle. I’ll be back in twenty,” I said, tying the laces of my running shoes.

“Enjoy your run.”

It was brisk outside, but the sun was radiant, promising to warm things up as winter finally wound down and spring neared. My breaths formed small clouds, the exertion pumping warmth through my body, everything moving in that familiar rhythm, strong and reassuring. It hit me how different my mornings felt now. Balanced, even.

With each step, I could feel the tension leaving my body. Before long, I hit that sweet spot where nothing existed but the air in my lungs, the beating of my heart, and the rhythmic pounding of my steps against the pavement. That was why I ran, for the focus, the mental clarity it gave which would serve me well the rest of the day. It was almost meditative that way and I had missed it terribly when I'd first moved here.

I ran a couple of miles then looped back. When the house came into view, I slowed to a walk, stretching my calves on the front steps. I glanced up at the bright yellow door, still half expecting Brooke to come running out and wrap me up in one of those bear hugs she liked to give me. That isn't going to happen, I reminded myself, swallowing the lump in my throat.

The smell of coffee greeted me as I opened the door. Tucker was in the living room with Chloe, hovering near her as she grabbed onto the edge of the couch and tried to pull herself up. Ever since she'd learned to crawl, she'd been on the move, and we were just waiting for her to start standing next.

"Good run?" he asked, grinning as Chloe made a move to bolt on her hands and knees. He caught her easily, scooping her up and swinging her into the air.

"Yep. How's the princess?" I said, smiling as she shrieked and giggled.

"As perfect as ever," he said, looking at her adoringly then he turned his attention back to me. "I left the coffee warming for you. Figured you could use a cup when you got back."

“And a shower,” I said, making a beeline for the mug he’d left out for me. “Thanks.” I added, letting out a satisfied sigh as the first sip hit my taste buds. When I turned my head, I found Tucker standing in the kitchen doorway with Chloe on his hip and a strange expression on his face, almost like he was seeing me for the first time.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He turned abruptly and walked out of the room. I thought his behavior was strange, but I didn’t have time to figure out what was going on. I needed to clean up and get to work.

Upstairs, I showered quickly then got dressed before heading to the room at the end of the hall. Zach and Brooke’s bedroom. The room had served as a tomb, a shrine of sorts which neither of us could bear to step into. But after the talk we’d had about my work situation, we’d both agreed that I could no longer work in the kitchen or spread out on my bed. Since Tucker was sleeping in the other guest room, that only left Brooke and Zach’s room which could be turned into an office.

It had taken us a good two days to work up the courage to go in there and then another week to go through everything, but we’d done it... together. The room had been as we expected, untouched and exactly as they had left it that fateful morning—a book opened on the nightstand, its ending never read, shoes discarded in the corner, and a towel hanging haphazardly over the rack from someone’s shower.

It was painful, terrible, and heartbreaking, but it was also cathartic in a way, like a necessary part of the healing process. Tucker and I had cried, laughed, and shared numerous stories about the two people we’d loved so much. I loved hearing about the kind of boys he and Zach had been—ornery, mischievous—and he had seemed particularly delighted when I spoke about my awkward teenage years and how Brooke had practically forced me to go to prom.

We boxed up several things to keep for Chloe and the rest we donated to charity. And when it was all done, we cuddled the embodiment of their love—their daughter—holding her tight and reminding ourselves that as long as we had her, we would never truly lose them.

A fresh coat of paint and some new office furniture had completed the transformation and now I had a quiet space I could slip away to when I needed to work. Like now. I settled in, and clicked open my email. There was a barrage of messages, and I attacked them with the usual vigor, finding my rhythm. I'd taken on an extra project for one of my clients, but the new office space kept the chaos where it belonged—outside these walls. The morning flew by, and I was wrapping up a meeting when Tucker's voice rang up the stairs.

“Lunch is ready,” he called.

I walked into the kitchen, seeing him standing in front of the stove with a spatula in one hand and Chloe bouncing in the highchair. He handed me a plate of grilled cheese sandwiches, and we sat down together.

We talked about mundane things—work and the weather—while we ate and Chloe played with the pieces of sandwich Tucker tore into tiny bits for her. She held a buttery hand out to me, and I pretended to take a bite, making her giggle and clap her hands together.

“You seem to be handling her messes better,” Tucker observed.

“I’m trying,” I said, wiping my cheek from where she’d touched it. “I don’t want my issues to become her issues,” I admitted quietly.

“And that right there is probably why Brooke and Zach chose you to help raise their little girl. They knew that no matter what, you’d put her needs above your own.”

The sincerity in his voice made tears spring to my eyes and I turned my head, blinking them back before I could make a fool of myself by blubbering all over him. But the truth was, his words had touched me. The fact that he knew all my quirks, all the insecurities left over from my tumultuous early years, and still found something worth praising, made me feel like I could do anything. Like I could take on the entire world if I wanted to.

After we ate, I lay on the living room floor and stretched out my arms. Chloe crawled up my chest, wanting a little more playtime before I got back to work. I chased her around the room, trailing after her on my hands and knees as she crawled around, surprisingly fast. When I caught her, I tickled her tummy, making her squeal until she was breathless then I read her a story.

When it was time for me to get back to work, I sat up and gave her a squeeze, and she pressed her head into my shoulder. Tucker caught my eye and smiled.

“Guess she’s ready for a nap,” he said.

I handed Chloe over reluctantly, hesitating a moment before letting go. It was hard to head back upstairs when everything I loved was right here. Tucker warmed a bottle and took her up to the nursery, and I went back to the office. By the time I heard him heading back downstairs, I’d sent another set of emails and caught up on my entire to-do list. It was amazing how productive I could be when things were going this well.

The afternoon was gone before I knew it and when five o’clock rolled around, I stood up and stretched. “Done for the day?” Tucker asked as I came down the stairs and headed straight for the kitchen.

“And officially starving. What do you feel like having for dinner?”

He looked thoughtful. “Something simple. Think you can manage that, Chef?”

I opened the fridge, surveying the shelves and already forming a plan. “Simple,” I said. “No problem.”

“I’m impressed.” He leaned against the doorframe, watching as I started chopping vegetables. “Who knew you’d be so adaptable?”

“It’s my secret talent.”

He took Chloe into the living room, giving me space to work, and the sound of her babbling drifted in. I chopped and stirred, feeling that strange, deep satisfaction again. Everything was falling into place in a way I never expected. I called them for dinner, and we sat together, Chloe smashing peas with enthusiasm, most of them ending up on the floor.

“You know,” Tucker said, his voice teasing, “some people hire professional cleaners for this kind of thing.”

“Some people?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “The ones who have more sense than we do.”

He picked up the worst of the mess, and I gave Chloe a bath, her little legs kicking as I sang a nonsense song about ducks and frogs. When she was clean, I bundled her into a towel and carried her out to the living room. Tucker was sprawled on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, looking more relaxed than I’d ever seen him.

“Alright, time for goodnight kisses. This little angel is going to bed.”

He reached out and took her in his arms, kissing her soft cheek and breathing in that clean baby smell. When he looked back up at me, he was smiling. “Need any help?”

“Nah, you’ve had her all day. Just relax, I’ve got this.”

My whole life had been ruled by a kind of restlessness, a need for calm that nothing ever seemed to satisfy, and I'd lived with it so long it had stopped feeling like something I could fix. Now, with Chloe and Tucker and this new way of being, there was a peace I almost recognized as happiness. The problem was that happiness wasn't supposed to be part of this story.

I held Chloe close, feeling the weight of her in my arms, the softness of her as she finished her bottle, eyelids heavy with sleep. Peace had always been an idea for me, abstract and far away, and yet here it was, settled in me like an old friend. Or maybe it was happiness. The warmth of it was the same.

But even the best days carried shadows with them, reminders of all I'd lost and all I wasn't supposed to have. The guilt was part of it now. Maybe it always would be. Brooke and Zach should've been here, building this life, finding these routines. It was supposed to be their happiness. How did I get lucky enough to have it instead?

Chloe's breathing was rhythmic, and I took the bottle from her mouth, replacing it with the pacifier she liked to sleep with. Even that tiny gesture made me feel like I was doing something right, and that sense of rightness only made the guilt hit harder.

The little girl's weight shifted as I laid her down in her crib. For a long time, I stood over her, simply watching the rise and fall of her chest. She was our future now, and the hugeness of that took my breath away. How did I get so lucky? And how was that fair to the people who hadn't?

Normally, when something this big happened, I'd call Brooke first, before anyone else. She'd always been there, even before I really trusted she would be. My parents had been wonderful people, but by the time they adopted me, I was so used to being shuffled around that it took a long time for me to believe I wasn't just another

temporary guest. It was easier with Brooke. She'd become my best friend that first day and made me feel like I belonged, like I was finally wanted.

She understood the little things, like how the chaos of my childhood made it hard for me to handle the slightest mess, and the big things, like how I worried I'd never find the family I'd always dreamed of having. That kind of friendship was hard to come by, and it didn't seem possible that she was gone.

"I hope you're happy," I said, and it came out so quiet I almost wasn't sure I'd said it at all. The words were there anyway, floating in the soft silence, and I repeated them louder. "I hope you're happy with how we've been taking care of her, Brooke."

Saying her name, even in a whisper, even to an empty room, hurt more than I'd expected. I sank to the floor beside the crib, resting my head on the rail, closing my eyes tight against the burn behind them. Why did I get to live while she didn't? What did I do to deserve any of this?

I stayed there, the hardwood uncomfortable beneath me, and thought about Brooke, about Zach, about the life they should have had. I imagined them here, in this room, taking turns rocking Chloe to sleep. I pictured Brooke's infectious laugh, Zach's quiet strength. The ache in my chest was familiar now, a constant companion.

"I miss you," I whispered, my voice breaking. "Both of you. So much."

I don't know how long I sat there, lost in memories and what-ifs. Eventually, I pulled myself up and wiped my eyes. Chloe stirred slightly but didn't wake as I kissed my fingertips then pressed them gently to her forehead.

"Sweet dreams, little one," I murmured.

Downstairs, I found Tucker sprawled on the couch, flipping through channels. He

looked up as I entered, his expression softening.

“Hey,” he said, sitting up. “Did you get her to sleep okay?”

“Yeah, she’s sleeping peacefully.”

“Good. Now, come on. Our favorite show is on tonight and I saved you a seat.” He patted the cushion beside him and nodded at the screen, where the latest episode of a true-crime show was paused.

I smiled at his playfulness. Evenings with Tucker had become my favorite part of the day, everything slower and softer and a little like dreaming. He always found a way to make me laugh; to ease any tension I’d felt throughout the day.

“Someone’s a little obsessed, don’t you think?” I teased, reaching for the remote and lowering the volume. “I’m starting to wonder if you have some deep, dark secrets.”

“Just the one where I don’t actually mind all your micromanaging,” he said, elbowing me playfully. “It’s more fun than I thought.”

“What a surprise. Turns out Bryson isn’t boring after all,” I said, my voice mock serious. “I’m pretty sure that’s what they call character development.”

“Wow,” he said, “next thing you know, you’ll be saying I’m a positive influence.”

“You’re not,” I said, pushing his feet off the table to clear room for my own. “But keep trying.” He laughed, the sound rich and warm, and I let myself sink into it, let myself stop worrying for once. I wondered how something so simple could feel so perfect.

“What about you?” I asked. “Character development yet?”

“Maybe a little,” he admitted. “This show is definitely rubbing off. Watch me commit the perfect murder and leave no trail.”

“Ha,” I said, “there’d be a trail, alright. Empty water bottles, crumpled snack bags, mismatched socks, some kid left behind in your haste.” We both laughed, and he reached for a bowl of popcorn, managing to spill half of it as he shoved it into his mouth.

“See?” I said. “Exhibit A.” He caught a kernel before it hit the floor and threw it back at me, catching me in the chest and making me smile.

We watched together, but I was too distracted to pay attention to the show. I studied him from the corner of my eye instead, taking him in without being obvious about it. He was slouched comfortably, one arm draped over the back of the couch, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

The light from the TV flickered across his face, highlighting the strong line of his jaw and the slight curve of his lips. I found myself wondering what it would be like to trace that jawline with my fingers, to feel the rough scratch of his stubble against my palm.

The thought startled me, and I quickly looked away, my heart racing. Why did my thoughts keep straying to him? This was Tucker, my friend, and my partner in raising Chloe. I couldn't have these kinds of thoughts about him. Could I?

But as the evening wore on, I couldn't help but notice other things. The way his eyes crinkled when he laughed at something on the show. How his hand brushed mine when we both reached for the popcorn at the same time. The deep, comforting rumble of his voice when he spoke. Each little detail seemed to take on new significance, and I found myself hyper-aware of his presence beside me.

As the credits rolled, Tucker stretched, his shirt riding up slightly to reveal a strip of tanned skin. I averted my eyes, feeling a flush creep up my neck.

“Well, that was a good one,” he said, turning to me with a grin. “What did you think?”

I blinked, realizing I had barely paid attention to the show. “Oh, um, yeah. It was interesting,” I mumbled, hoping he wouldn't press for details.

His brows furrowed slightly. “Are you okay? You seem a little distracted.”

“I'm fine,” I said quickly, perhaps too quickly. “Just tired, I guess. It's been a long day.”

He nodded; his expression concerned. “Maybe we should call it a night then. You've been working hard lately.”

I nodded, grateful for the excuse to retreat. “Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I'll just clean up a bit before heading to bed.”

As I gathered the popcorn bowl and empty glasses, I could feel Tucker's eyes on me. When I turned back, he was standing, looking a bit uncertain. “Bryson,” he said softly, “you know you can talk to me about anything, right? If something's bothering you...”

His concern touched me, making my chest tighten with an emotion I wasn't ready to name. “I know,” I said, managing a small smile. “Thanks, Tucker. I'm okay, really. Just tired.”

He nodded, but I could see he wasn't entirely convinced. “Alright. Well, goodnight then. Sleep well.”

“You too,” I said, but as I listened to him climb the stairs, I knew that sleep was going to be next to impossible.

Chapter Eleven

TUCKER

I crawled around on my hands and knees, inspecting tables, chairs, and power cords for anything sharp or dangerous. Chloe crawled along beside me, enjoying this new game, and keeping up a steady stream of conversation in her adorable babble. I made sure to answer her with appropriate oohs and aahs.

I spotted an open outlet and quickly shoved a plastic cover into it then turned to her. “Well, what do you think, Inspector? Are we done with the living room?” Her head tilted to the side as if seriously considering my question. A wide smile spread across her face, but she was gazing past me, focusing on something over my shoulder.

Bryson walked in, two steaming mugs in his hands. His half-smile widened when he saw Chloe, revealing the dimple in his left cheek. Setting the mugs down on a side table, he dropped down beside me, sitting cross-legged. “I brought you a coffee, but I can see you’re in the middle of baby-proofing. At least you have a good helper by your side.”

“I never realized how dangerous everything is around here. Now that she can move, nothing is safe.”

As if that was her cue, Chloe quickly crawled over and stuck her hand into the basket of tools I’d been using. I swooped in just before she stuffed something in her mouth. “Exhibit A,” I say, lifting the safety latch out of her grip. “A criminal mastermind.”

“An extremely cute one, I might add,” Bryson cooed.

“She is that.” I wiped the line of drool that was dripping down her chin with my sleeve. “She’s also faster than me, which makes this doubly as hard.”

He snatched the baby from me. “Sounds like Uncle Tucker is just getting old, doesn’t it, Chloe,” he teased, holding her up to look in her eyes. Chloe giggled in agreement, reaching out to yank on his hair.

I let out a mock gasp. “Are you two ganging up on me now?”

Her laughter echoed around the room as I reached out and began tickling her tummy. She squirmed in his arms, peals of laughter erupting from her tiny body. “Oh, you think that’s funny? What about if I do it to you?” I said, turning on Bryson with a predatory gleam in my eyes.

He yelped in surprise, landing on his back as I lunged for him. Loud laughter rang out as he attempted to squirm out of my reach. Sensing I had the upper hand, he set Chloe to the side. She watched with excitement as I continued my assault, tickling Bryson until he begged for mercy.

I stared down at him, panting. His face was flushed, his eyes bright with humor, and his chest rose and fell in rapid succession. My eyes zeroed in on his pulse which fluttered wildly at the base of his throat and the sudden, powerful urge to bend down and kiss it washed over me like waves crashing upon the rocks.

My eyes traveled back to his, but he was busy staring at my mouth. He licked his lips and a groan rumbled up from my chest. Hazel eyes darted to mine and held, the moment stretching out. I wanted to ask him what he was thinking, but before I got the chance, we heard something else.

“Da da.”

Bryson’s eyes rounded. “Did she just?—”

“I don’t know.” I scrambled off of him and he sat up, both of us staring expectantly at the little girl on the floor. “Did you say something, honey?”

She grinned, a flash of white showing from the tiny tooth in the bottom of her mouth. “Da da,” she repeated, clearer that time.

My heart lurched, pride mixed with longing, joy mixed with heartache. My brother should be here for this. He shouldn’t have to miss hearing his daughter say his name. Bryson looked at me and the stricken expression on his face told me he was thinking the same thing.

I picked her up, holding her close. “Good girl, Chloe. You said your first word.” I kissed her forehead. “Your daddy heard it to. Wherever he is, I know he heard it too.”

The wheels bumped along the sidewalk, but Chloe was unbothered, her eyes wide and curious beneath the shade of her stroller. She rode like a tiny queen, overseeing the blooming landscape of Lakeside Ridge. The air was rich with the scent of wet earth and new growth, trees budding under the warm glow of an April sun. I popped a wheelie to clear the curb as we crossed over to Duncan’s Donuts it’s almost time for her nap.”

Duncan stood as I settled Chloe back into the stroller. He brushed some flour from his jeans and looked at me with intent. “Seriously, man. Just one night. You’ll thank me.”

“I’ll think about it. Promise.” His words ran through my head on a loop as we made our way home and the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right. The

only time Bryson or I went out was for the dad's group. When was the last time we did anything fun just for ourselves? By the time I reached the house, I'd already fired off a text to Susie, asking if she was available to babysit Saturday night.

I slipped back into the house after having dropped Chloe off. Susie had been thrilled when I'd asked her to babysit, happily agreeing to keep her as long as we wanted. She was amazing, but I was still a little nervous about leaving Chloe there. That was until Susie told me she had spent the day before "Chloe-proofing" the entire downstairs. That had made me feel much better and I'd left my niece in Susie's very capable hands.

Bryson had still been getting dressed when I'd taken Chloe, but he came walking down the steps when he heard me come back. My mouth went dry as I noticed how incredible he looked. The black skinny jeans he wore accentuated the toned legs he'd gotten from years of running and the green sweater he had on made his eyes appear more golden than hazel. His brown hair was perfect, styled with intent, and the scent of pineapple and coconut clung subtly to the air as he took a step forward.

"This was a great idea—where are we going?" His voice was bright, and he fidgeted a bit, adjusting the sleeve of his sweater.

I stayed where I was, arms folded casually, trying to hide the fact that my pulse had just jumped a mile ahead of me. "It's a surprise. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." I joked.

He rolled his eyes playfully. "As long as I don't have to cook or clean, I don't care where it is. This was a great idea. Thank you."

"Even Cinderella got one night off, right?"

His eyes danced when he laughed, and my brain got snagged on how gorgeous he

looked. I'd been doing that a lot lately. Noticing things about him I hadn't paid attention to before, like how soft he looked in the morning with his hair all mussed and his cheeks still marked with lines from his pillow. And how he gnawed on his bottom lip when he was working on something that required a lot of concentration, or the soft sigh he'd make with every first sip of coffee.

That wasn't all. There was also the gentle way he spoke to Chloe, the soothing sound of his voice as he sang her to sleep at night, and the careful way he held her, like she was the most precious thing in the world to him. I noticed it all, tucking each new piece of information away in my mind as if I expected to be quizzed on it later.

Where Chloe used to be the first thing I thought of each morning and the last thing before I went to bed at night, now it was the two of them. Bryson Kelly had somehow set up camp inside my brain and he seemed content to stay there. And it scared the shit out of me.

There was no denying I found him attractive. I had since the first time I'd laid eyes on him, but back then, I'd found him insufferably rigid, a stick in the mud that had put down roots and grown into a mighty oak. But now, I knew him better. I knew about his childhood and why he felt the need for all his lists and plans and schedules. I knew that they made him feel safe in an unpredictable world, and who could fault him for that?

I also knew what a good man he was. Smart, hardworking, and compassionate. The kind of man who would drop everything to help a friend. In fact, he had—leaving his home and moving in with a virtual stranger to take care of his best friend's daughter. And while I'd teased him about ordering all those parenting books, the fact that he'd read them, and taken notes just proved how committed he was to Chloe and her well-being. He was an incredible man, but I had a sneaking suspicion that was only the tip of the iceberg.

I was jarred from my thoughts by the sound of his voice. “Well, I don’t know about you, but this Cinderella is starving. I hope wherever we’re going includes food.”

“Of course, it does. Come on, your chariot awaits.”

Moonlight shone across the lake, highlighting the ripples in the water created by an evening breeze. We stared at the view through the window next to our table, the smell of grilled seafood and the soft sound of jazz music in the air.

“Wow, Tucker, you really went all out tonight,” Bryson remarked, lifting his glass of water and taking a drink.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “I figured we deserved something special after all the hard work we’ve been doing lately. Plus, I wanted to go somewhere that didn’t include packets of ketchup or cartoon characters on the cups.”

His head tilted back with a laugh, and I felt my own grin widen. Why did it feel like such a victory every time I made him laugh? “This definitely beats chopped bananas and mashed broccoli.”

“And no one will throw food at you here,” I quipped, sharing another laugh with him.

“Are you sure Susie didn’t mind babysitting? Did Chloe seem happy when?—”

“Hey, now! Remember our agreement? Tonight is for adults, no more kid talk.”

Bryson sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just hard switching out of parenting mode sometimes. The other day, I was on a conference call and my prospective client sneezed. I told her I hoped she wasn’t getting a wittle cold.”

“No!”

“Yep. She looked at me like I was crazy until I explained what was going on and then she wanted to see pictures. We spent thirty minutes just talking about our kids and gushing over pictures. Still, I was embarrassed. That was the first time I’ve ever been anything but completely professional at work.”

“Doesn’t sound like it turned out so bad though.”

“It turned out great, actually. She liked me so much she ended up signing a contract with our company that same day.”

I smiled warmly. “Who wouldn’t be charmed by Chloe, or you for that matter,” I added without thinking. I noticed my slip when I saw the shocked look on his face. Thankfully, I was saved from having to explain when the server arrived to take our drink order.

Dinner was delicious—stuffed crab for him and fried shrimp for me. As we finished our entrees, Bryson leaned back in his chair with a contented sigh. “This has been incredible, Tucker. Thank you for planning such a wonderful evening.”

I felt warmth spread through my chest at his words. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it. I have to admit, I wasn’t sure if you’d want to leave Chloe.”

He nodded, a wistful smile playing on his lips. “I was hesitant at first, but you were right. We needed this.” His eyes met mine, a depth of emotion in them I couldn’t quite place. “It’s nice to just be... free for a while.”

The air between us suddenly felt charged. I cleared my throat, trying to dispel the tension. “So, tell me something I don’t know about you, Bryson Kelly.”

He chuckled, running a hand through his hair. “Something you don’t know about me. Hmm...” His eyes drifted to the side as he thought. “Oh, I’ve got one. When I was in

college, I used to be in an a cappella group.”

My eyebrows shot up. “No way! I never would have pegged you for the singing type, you know, publicly. But I’ve heard you singing Chloe to sleep. You’ve got a great voice.”

“Thanks. We even made it to nationals one year,” he said, a hint of pride in his voice. “We didn’t win, but it was still an incredible experience.”

I leaned forward, intrigued. “So, what was your signature song? Please tell me it was something embarrassingly 90s.”

His cheeks flushed slightly. “We may have done a medley of Backstreet Boys songs...”

I burst out laughing. “Oh man, I would pay good money to see that. Please tell me there’s video evidence.”

Bryson’s cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of red. “God, I hope not. Though knowing some of the guys in that group, I wouldn’t be surprised if footage exists somewhere.”

“Well, now I know what I’m searching for on YouTube later,” I teased.

“I’m never going to live this down, am I?” He groaned, burying his face in his hands.

“Not a chance,” I said with a wink. “Okay, your turn. Ask me something.”

He thought for a moment, tapping his finger against his chin. “Alright, what’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done while traveling?”

I leaned back, a slow grin spreading across my face as I recalled some of my wilder adventures. “Well, there was this one time in Borneo...”

Bryson leaned forward, eyes sparkling with interest. “Oh, this should be good.”

“I was staying on this tiny island, and some locals told me about a secret beach you could only access by swimming through an underwater cave. They swore it was the most beautiful place on earth.”

“Let me guess—you just had to see it for yourself?”

I nodded. “Of course. So, the next day, I swam out to where they said the entrance was to the cave. The problem was, I couldn't find it. I dove down again and again, searching, but nothing.”

“That sounds terrifying.”

“It was, but I was determined. Finally, on my last attempt, I spotted it—a tiny opening, barely big enough to swim through. I took a deep breath and went for it.”

“And?”

“It was the longest moment of my life. The passage was narrow, and it twisted and turned, and just when I thought my lungs would burst, I surfaced in this incredible hidden lagoon. Crystal clear water, a pristine white-sand beach, and not another soul in sight. It was like something out of a movie.”

“Wow,” Bryson breathed. “That sounds amazing. And terrifying. I don't know if I could have done that.”

I shrugged. “Honestly, looking back, it was pretty reckless. Any number of things

could have gone wrong. But in the moment, the thrill of discovery outweighed the fear.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “I can't even imagine doing something like that. The most adventurous thing I've ever done is...well, I guess moving here to take care of Chloe.”

I reached across the table, giving his hand a quick squeeze. “Hey, that takes a different kind of courage. One that's way more admirable than my reckless stunts.”

Our eyes met and held for a moment. I felt a spark of something pass between us, and my breath caught in my throat. Bryson cleared his throat and pulled his hand back, breaking the spell.

“So, um, what's next on the agenda for tonight?” he asked, his voice a little husky.

I glanced at my watch. “Well, it's still early. How about we head over to Lucky's for a drink?”

His face lit up. “That sounds perfect. I could use a beer after all this fancy food.”

We settled the bill and headed out into the cool evening air. The short drive to Lucky's was filled with comfortable silence. As we walked into the bar, the familiar sounds of clinking glasses and laughter washed over us. A few regulars called out greetings, and I felt a warmth spread through my chest. It was nice to feel like part of a community again.

I steered Bryson towards the bar, ordering us each a beer. As we waited, I couldn't help but notice how the dim lighting softened his features, making him look even more handsome than usual.

“So, what do you want to do?” I asked, handing him his beer. “We could grab a table, play some pool...”

His eyes lit up. “Pool sounds fun. I haven't played in ages though, so go easy on me.”

I grinned. “No promises. I'm pretty competitive.”

We made our way to an open table and racked up the balls. As Bryson leaned over to break, I couldn't help but notice how his jeans hugged his ass perfectly. I quickly looked away, taking a long swig of my beer to distract myself.

“Not bad,” I said as a striped ball sank into the corner pocket. “Looks like you've still got some skills.”

He smirked. “Don't sound so surprised. I may be a bit rusty, but I used to be pretty good back in college.”

“Hmm, is that so? Well, in that case, perhaps we should make things a little more interesting. Care to make a wager?”

“What did you have in mind?”

I thought for a moment. “How about... if I win, you have to change all the dirty diapers for a week.”

He laughed. “And if I win?”

“Name your price.”

He considered this, taking a sip of his beer. “If I win, you have to cook dinner every night next week. And I mean really cook, not just ordering takeout.”

“Deal,” I said, extending my hand. We shook on it, and the game began in earnest.

As we played, the conversation flowed easily between us, punctuated by playful trash talk and laughter. I found myself watching Bryson more than I probably should have, admiring the way he moved around the table with surprising grace.

“You're staring,” he said at one point, a slight smirk on his face as he lined up a shot.

I felt heat rise to my cheeks, caught off guard. “Just trying to psych you out,” I recovered quickly, flashing him a grin. “Is it working?”

He chuckled, sinking the ball with ease. “Not even a little bit.”

The game remained close, each of us making impressive shots and equally embarrassing misses. As he bent over to take his final shot, I let my eyes trace the curve of his back, lingering on the sliver of skin exposed where his sweater had ridden up slightly and I felt a familiar warmth spreading through my body.

“Yes!” His triumphant shout snapped me out of my daze. I blinked, realizing he had just sunk the 8-ball. “Looks like you're on cooking duty next week, Murphy.”

I groaned dramatically. “I demand a rematch. You must have cheated somehow.”

Bryson's eyes sparkled with amusement. “Face it, Tucker. You've been bested by the a cappella nerd.”

“Never thought I'd see the day,” I chuckled. We finished our beers and decided to call it a night, both of us eager to get back to Chloe.

Susie greeted us with a warm smile. “How was your night out?” she asked, her eyes twinkling.

“It was great,” Bryson replied, a hint of surprise in his voice as if he hadn't expected to enjoy himself so much.

“Chloe was an angel,” she assured us. “She's been asleep for about an hour now.”

We thanked her profusely then gathered Chloe's things and walked home. She must have been worn out because she didn't stir, not even when I slid her jacket off and laid her in her crib. Bryson flicked the monitor on, the soft glow of her nightlight, casting gentle shadows across the walls.

Quietly, we crept from the room and shut the door behind us. We tiptoed down the hallway but when Bryson reached his room he stood there, his hand resting on the doorknob. His eyes were soft in the dim light as he turned toward me. “Tucker, I just wanted to say... thank you. For tonight. It was exactly what I needed.”

I felt a warmth bloom in my chest at his words. “I'm glad you enjoyed it. I had a great time too.”

We stood there for a moment, the air thickening and a magnetic pull that made me want to close the distance between us. His eyes flickered to my lips, and for a heart-stopping second, I thought he might actually do it, might close the distance and kiss me.

Instead, he cleared his throat and took a small step back. “Well, goodnight then,” he said, his voice soft.

“Goodnight,” I whispered. I waited until he'd shut his door and then I slumped against the wall. Tucker, you are so screwed.

Chapter Twelve

brYSON

I'd never heard a sound as comforting as Tucker singing Chloe to sleep upstairs. The memories of Brooke and Zach still echoed throughout the rooms of this house, the edges of grief at times so sharp they threatened to double me over. But the deep rumble of Tucker's voice, the sweet sound of Chloe's giggles helped soften those edges, gentle reminders that there was still a lot of life left here.

In the kitchen, I poured the popcorn into a bowl, but my thoughts remained on the man upstairs. Everything had changed since our night out together. What had once been a simple crush on my part had turned into a preoccupation. It was more than attraction—I had genuine feelings for Tucker, feelings that made me buzz from head to toe.

Our lives had woven together rather seamlessly. We'd gone from talks about diaper brands and pediatricians to sharing past dreams and future hopes. His openness and warmth, how easy it was just being with him, pulled me closer every day.

The more I got to know him, the more I realized he wasn't like anyone I'd ever met. Certainly not like the guys I'd briefly dated before. Tucker listened to me, he understood me, and he didn't seem bothered by my idiosyncrasies—at least not anymore. But more than that, he was caring, and funny, and I liked spending time with him. He was chaos and comfort rolled into one.

His footsteps on the stairs pulled me from my reverie, so I grabbed the snacks and

headed into the living room. I plunked the sodas on the coffee table and sank down beside him on the couch, setting the popcorn bowl between us. “Extra butter, just the way you like it. You also have your choice,” I said, holding up two boxes of candy—one Reese’s Pieces and one Milk Duds.

He paused, giving it serious thought before saying, “Why don’t we share them both?”

“Good call.” I handed him the Reese’s Pieces and began opening the Milk Duds, but stopped when I saw him dump half of the candy into the bowl of popcorn.

“What the hell are you doing?” I screeched.

Tucker looked at me like I was the one who had just lost their mind. “Don’t tell me you’ve never eaten it this way.”

“Definitely not. It sounds disgusting... and messy.”

“Man, you don’t know what you’re missing then. This is the best way to eat it. It’s a little salty, a little sweet. Mmmm.”

I laughed. “You’re crazy.”

“Just try it and if you still think it’s gross, I’ll make you a new bowl of popcorn,” he promised.

“Fine,” I said.

Before I could even reach for the bowl, however, Tucker grabbed some and held it out to me, his fingers hovering in front of my mouth. My eyes bounced between the snack and his face, my pulse picking up speed. Did he really want me to?—

“Try it,” he urged.

I held his gaze as I leaned forward, ready to back away if he changed his mind, but he didn't, his eyes focused intently on me as I opened my mouth. The touch of his fingers—slick with butter—against my bottom lip sent a thrill throughout my entire body, like a shockwave of electricity.

My tongue accidentally slipped along the pad of his thumb as I scooped the snack into my mouth. Butter, salt, and just the right amount of sweetness awakened my taste buds, and I groaned in response, my eyes fluttering shut as I savored the taste. Like he'd said, it was the perfect flavor combination.

When I opened my eyes, Tucker was staring at me open-mouthed, his pupils so wide there was barely a ring of blue left around them. I could hear the click of his throat as he swallowed. “Like it?” he asked in a husky voice.

“Delicious,” I whispered, not sure if I was talking about the snack or the taste of him. I was pretty sure it was the latter, but I wasn't about to admit that to him and make things awkward between us.

His gaze lingered on my lips for a moment before he cleared his throat and reached for the remote. “So, uh, ready to start the movie?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, trying to ignore the tension crackling between us.

As the opening credits rolled, I found myself hyper-aware of Tucker's presence beside me. The warmth radiating from his body, the subtle scent of his cologne, the way his arm brushed against mine when he reached for more popcorn. Every accidental touch sent sparks skittering across my skin.

We fell into our usual pattern of playful banter, tossing out comments about the plot

and characters. But I couldn't focus on the screen. My attention kept drifting to him—the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed, how his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed, the flex of his forearm as he reached for his soda.

As the movie progressed, we gradually shifted closer together on the couch. The popcorn bowl, long since emptied, had been discarded on the coffee table. Now there was nothing between us but a few inches of charged air. Our thighs pressed together, and I swore I could feel the electricity humming between us.

When he shifted and draped his arm across the back of the couch behind me, my breath caught in my throat. I turned my head to look at him, only to find him already watching me, his eyes dark and intense. Time seemed to slow as we held each other's gaze. My heart pounded in my chest as his eyes flicked down to my lips and back up.

Tucker's hand slowly slid from the back of the couch to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing gently across my skin. I leaned into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed for a moment. When I opened them again, he was so close I could see the flecks of silver in his eyes.

“Bryson,” he whispered, his breath warm against my lips. “Can I kiss you?”

Unable to find my voice, I nodded, my heart racing as he closed the distance between us. The first brush of his lips against mine was soft, tentative. A gentle exploration that sent tingles throughout my body. But as I leaned into him, parting my lips slightly, the kiss deepened.

His lips were soft but insistent against mine, his kiss a perfect blend of tenderness and passion that made my head spin. His hand slid from my cheek to the nape of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair as he pulled me closer. I gripped his shirt, anchoring myself as waves of sensation washed over me.

The taste of butter and chocolate lingered on his tongue as it brushed against mine, igniting a fire, low in my belly. Every nerve ending in my body felt alive, hyper-aware of each point of contact between us. The scratch of his stubble against my chin, the firm press of his chest against mine, the warmth of his thigh where it touched my own.

“Damn, Bry,” he groaned.

He shifted his body, his knee between my legs, pushing me back until I lay beneath him. The cushions softened the world around us, and he was everywhere. He pinned me down with his mouth, his body, and I couldn’t get enough. I arched up, needing him, hard for him. My hips met his, grinding. God, he felt amazing. I tugged at his shirt, needing to feel skin, warmth, Tucker. Hands roamed like they couldn’t figure out where to land. He kissed me like I was the air he needed to breathe, hot and frantic and perfect.

We moved together, faster and more desperately. His weight on top of me was everything I’d ever wanted and more. I gasped against his mouth, the only sounds in the room were our ragged breaths and muffled groans. My whole body burned, my whole heart wanted him. The world was nothing but the two of us and I never wanted it to end.

But as the initial euphoria faded, a tendril of worry crept in. I pulled back slightly, searching his face. “Wait. Tucker, what are we doing?”

His eyes fluttered open, arousal flaming brightly in their depths, his breathing ragged. He propped himself up on his elbows, still hovering over me. “I thought that was pretty obvious,” he said with a soft chuckle.

I couldn't help but smile, even as anxiety began to build in my stomach. “I mean, is this just a one and done? Do you want more? What does this mean?”

His lips landed on mine, silencing my frantic questions. “Shh! Breathe, Bryson.” He waited patiently while I pulled in a breath and then another one.

As my heartrate began to slow, his expression softened. He brushed a strand of hair from my forehead, his touch impossibly gentle. “Hey, look at me,” he said softly. When I met his gaze, he continued, “I know you like things planned out and I should have thought of that. I’m sorry for just throwing myself at you like that.”

“It’s okay,” I rushed to assure him. “I liked it... clearly.” We both glanced down at our very obvious arousal and chuckled.

Tucker shifted so we could sit up, but he remained close, his hands reaching for mine. “I like you, Bryson,” he said softly, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand. “A lot. And I think you like me too?”

I nodded quickly. “Very much.”

His smile warmed. “Good. Then don’t you want to see where this could go between us?”

My heart soared at his words, but anxiety still gnawed at me. “But what about Chloe? She has to be our priority. If things don’t work out, it might make things awkward between us which could make things harder for her.”

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. “I get it. She's been through so much already. But think about it, we weren’t that crazy about each other at the beginning. Hell, we damn near drove each other crazy,” he added wryly. I laughed at the accurate description. “But even then, we didn’t let it get in the way of our care for her, and we never will.”

“You’re right,” I said with a sigh. “I know you love that little girl as much as I do,

and we'll always protect her. I guess I'm just worried about things becoming weird. We're finally in a really good place. We each have our own strengths, and we've learned to balance them well. We complement each other and I consider you a friend. My best friend."

My voice cracked on the word best and his face took on a look of understanding. My entire life, only one other person had held that title. Brooke. I would always consider her my best friend, but over time, someone else had crept in, filling those empty spaces, becoming someone I could always count on. Tucker was also my best friend.

"You're my best friend too," he whispered.

I stared at him, imploring him with my eyes. "Which is why I can't risk losing you. Plus, we'd still have to live together, even if things didn't work out."

Tucker reached up, cupping the back of my neck as he looked into my eyes. "But Bry, what if it did? What if we tried and we found that this was the best thing we'd ever experienced? I'm not saying it's always going to be perfect. I'll still get on your nerves sometimes and you'll still drive me insane from time to time, but I think we owe it to ourselves to find out, don't you?"

I bit my lip, considering his words. "So, what exactly are you proposing?"

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "How about we don't label anything right now? Let's just give this a chance and see what happens. We don't have to rush into anything. We can take it slow, see how things develop."

The look in his eyes was enough to tip the scales. I took a breath, long and deep, letting the air fill me with possibilities. "Okay," I said finally, my heart hammering in my chest. "Okay. Let's see where it goes."

The smile that spread across his face was everything, and the excitement buzzed through me, mixing with nervous energy. We sank back against the couch, wrapped up in each other, knowing we were diving into something big. The start of a new chapter, full of hope, uncertainty, and a possibility for the kind of joy I'd never felt before.

Chapter Thirteen

TUCKER

I finished rinsing the dishes and putting them in the dishwasher then wiped down the counters, the smell of grilled chicken from our dinner lingering in the air. The week had consumed us in the kind of routine that blurred days together: Bryson working on a big project, me finishing the app I'd been working on and picking up the slack with Chloe, and both of us falling asleep in clothes we hadn't intended to wear to bed.

Giggles drifted down from upstairs, and my heart swelled with love. Chloe sounded so happy. Despite the loss of her parents and being left with two men who could barely stand each other—and who hadn't known the first thing about raising a baby—she was happy. But then again, so was I. I hadn't given it much thought before, but it was true. I was happy and it was all because of the man and little girl upstairs.

Chloe had given my life new meaning, a purpose greater than anything I'd ever experienced before. And as I'd gotten to know Bryson, peeling back the layers to see who he really was, I discovered a man who'd needed love just as much as I did, with an unlimited amount of love to give in return. He was sensitive and kind, gentle and sweet. Was it any wonder I was starting to fall for him?

I couldn't wait to get him alone. To curl up next to him and trace the shape of his lips, to know him beyond the efficient, dedicated man who'd rearranged his entire life to help me raise my niece. I craved the version of him who wasn't planning everything out in advance, who let himself just be—the version only I got to see.”

A quick detour to the fridge for a bottle of water, and I was ready to dive into the evening with the same enthusiasm Chloe usually reserved for smashing sweet potatoes onto her highchair. I bound up the stairs, following the sound of Bryson's voice as I went to join them.

I found him sitting on the bathroom floor, sleeves rolled up and head bent in intense concentration as he carefully washed Chloe's hair. Our little dynamo was having none of it. She splashed and shrieked with a maniacal glee, sloshing water onto Bryson's shirt. His laughter filled the tiny space.

I leaned against the doorway and watched the pair of them for a minute, soaking up the way Chloe managed to light up every room she was in. Then, Bryson spoke to her in the same serious tone he'd use with a client: "After your bath, you have to get your jammies on and drink your bottle, and if you go right to sleep, I'll buy you a new toy." Chloe responded with a giggle, clearly unimpressed by his bribery attempt.

I crossed my arms and broke my silence. "Are you trying to bribe my niece into going to sleep?"

He jumped slightly, his eyes wide and startled as he looked over his shoulder. "I didn't hear you," he stammered, a faint blush coloring his cheeks. "I just thought—if she went to bed on time—we'd have more..."

Moving in, I knelt beside him, my leg pressing against his. I reached out to brush an errant lock of hair off his forehead then leaned in close to his ear. His breath hitched as I whispered, "I need to be alone with you. Is that what you want to?"

His flush deepened. "Y—yes," he stammered.

I chuckled. "Then maybe we should up the ante. I'd be willing to buy her a pony."

Bryson's surprised laugh made my heart skip a beat and I leaned back with a grin. "You know, this would go a whole lot faster if we worked together."

"Always so smart," I said, placing just a ghost of a kiss on the corner of his mouth before I grabbed a washcloth and poured some soap on it. I worked it into a lather and started rubbing it over Chloe's back in tiny circles. When I looked over at Bryson, he was grinning.

"What?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing in particular. I'm just happy."

I smiled back at him. There would probably never be a time when I didn't miss my brother or feel the weight of his loss, but with Bryson and Cloe in my life, I was learning there was still room in my heart for happiness too.

Chloe fell asleep with uncharacteristic ease. We tiptoed down the stairs and flopped onto the couch with a shared sigh of relief. I pulled a blanket over us and shifted my weight against Bryson, burying my nose in his hair. He reached for the remote, turning the tv on low and nestled closer.

"Now what?" His voice was warm, breathy.

"You get a kiss."

He grinned, a light sparking in his eyes that threatened to combust right there on the couch. "What a coincidence," he said. "That's just what I wanted." He relaxed into me, our bodies aligning like they were meant to fit, and I took a deep breath of him—soap and shampoo, mixed with the faint trace of pineapple and coconuts.

"I've got a long list of things you can get," I replied, brushing my lips across his.

He kissed me back, slow and tantalizingly sweet. “What else would be on that list?” he asked, a gentle insistence behind the teasing.

I toyed with the waistband of his shirt, feeling his smooth skin beneath my fingertips. “Guess.”

His hand slid up my leg, sending a shiver of anticipation straight through me. He was clever, observant—never missing anything for long—and this was no exception. Bryson was the most perceptive man I’d ever met. Maybe that’s why it felt like he saw straight through me when he lifted his head, his gaze intent and his words playful. “Is one of them in this room?”

I didn’t answer, not with words. I shifted beneath him again, lowering my lips to the side of his neck, leaving a line of kisses in my wake. He rewarded me with a soft, contented hum and a delicate shiver. I felt his breath hitch and his pulse quicken. “This was a better plan than the one where we fell asleep watching TV.”

“And here I was worried you wouldn’t like it.”

He turned his head, capturing my mouth with a kiss that started gentle and grew hungry. The pressure built between us, tangible and sweet, until we finally pulled apart. We lingered there for a moment longer, cocooned in warmth, enjoying the shared quiet as much as the whispered confessions of “I want you” that were on both of our lips. Then we made our way upstairs to my bedroom, stopping at every other step for another kiss, another tentative, stolen touch.

We made it to my room with lips slightly swollen, shirts askew, and all of our thoughts too tangled with desire to make sense of anything else. I guided Bryson to the bed, flicking on a small lamp in the corner and filling the room with soft light. We faced each other, his gaze piercing as I unfastened the buttons on his shirt, my fingers lingering on the hollow of his throat. He fumbled with my zipper, teasing, deliberate,

and not at all subtle in his attempt to get it off.

There was a brief moment where we just stood there, pausing to take everything in—the sight of our skin, unencumbered and electric, the sound of each breath, louder than the rest of the world. He ran his hands down my chest, wanting, making my pulse quicken in a way that was almost unbearable. I did the same to him, and his shirt fell away with a quiet rustle, exposing the perfect lines of his lean, toned body.

The bed creaked softly beneath us as I pressed him down onto the sheets, sinking into him, my rigid length not leaving any room for doubt about what I wanted. Our lips found each other again, hot and urgent, and I tasted the eagerness on his tongue. I moved my mouth to his neck, his collarbone, feeling him shudder with every brush of my lips.

I took my time, savoring every inch of him with the kind of attention I hadn't allowed myself until now. His skin was flushed beneath my tongue, and his small, incoherent noises spurred me on. The more I gave, the more I wanted.

Bryson arched up to meet me as I kissed my way down his chest, letting out a low, needful moan that had my cock leaking in response. His fingers gripped my shoulders, almost pleading, but I was just getting started. I worked my way over his abdomen, loving the way he gasped and squirmed beneath me.

Then, with a long, aching look, I slid further down, and the moment my mouth was on his cock, he let out a strangled cry, like he'd been holding his breath until now. I moved slowly at first, savoring the intoxicating scent of him, the taste of him on my tongue, the sound of his desperation as he begged me for more.

I picked up my pace, wanting to make it so good that he wouldn't know what hit him. He tangled a hand in my hair and pushed himself deeper, faster, as if he couldn't stand it anymore. I felt the pressure building in him, felt his whole body go tense and

rigid and only then did I pull away.

Bryson stared up at me, shock and frustration evident on his face. “Why did you stop?”

“I have waited a long time for this and I’m not about to rush through it. I plan on taking my time with you,” I answered.

Shaking with need, he pushed me onto my back and straddled my waist, his weight delicious and solid against me. “Fine, but then I want the same. I want to taste you too,” he said, more breath than voice.

My body felt strung tight; a cable ready to snap under the pressure of my desire. I shifted, lining our bodies side by side in a sixty-nine position. I took him in my mouth again, feeling the hard pulse of him on my tongue as he leaned forward and wrapped his lips around my cock.

Time, space, any reality outside of that room ceased to exist. The only things that mattered were the weight of him and how perfect he felt against me, the heat of his skin as our bodies slicked together. His lips moved with maddening precision, each stroke teasing out an involuntary moan from me that buzzed against his cock. I couldn’t tell where one of us ended and the other began.

He took his time, every shift of his mouth purposeful and slow, a near-agony of sensation. I pulled back to look at the glisten of precum beading on the tip of his hard cock, then took him deeper, his low, rough sounds making my whole body tense with need.

My fingers kneaded his perfect ass, squeezing and separating the rounded cheeks as I swallowed him deeper into my throat. One wet finger slipped between his cheeks, and he made a low, hungry noise that pushed me right to the edge. I traced his hole,

shivering with the kind of pleasure that almost felt like pain.

Bryson bucked his hips against me, his voice cracking as it floated back through the air. “Tucker, oh God—” His approval spurred me on, faster and less careful, each of us chasing the same elusive thing.

The slick, primal sounds of our moans filled the room, every hitch in his breath in sync with my own. The pressure built, consuming us in unrelenting, explicit heat. I could tell how hard he fought to hold on and how hard we both lost that fight in the end. We came in a frantic, heady release, together and shuddering.

We collapsed onto the bed, breathless and sated, bodies entwined and every part of me wishing I could hold him this close forever. He was flushed and beautiful in the dim light, and when I pulled him into a soft, spooning embrace, he melted into it like he’d been there all along.

“Stay with me tonight,” I said, nuzzling the back of his neck, too full of affection to be anything but blunt.

He sighed, more contentment than exhaustion. “Okay,” he agreed easily. He shifted against me, his fingers twining with mine, and I couldn’t imagine being any happier.

Chapter Fourteen

brYSON

The hum of the car's engine filled the comfortable silence as we cruised down the winding road to Langston's house. Tucker's hand rested on my thigh, his thumb tracing lazy circles that sent tingles through my body. In the rearview mirror, I caught glimpses of Chloe babbling happily to her stuffed giraffe in the backseat.

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. This moment felt perfect—almost too perfect. A nagging voice in the back of my mind whispered that it couldn't last, that something would inevitably go wrong. But for once, I pushed those thoughts aside. I was determined to savor every second with Tucker and Chloe, to bask in the warmth of this newfound happiness.

“What's got you grinning like that?” he asked, shooting me a curious look.

I squeezed his hand, intertwining our fingers. “Just thinking about how lucky I am. This feels too good to be true.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. “Better believe it, babe. You're stuck with me now.” My heart skipped a beat at the casual endearment. It was still new, this shift in our relationship, but it felt so natural. Like we'd been heading toward this all along.

We pulled up to Langston's house, the sound of laughter and the enticing smell of sizzling meat drifting from the backyard. Tucker helped get Chloe out of her car seat

while I grabbed the pasta salad we'd brought.

As we rounded the corner of the house, I was hit with a wave of warmth that had nothing to do with the weather. Our friends were scattered across the yard, kids running and shrieking with delight. Langston stood at the grill, spatula in hand while his girls chased each other around a tree. Nearby, Noah and Duncan tossed a football with Noah's son, Curtis and Duncan's foster son, Jessie.

"Look who finally decided to grace us with their presence!" Duncan called out, waving us over.

"Sorry we're late," Tucker said with an easy grin. "Someone here insisted on making his pasta salad from scratch."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't hide my smile. "It's not my fault you have no taste. Store-bought just doesn't compare."

"Whatever you say, Gordon Ramsay," he teased, bumping his shoulder against mine.

"Beer?" Langston called from the grill, gesturing with a bottle.

"Please," Tucker and I answered in unison, sharing a grin.

As we settled into lawn chairs, I felt a sense of belonging wash over me. These guys had become more than just friends—they were family. My chosen family. The easy banter, the shared laughter, the way they'd welcomed me into their fold without hesitation... it was everything I'd always longed for.

Tucker's arm draped casually over the back of my chair, his fingers absently playing with the hair at the nape of my neck. The simple touch sent a shiver down my spine, and I leaned into him without thinking.

“Well, well, well,” Noah drawled, his eyes twinkling. “What do we have here?”

I froze, suddenly realizing how couple-y we must look. Tucker's hand stilled, but he didn't pull away. My cheeks burned as I met our friends' curious gazes.

“Uh, well...” I stammered, unsure how to explain.

Tucker, bless him, came to my rescue. “We're together,” he said simply, squeezing my hand. “Officially.”

For a moment, silence fell over the group. Then Duncan let out a whoop, pumping his fist in the air. “I told you! Pay up, boys!”

My jaw dropped as I watched Noah and Langston grumbling good-naturedly as they pulled out their wallets.

“Wait, you guys were betting on us?” Tucker asked incredulously.

Noah grinned, handing over a twenty to Duncan. “Of course we were. The sexual tension between you two was thick enough to cut with a knife. It was only a matter of time.”

“We had a pool going for when you'd finally get your heads out of your asses,” Langston added with a wink.

I buried my face in my hands, torn between embarrassment and laughter. “I can't believe you guys,” I muttered, but there was no real heat behind it.

Tucker chuckled, pulling me closer. “Well, I guess the cat's out of the bag now. You're all terrible friends, by the way.”

“The worst,” I agreed, finally looking up with a grin.

“Ah, but you love us anyway,” Duncan said, raising his beer in a mock toast.

And I did. As I looked around at these men who had become my family, I felt a surge of affection so strong it nearly took my breath away. They'd seen me at my worst, supported me through my freak-outs over Chloe, and now they were celebrating my happiness with genuine joy.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of good food, laughter, and the kind of easy companionship I'd always dreamed of. As the sun began to set, casting a warm glow over the yard, Tucker and I gathered a sleepy Chloe and said our goodbyes. The drive home was quiet, Chloe dozing in her car seat while Tucker and I exchanged soft smiles and lingering glances.

Once home, we worked in tandem to get Chloe ready for bed. I laid out her pajamas while he changed her diaper with a tenderness that should have been impossible for a man his size. We brushed shoulders, fingers, each touch like a spark that flared then faded, begging for more.

We dressed Chloe in the soft glow of the nightlight, our breaths and motions falling into an easy pattern. I couldn't stop watching him. Everything I'd ever wanted seemed to line up at once. Family. Love. A sense of belonging that didn't come with an expiration date. The emotions were almost too big, too tangled, but with each passing day, I found it easier to believe.

Chloe fussed, and I took her in my arms, letting her settle against my chest. The sensation of her small weight, of Tucker's eyes on me, of this life being real, was dizzying. I paced the room, humming nonsense until her eyelids began to droop. It felt fragile, this thing we were building. But as Tucker wrapped an arm around my waist, steadying me, grounding us, it felt unbreakable too.

We laid her in the crib, and I held my breath, waiting to see if she'd stir. Tucker's hand was warm at the small of my back. Her lips pursed in one last protest, then relaxed as she settled into sleep.

"Finally out," he whispered, his voice rich with triumph and relief.

I nodded, still feeling like I was dreaming. Like any moment, I'd wake up to find myself in a place where this was impossible, where men like him didn't stay, where family didn't mean what I needed it to. But I was here, and so was he.

"You want to watch TV?" he asked, tilting his head toward the living room.

"Yeah. I'll be down in a bit. Need to shower first."

His smile was slow and full of unsaid things. "Don't take too long, Bry."

I caught his eye as I headed down the hall, the spark in his gaze lighting me up inside. The shower blasted hot water over me, steam filling the room and taking with it the weight of everything that used to be.

Before I'd moved to Lakeside Ridge, my life was one endless rinse-and-repeat. Same hopes, same doubts. I ran my hands through my hair, rinsing the soap out, and thought of how everything had flipped on its axis since he'd walked into this house with his easy grin and calm assurance, teaching me how to trust myself and how to let others in... how to let love in.

I leaned my forehead against the cool tile, letting the water cascade down my back. The realization hit me like a tidal wave, leaving me breathless and giddy. I loved him. I was in love with Tucker Murphy.

The thought should have terrified me, sent me spiraling into a pit of anxiety and

what-ifs. But instead, I felt... calm. Certain. Like puzzle pieces finally clicking into place.

I wanted everything with him. Lazy Sunday mornings tangled in bed sheets. Bickering over whose turn it was to do the dishes. Planning vacations and dreaming about the future. I wanted to build a life with him, to create the kind of family I'd always longed for.

With newfound resolve, I shut off the water and toweled off quickly. My reflection in the mirror caught my eye – cheeks flushed, eyes bright with hope and possibility. I took a deep breath, steadying myself. This was it. No more holding back, no more fears about the future. I was all in.

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I padded down the hallway, following the soft glow of the TV. Tucker looked up as I entered, his eyes widening slightly as they roamed over my bare chest. The heat in his gaze made my skin tingle.

“Thought you might have fallen asleep in there,” he teased, patting the spot next to him on the couch.

I shook my head, my heart pounding. “No, just... thinking.”

“About what?” he asked, his brow furrowing slightly at my serious tone.

I crossed the room in a few quick strides, coming to stand in front of him. His hands automatically reached for my hips, steadying me. I cupped his face in my hands, marveling at the way his stubble tickled my palms. His eyes searched mine, curious and a little concerned.

“Tucker, I...” I swallowed hard, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. “I love you.”

For a heartbeat, the world stood still. Then his face broke into a smile so bright it rivaled the sun. “Bry,” he breathed, pulling me closer. “I love you too. God, I love you so much.”

His lips met mine in a kiss that was equal parts tender and passionate. I melted into him, all my fears and doubts dissolving in the warmth of his embrace. When we finally broke apart, both breathless, I rested my forehead against his.

“I want everything with you,” I whispered. “A life, a family, all of it. I know it's fast, and maybe it's crazy, but I've never been surer of anything in my life.”

His hands slid up my back, pulling me even closer. “It's not crazy,” he murmured against my lips. “Or if it is, then we're crazy together. Because I want all of that too, Bry. I want a life with you and Chloe. I want to build something real, something lasting.”

My heart soared at his words. I straddled his lap, my towel slipping dangerously low on my hips. His eyes darkened with desire as his hands roamed over my bare skin.

“Show me,” I whispered, nipping at his lower lip. “Show me how much you want this... want us. Make love to me.”

Chapter Fifteen

TUCKER

I sat there like a dope for a full five seconds, the sight of him wiping every coherent thought from my mind. I loved him more than I ever thought I could love anyone, and it hit me all at once, almost like I was seeing him for the first time.

I'd always thought falling in love would be a slow process, something gradual and almost planned, like the flight itinerary for one of my trips. This felt more like a free-fall, a sudden drop where the only thing you can do is enjoy the ride. And God, I was loving the ride.

“Are you coming?” His voice was teasing, that playful grin taunting me. I had no words. I didn't need any. My smile said it all. The towel slid a little lower on his hips as he stood.

My eyes took in every inch of him, an all-you-can-eat buffet of Bryson Kelly that left me starving for more. His light brown hair, usually so carefully arranged, was in wild disarray, messy and adorable. His skin was still flushed from the heat of the shower, a slight sheen left behind like it hadn't quite decided to let him dry off yet.

A thin line of hair traveled down his chest, trailing all the way to where it disappeared under the edge of the towel. And his muscles—God, the muscles—tight and hard, giving him the look of a Greek statue. If Greek statues had dimples and knew how to make a guy lose his damn mind.

The scent of soap hung in the air, mingling with something else I couldn't quite place. Clean and inviting, with an undertone that was pure Bryson.

I felt like I was vibrating, the tension coiling inside me so tightly that it was ready to snap. I wanted him more than I ever wanted anything, but it was more than just desire. It was a need that ran so deep it was almost physical, something that lived in my bones and wouldn't rest until he was with me in every way.

The air between us felt charged, like we were walking through a storm, and the lightning could strike at any second. Each second seemed to stretch, every little movement drawn out. It was electric, that moment of calm before everything went wild.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked softly, his voice a mix of confidence and vulnerability. My heart did a somersault, not sure which side of him it loved more.

"Yeah, it's just... You're beautiful," I managed, my voice a little rough around the edges. I was amazed I even got a sound out.

His grin widened, eyes sparkling with warmth and mischief. It was the perfect mix of everything he was, everything I wanted. A lifetime of moments just like this flashed before me, the possibility so close I could almost reach out and touch it.

He gave me a look that sent a jolt of desire through my body, my pulse quickening with the unspoken promise in his eyes. The silence that followed felt full, bursting with all the words that we didn't need to say. He knew exactly what he was doing to me. Knew that he had me under his spell, and he was savoring every second of it.

With a turn of his head and a slight tilt of his hips, he started moving toward the stairs. I followed him, more than ready for what came next. It was the longest walk of my life, from the living room to the bedroom, but the anticipation was almost as

sweet as the promise of what we were about to share. I let myself imagine it in exquisite detail, knowing full well that the reality would be even better.

As we moved down the hall, I was so aware of him, so attuned to every detail that it was like seeing in high definition. We stepped into the bedroom, and with every heartbeat, I was falling harder and faster, but for the first time, I wasn't afraid to land.

He stood close, so close that every heartbeat thudded loud between us. I couldn't remember ever wanting anything as much as I wanted this, wanted him. The bedroom was dim, our own private cocoon, and his eyes never left mine as he reached for me.

The rest of the world seemed to melt away, and I let it, gladly. Every brush of his fingertips sent a spark up my spine, the anticipation almost more than I could take. My voice was rough, full of everything I felt, when I told him I loved him. He was trembling, and I was, too. I don't think I've ever been happier.

It was like we were seeing each other for the first time, and everything about it felt new. The heat of his body, the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, the look in his eyes that told me he felt exactly the same way.

I didn't want to miss a thing. I couldn't, not when the feeling was this intense, this all-consuming. My skin buzzed with every touch, and he couldn't get close enough, fast enough.

Bryson's hands were sure as they found my waist, his fingers pressing into me just the way I liked. The love in his eyes was almost more than I could handle, a weight that wrapped around my chest and filled it to bursting.

I quickly stripped and began folding my clothes neatly, setting them on top of the dresser. "You don't have to do that," he whispered.

“I want to. I want all of your focus on us tonight,” I answered softly.

Bryson’s eyes shone with love as he stepped closer and pulled me in for a fiery kiss. My hands found the knot at his waist and yanked on it, pulling the towel away and revealing every delicious inch of him.

We made it to the bed, falling against the mattress in a tumble of limbs and laughter that was almost a moan. He kissed me like he needed it to breathe, and maybe he did, because it was exactly how I felt. A rush of affection swelled in my chest, overflowing into every touch, every sound.

“I love you,” he whispered, the words a promise, a vow, an exhalation of all the air in his lungs. I watched his lips as he said it, committing the moment to memory like a writer does a favorite scene. I wanted to keep it forever, bottle it up and carry it with me wherever I went.

The words escaped me, rough and honest and thick with need. “I love you too.” I watched the effect it had on him, the small tremble of his hands and the brightness in his eyes. It made me want to say it a hundred times, a thousand, until we were both old and gray and couldn’t say it anymore.

He pressed against me, and I felt the hard line of him, so real, so wanting. I had never been happier. Our touches grew urgent, the press of skin on skin, our breaths mingling as we shifted and found new ways to get even closer. The soft slide of our bodies, the way we seemed to fit together so perfectly, like it was always meant to be.

He couldn’t keep his hands still, and I loved it, loved the feel of him, the weight of his affection and the clear, desperate want that moved between us. It was everything. Bryson sat up just long enough to grab the lube and condoms he’d left ready on the side table, his thoughtfulness sending a wave of gratitude through me. Of course he had it all arranged, as meticulous in his lovemaking as he was in every other aspect of

his life. The gesture made my heart swell.

I took the supplies from him, smiling at the small details he'd attended to. It made me love him even more. He shivered as I touched him, both of us fighting for air, for control, for more of everything. We weren't in any rush, not really, but we were equally anxious to get there together, to feel me moving deep inside him, to become one.

My hands were a little unsteady as I applied lube to my fingers and began circling his hole with them, the sensation heightening everything to a point I almost couldn't take. His breath hitched, and it was the most beautiful sound. Our eyes stayed locked as I slowly worked him open, even as the world slipped away and the intensity of what we were doing hit us full force.

With deliberate care, I opened the condom wrapper and handed it to him. We were ready, more than ready, and the thought of what came next sent a pulse of want through me that was almost too much.

I bit my lips as Bryson sat up and slid the latex down my length with quick, sure movements. He stared down at my cock intently as he slicked it up with lube and I watched the tension in his face give way to pure desire. Then I was above him, the warmth of him making me dizzy, drunk on him, on us, on what we were sharing.

I moved inside him slowly at first, letting us both feel every inch of it, every shift, every movement. My heart pounded in my ears, and I closed my eyes for a second, overwhelmed by how much I loved him, how right this all felt.

The world outside dissolved, nothing but us and the moment and the deep, throbbing connection that bound us together. I held onto him, never wanting to let go. He was mine, and I was his, and the certainty of it filled me with a joy that spilled over and out in soft whispers.

“I love you, Tucker,” he said again, his voice a tremor, a plea, a declaration, and I caught his mouth with mine, feeling the words as much as hearing them.

“You are my world,” I replied easily, losing myself in him, in us, in everything.

We moved together, finding a rhythm that was both familiar and entirely new, a choreography that only the two of us understood.

His body was hot beneath mine, slick with sweat and desire. Every thrust sent waves of pleasure coursing through me, building and building until I thought I might shatter from the intensity. Bryson's legs wrapped tightly around my waist, pulling me deeper, urging me on with breathless moans and whispered encouragement.

I could feel him trembling, his muscles clenching around me as he got close. His hands roamed my back, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I captured his lips in a searing kiss, swallowing his cries of pleasure as I increased my pace.

“Tucker,” he gasped, breaking the kiss. “I'm so close...”

“Me too, baby,” I panted. “Come for me. I want to feel you.”

His body went taut, back arching off the bed as he came with a strangled cry of my name. The sight of him coming undone beneath me, combined with the rhythmic pulsing around my cock, pushed me over the edge. I buried my face in his neck, muffling my own cry of ecstasy as I came hard, my hips jerking erratically.

For several long moments, we lay there, tangled together, struggling to catch our breath. I could feel Bryson's heart racing against my chest, matching the frantic beat of my own. Slowly, carefully, I eased out of him, both of us groaning softly at the loss of connection.

I discarded the condom and grabbed some tissues to clean up before collapsing back onto the bed. Bryson immediately curled into my side, his head resting on my chest. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close as our breathing gradually returned to normal.

We lay in comfortable silence for a while, my fingers tracing lazy patterns on his back. The room was quiet except for the sound of our breathing and the occasional rustle of sheets as we shifted closer to each other.

“I've never felt like this before,” I admitted softly, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

Bryson lifted his head to look at me, his hazel eyes searching mine. “Me neither,” he whispered. “It's... scary, but in a good way. You know?”

I nodded my understanding. This thing between us was powerful, all-consuming. It made me want things I'd never given much thought to before. A future. A home. A family. With him. “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean,” I whispered, tightening my arms around him.

As we lay there, basking in the afterglow, I couldn't help but marvel at how much my life had changed in such a short time. Just a few weeks ago, I was a wanderer, content with my nomadic lifestyle and fleeting connections. Now, here I was, wrapped up in the arms of a man who made me want to put down roots.

Chapter Sixteen

TUCKER

I gave my reflection a final once-over in the bathroom mirror, then checked my watch for the sixth time in two minutes. Seven-fifteen. Where was the time going? And why the hell couldn't I just calm the fuck down and let this morning unfold at its own pace?

“This is a routine procedure,” Mr. Jenkin’s calm lawyer voice had repeated several times the day before. “Don't sweat it.” Except here I was, sweating it. Worse, I couldn't shut off my brain and all the questions it tossed at me, one after another like pop-ups on a computer screen. What if we said the wrong thing? What if the judge didn’t think we were cut out for this kind of responsibility? What if he didn’t think we were good enough to be Chloe’s guardians?

I hated those thoughts. I hated even thinking about those thoughts. I messed with my collar again as Bryson stepped into the bathroom, looking completely put together and ridiculously composed. In black slacks and a mint-green button-up shirt, he seemed ready for whatever came next.

There was no missing the smile on his lips when he saw me struggling with my tie. “You’re making that look harder than it should be,” he said.

I leaned closer to the mirror. “This should be easier than it is, shouldn’t it?”

He moved in close, his hands sliding around from behind me to tie my tie in precise,

neat motions. The warmth of his body, the smell of his aftershave, both made my heart pound, but for better reasons than before. “It's a big day,” he said, his voice soothing, even. “You're allowed to be nervous.”

“Mr. Jenkins said it would be a piece of cake,” I said. “Isn't that what he called it?”

“Routine, easy, don't sweat it,” Bryson recited, making it sound less like legalese and more like a lullaby.

“You're not worried?” I asked, searching his face for even a shadow of doubt, but it was useless.

“Not really,” he said. He looked like he believed it. Hell, maybe he even did. “We've been taking care of Chloe for six months now. We love her and she loves us. The judge will see that.” His voice stayed solid, like he knew it to be true.

He laid his chin on my shoulder, staring at our reflections in the mirror, and I let out a long, jittery breath. “You make it sound so simple,” I said, leaning into his touch and hoping his calm would rub off on me.

“It is simple,” he whispered, his lips so close to my ear that it sent a little shiver down my neck. He kissed the side of my jaw, and I chuckled under my breath.

“What's so funny?” he asked.

“Usually, I'm the calm one under pressure,” I said, taking his hand as we headed down the hall. “But now you're the one soothing me.”

Bryson smiled, his dimple appearing. “I guess we've rubbed off on each other more than we realized,” he said, squeezing my hand. “But don't worry, I'm sure I'll be back to my neurotic self by lunchtime.”

I couldn't help but laugh at that. It was true—Bryson's usual meticulousness seemed to have taken a backseat today, while my typically carefree attitude was nowhere to be found. As we approached the nursery, I found myself fussing with my tie again, smoothing imaginary wrinkles from my shirt.

He noticed and gently batted my hands away. “You look perfect,” he assured me, then added with a wink, “For once.”

I rolled my eyes but felt a smile tugging at my lips. “Hey now, watch it with the 'for once' comments,” I teased back. “I'll have you know I clean up quite nicely when the occasion calls for it.”

We entered Chloe's room, where she was already awake and babbling happily in her crib. Her big blue eyes lit up when she saw us, and she reached out her chubby little arms.

“Good morning, princess,” Bryson cooed, scooping her up. “Are you ready for your big day?”

I watched as he expertly changed her diaper and dressed her in the adorable pale yellow dress we'd picked out for the occasion. His confidence in caring for her had grown so much over the last few months. My heart swelled with love for both of them. How had I gotten so lucky?

“There,” he said, smoothing down her wispy blonde curls. “Perfect.”

I stepped closer, wrapping an arm around his waist and planting a kiss on Chloe's forehead. “You both look perfect,” I said softly.

Bryson leaned into me, and for a moment, we just stood there, the three of us together. A family. My throat tightened with emotion.

“We should get going,” he said after a minute, his voice a little husky. “We don't want to be late.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. We gathered the diaper bag and headed out to the car. As I buckled Chloe into her car seat, I couldn't help but marvel at how much our lives had changed in such a short time. Six months ago, I was a free spirit, traveling the world without a care. Now, here I was, about to become a legal guardian to this precious little girl.

“Oh, by the way, Langston texted this morning to make sure we were still on for tonight. I think it's sweet that he invited us to dinner to celebrate.”

I nodded weakly. I just hoped we actually had something to celebrate later.

The drive to the courthouse was quiet, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I kept glancing at the baby camera at Chloe, who was contentedly sucking on her pacifier and watching the world go by outside her window. Bryson's hand found mine across the center console, and I intertwined our fingers, drawing strength from his touch.

We arrived at the courthouse with plenty of time to spare. As we walked up the steps, Chloe nestled securely in my arms, I felt a renewed sense of nervousness. But one look at Bryson's reassuring smile steadied me.

Mr. Jenkins met us in the lobby, his briefcase in hand and a confident air about him. “Good morning,” he greeted us warmly. “Are we ready?”

“We are,” Bryson said with absolute certainty. The confidence made me smile, but my stomach churned as I tried to picture the next hour.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing us toward a quieter hallway. “The judge is ready to go. Let's talk for a minute before we get started.” We followed him over to a wooden

bench and sat down. “As I mentioned yesterday, the judge may ask each of you to make a statement about your relationship with Chloe and your intentions as guardians. You’re not under oath, but it helps to be honest and direct.”

“Do we both need to speak?” Bryson asked.

“You don’t have to, but I’d recommend it,” Mr. Jenkins said, shifting his focus to me. He gave me an appraising look, like he was reading my anxiety and recalibrating for it. “Brief and heartfelt. That’s the way to go.”

I imagined myself freezing up, mumbling in panic, saying everything except the things that mattered most. It made me dizzy, but then Bryson put his hand on my knee and gave it a squeeze. I took a deep breath, searching for something I hadn’t found all morning: calm, composure, certainty.

“And you’re positive this won’t be a problem?” I asked, my voice cracking.

Mr. Jenkins chuckled. “Positive,” he said. “Zach and Brooke’s wishes were clear—they wanted you both to raise Chloe. She’s been with you for the last six months, and there are no competing claims for guardianship. It’s a slam dunk, as far as these things go.”

I wasn’t sure how much a slam dunk was worth in court, but his assurance helped. I felt my muscles unclench by a fraction. “See?” Bryson said softly, resting his arm against mine.

I reached for his hand and let my fingers settle into the familiar grooves of his. “When do we go in?”

“Let me check,” Mr. Jenkins said. He disappeared into the courtroom for a minute, then emerged with another confident smile. “Right now. Follow me.”

The courtroom had a high ceiling and polished wood paneling that gleamed in the sterile, too-white light. The space was huge but felt cramped with the gravity of what we were doing there. I swallowed hard. Bryson's hand stayed locked around mine and the familiar weight of Chloe in my arms both acted as a lifeline.

I stayed close as Mr. Jenkins directed us to the table in front. He took his seat, and I slid in beside him while Bryson settled on the other side of me. He reached into the diaper bag and pulled out Chloe's favorite baby doll. She let out a happy squeal when she saw it and reached for it with grabby hands.

His eyes met mine over top of her head, a single look that conveyed so much. A silent conversation of hope, trust, conviction, and love. Most of all love. My breath caught in my throat at the raw display of emotions, and I felt my eyes well up with tears. I blinked them back, not wanting to break down before we even started.

The bailiff's voice rang out. "All rise. The Honorable Judge Raymond Bauer presiding."

We stood as an older man with silver hair and kind eyes entered, his black robes swishing as he took his seat at the bench. He smiled at us, his gaze lingering on Chloe for a moment before he addressed the court. "Good morning. We're here today for the matter of guardianship for Chloe Murphy. Let's begin."

Mr. Jenkins stood, his posture relaxed but professional. "Your Honor, we're here to finalize the permanent guardianship of Chloe Murphy to Tucker Murphy and Bryson Kelly, as specified in the will of her late parents, Zachary and Brooklyn Murphy."

Judge Bauer nodded, his expression thoughtful. "I see. And how long have Mr. Murphy and Mr. Kelly been caring for the child?"

"Six months, Your Honor," Mr. Jenkins replied. "Since the tragic passing of Zachary

and Brooklyn Murphy.”

The judge made a note on the file before him. “And how has the child been faring?”

“Exceptionally well, Your Honor,” Mr. Jenkins said. “Mr. Murphy and Mr. Kelly have provided a loving, stable home for Chloe. She's thriving under their care.”

“Yes, I have received a full report from Child Protective Services verifying the child’s well-being. It was a rather glowing report indeed. Is there anything you’d like to add to this, Mr. Jenkins?”

“No, Your Honor.”

“Very well,” the judge said, peering over his glasses like he’d done this a thousand times. He marked a few lines in the papers, then addressed us in a kind, if clinical voice. “I’d like to hear directly from the petitioners. Do you wish to make a statement?”

This was it. The moment that mattered more than anything. Bryson stood up and held himself with all the composure and confidence I wished I had. He didn’t look nervous; he looked like he was made for this, like he’d spent his life preparing.

“Go ahead,” the judge prompted, watching Bryson with focused attention.

“I’m Bryson Kelly,” he said, his voice filling the room with steady, resonant sound. “Brooke Murphy was my first friend, my best friend for most of my life, but even more than that, she was my family. When she married Zach, he became my brother and then little Chloe came along and well... she became my goddaughter, my niece. I want to make it clear: Chloe means everything to me. I will do anything and everything to provide for her well-being, to protect her, love her, and to always put her needs above my own.”

I looked at him, astonished by how calm he was. There was no hesitation, no room for doubt. He believed in himself, he believed in us, and he believed in our family.

The judge nodded again, a softer nod than before. “And Mr. Murphy?” he asked, his eyes settling on me. I tried to speak, but my tongue didn’t cooperate. It felt huge and alien in my mouth, and I wondered how Bryson had made it look so easy.

Bryson reached down and touched my shoulder. “You can do this,” he whispered.

Drawing strength from him, I stood. Chloe leaned her head on my shoulder, and I squeezed my eyes shut, kissing her forehead and saying a quick prayer to God and to my brother, asking them to not let me screw this up.

“I’m Tucker Murphy,” I said, surprised by how steady I sounded. “Zach was my brother which makes Chloe my niece. I made a promise to Zach to raise her in a kind, loving home and I intend to keep that promise, to raise her as if my heart depended on it. I will protect, teach, and love her for the rest of my life.”

The judge let out a long breath, like he’d been holding it the whole time. “Thank you both for your candor and for the obvious devotion you have to Chloe,” he said, his voice carrying warmth and weight. “On the basis of the testimony and documentation provided, I hereby grant permanent guardianship to Bryson Kelly and Tucker Murphy.”

The words hit me in a wave, and I couldn’t tell if they were real. Permanent guardianship. To us. They were real, and they were perfect.

Mr. Jenkins grinned like he had expected nothing less. Bryson spun towards me, a triumphant grin on his handsome face as he flung his arms around both of us. Chloe gurgled, her little face scrunching up in delight. We stood there in disbelief, in pure, joyful disbelief.

The courtroom melted away. There was no one but us. I looked at Bryson, and he looked at me, and we both burst out laughing. I don't know which of us kissed the other first, but it didn't matter. I wiped at my eyes and gathered Bryson and Chloe close, feeling the first, thrilling sense of forever.

We left the courthouse with the papers tucked neatly into the diaper bag, and a tidal wave of relief crashing over us. I couldn't remember ever being this happy. Everything felt different, lighter, a hundred shades brighter than it had a few hours ago.

The cool stiffness of the courthouse melted into a beautiful late-spring day, with sunlight streaming through the trees and spilling into every corner. I smiled at Bryson, then at Chloe, then back at Bryson. It was like I couldn't stop smiling even if I tried.

"We're guardians," I said, letting the words sink in again. "For real."

"She's ours now," he whispered, gazing at reverently at the little girl in my arms.

I couldn't help but grin at that. "She's been ours for a while now," I said softly.

I buckled Chloe into her car seat, planting a kiss on her forehead before closing the door. As I turned back to Bryson, I noticed a thoughtful look on his face.

"What's on your mind?" I asked, stepping closer to him.

He glanced at his watch. "We have about an hour before we need to meet Langston at Lucky's for dinner," he said. "There's something I'd like to do first, if that's okay with you."

"Sure," I replied, curious. "What did you have in mind?"

I followed his directions, and in ten minutes we were parking at the quiet cemetery where Zach and Brooke lay side by side. Like the rest of the town, it was small and well maintained, lovingly cared for by its members.

“I’m glad you suggested this,” I said, taking in the peace of the surroundings. “Feels like forever since we’ve been out here.”

“Seemed like the right thing to do,” Bryson replied solemnly.

I unbuckled Chloe and lifted her from the car seat, settling her on my hip while Bryson gathered the flowers we’d picked up at the florists along the way. The sky was a huge stretch of blue overhead, unbroken and calm. There was a comfortable silence between us as we walked along the gravel path towards their plots.

“This is it,” Bryson said, stopping at the low granite marker that read “Zach and Brooke Murphy” in bold, simple letters. He set the bouquet at its base and crouched there, running his fingers over the smooth stone like he was reaching through time and distance to touch them. I knelt beside him, pulling Chloe onto my lap and leaning my shoulder against his.

“Hey, Brooke. Hey, Zach,” I said, feeling a pinch in my heart that was both familiar and welcome. “We wanted to come by and tell you the news ourselves.”

“We did it,” Bryson said, his voice low, full of tenderness. “We got the papers today. Everything went through and we are officially Chloe’s guardians.”

I pictured Brooke’s smile, the way it would light up her whole face. I pictured Zach nodding in his easy, understated way, the gleam in his eye that meant he was proud of me even if he’d never come right out and say it.

“Thank you so much for trusting us with her. We promise to take care of her,” I said,

my voice thick with emotion. “We'll love her and protect her with everything we have.”

Bryson nodded, his eyes glistening. “We'll make sure she knows how much you loved her, how amazing you both were,” he added. “She'll grow up hearing stories about her brave, kind, wonderful parents.”

I looked down at Chloe, who was contentedly playing with a blade of grass. “We're going to give her the best life we can,” I continued. “We'll be there for every milestone, every triumph, every heartbreak. We'll teach her to be strong, compassionate, and to live life to the fullest—just like you both did.”

Bryson turned his head to look at me, reaching out and taking my hand. “I think... I think they must have known somehow,” he said softly. ““When they chose us to raise Chloe together. They must have seen something in us, something that made them believe we could do this.”

I squeezed his hand, feeling a lump form in my throat. “I think you're right,” I whispered. “They knew we'd be stronger together, that we'd balance each other out.”

We sat in silence for a moment, the gentle breeze rustling the leaves overhead. Chloe babbled softly, reaching out to touch the flowers we'd brought. “Look at her,” he said, his voice filled with wonder. “She has Brooke's eyes and Zach's smile.”

I nodded, feeling a bittersweet ache in my chest. “She does. And she'll have your kindness and my sense of adventure.”

He chuckled softly. “God help us all.”

We fell into a comfortable silence, each lost in our own thoughts. I found myself remembering all the times Zach and I had talked about the future, about settling down

and raising families. He'd always been so certain that I would make a great dad someday, even when I couldn't see it myself. Now, holding Chloe and sitting beside Bryson, I realized how right he'd been.

“You know,” I said softly, breaking the quiet, “I think they'd be proud of us. Of how far we've come, of the family we're building.”

Bryson nodded, his eyes misty. “I hope so,” he whispered. “I really hope so.”

I leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to his temple. “I know so,” I assured him. “That’s why they trusted us with their most precious gift.”

We lingered there a little longer, making more promises and sharing more memories, before we finally stood to go. I knew we would be back, often and with plenty to tell them, but leaving was still hard.

As we walked back to the car, hand in hand with Chloe between us, I felt a sense of peace settle over me. We'd come so far, Bryson and I, from reluctant guardians to a real family. And somehow, I knew Zach and Brooke were smiling down on us, proud of the life we were building together with their daughter.

brYSON

We drove from the cemetery with hope trailing behind us like dust in the rearview mirror, Chloe softly snoring from her car seat. I let the moment linger, savoring the warm weight of Tucker's hand as it moved from my thigh to the wheel, his eyes scanning the road and glancing my way, a grin threatening to overtake his mouth.

"What has you smiling like that?"

"Oh, just thinking. Chloe's first birthday is coming up soon, you know."

I smiled back. "Yeah. I was holding off on planning her party until we got through all the legal stuff, but now, I guess we're free to celebrate."

"Do you think she's old enough for a pony yet?" he mused. I laughed louder and lighter than I'd thought possible. "Or a trampoline," he continued. "A miniature Ferrari?"

I rolled my eyes playfully. "I think blocks and stuffed animals are more her speed right now."

The car filled with the sound of our joyful banter which continued until we pulled into the parking lot of Lucky's. "Wow! I've never seen the lot so full," I said, looking around at the rows of cars.

"Yeah, it's really busy, especially for a weeknight. Are you sure Langston wanted to do this tonight?"

I nodded. “Yeah, it was his idea.” Chloe opened her eyes as I pulled her from her car seat, but they drifted shut again as she cuddled up against me, her head resting on my shoulder.

“Well, let’s go see. If he’s too busy, we’ll reschedule for another night.”

Tucker rested a hand on the small of my back as he led us to the front door and opened it for me. Once inside, cheers erupted around us like fireworks, applause ricocheting off the walls. A huge “Congratulations” banner spanned the far wall, balloons bobbed from every booth, and colorful streamers draped across the ceiling. The tables were covered in festive tablecloths and lively music played through the speakers.

The look on Tucker's face said he'd been as caught off guard as I was, and for a split second, we both stood stunned as what seemed like half the town congratulated us on our guardianship. Chloe lifted her head from my shoulder, staring wide-eyed at the commotion but she grinned when she saw the balloons.

I finally found my voice. “You guys did this for us?” My gaze bounced from face to smiling face.

Someone called out, “You bet we did!” and more laughter and applause erupted. I felt Tucker's arm around my waist, squeezing tight. I couldn't help but smile at the energy in the room, the warmth of this unexpected welcome that washed over us like summer rain.

Langston stepped forward, shaking both of our hands with a wide grin. “Sorry to ambush you like this, but once they heard you were finalizing things today, well, they all just wanted to help celebrate.”

“No need to apologize. This is amazing,” Tucker said.

The place was packed, and I saw familiar faces everywhere. More people kept streaming over, all eager to shake hands, pat us on the back, even pinch Chloe's cheeks until she dissolved into giggles. I felt like I was floating in a sea of well-wishers, each one more enthusiastic than the last.

We were ushered toward a big table covered with a mountain of food and drinks. It was like everyone in the town had chipped in, making the place a vibrant patchwork of friendship and family. I stood there, taking it all in, hardly believing it was real.

I thought back to my childhood, to nights spent wishing for parents, praying for a family. Now here I was, at the center of something I'd always wanted and never thought I'd have—a family of my own, a community of friends who cared about and supported us.

Tucker's fingers laced through mine. "You doing okay?" he asked, his breath warm against my ear.

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat. "Better than okay. This is perfect."

People flooded our table like they'd been waiting all day for this moment, words of congratulations mixing with bear hugs and affectionate pats on the back, a tidal wave of support that left me breathless. Susie was the first to reach us, pulling us both into an embrace that smelled of vanilla and hairspray.

"I'm so happy for you guys," she said, kissing my cheek and Chloe's in one swoop.

I tried to keep track of it all, not wanting to miss a thing. Mrs. Patel was there with Margie, both of them gushing over how much Chloe had grown. Frank stopped by to offer congratulations, his plate piled high with food and the Johnson's offered to watch Chloe anytime we'd like.

Noah was there with his son, Curtis. They walked over with Duncan and Jessie. Noah

grinned, clapping Tucker on the shoulder. "I'd like to officially welcome you guys to parenthood. It's a wild ride, but worth every second."

"Thanks, man," I said, bouncing Chloe on my knee. "We're excited for the adventure."

Duncan chimed in, "And don't forget, we're all here to help. It takes a village, right?"

Noah nodded, adding, "Absolutely. Anytime you need a sitter or just a breather, give us a call." The warmth of their offers wrapped around me like a cozy blanket. I'd spent so long feeling alone, and now here we were, surrounded by people who genuinely cared about us.

As the crowd thinned a bit, Langston made his way over, his identical twins in tow and a strikingly gorgeous man at his side. Millie and Maya darted ahead of their father, making a beeline for Chloe. Their eyes lit up at the sight of her, and they immediately started cooing and making silly faces.

Langston turned to the man beside him, who'd been watching the scene with a warm smile. "Guys, I want you to meet someone. This is my best friend, Raiden."

Raiden stepped forward, extending his hand. "It's great to finally meet you both. I've heard so much about you from Langston."

"It's nice to meet you too," I said, shaking his hand. I couldn't help but notice the way Langston's eyes lingered on his friend. There was a softness there, a hint of longing that made me wonder if perhaps their relationship wasn't as platonic as Langston had implied.

The night stretched on, an endless parade of congratulations and well-wishes. People came and went, leaving us with warm hugs and warmer words. "You three are so lucky to have each other!" was the most common refrain, and I had to agree. I

certainly felt lucky.

The room slowly started to empty, and I knew Chloe wouldn't be the only one who'd sleep well tonight. As we got ready to leave, Tucker's eyes shone with happiness, a happiness that hadn't been there in so long I almost didn't recognize it. He held Chloe against his chest, breathing her in and I knew I wasn't the only one who wanted to remember this day forever.

It was late by the time we got home, Chloe asleep before we'd even carried her through the door, and the only sound in the house was the soft hum of the fridge. We managed to get her changed and tucked in without waking her and then quietly slipped from the nursery.

I followed Tucker into the bathroom and leaned against the sink, watching him as he started the shower and began to undress.

"Want to join me?" he asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

I couldn't help but smile. "I thought you'd never ask."

We showered together, hands roaming, lips meeting under the warm spray. It felt like coming home, like everything in the world had finally fallen into place. When we finished, we dried off and slipped into bed, our bodies still humming with the day's excitement.

As we settled in, I found myself thinking about Langston and Raiden. "Hey, did you notice the way Langston looked at his friend?" I asked, turning to face Tucker.

He nodded, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "Yeah, I caught that. There was definitely something there."

"I can see why," I teased. "Raiden's quite the looker."

Tucker's eyebrows shot up in mock offense. "Oh, is he now?" He rolled on top of me, pinning me to the mattress. "Should I be jealous?"

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Not a chance. You're the only man I'll ever want." I pulled him down for a kiss, savoring the taste of him. "But you could remind me, if you want."

He growled low in his throat, capturing my lips in a searing kiss that left me breathless. His hands roamed my body, igniting sparks wherever they touched. I arched into him, craving more.

"God, I want you," he murmured against my neck, his stubble scraping deliciously against my skin.

"Then take me," I whispered back, spreading my legs in invitation.

He arched an eyebrow, a challenge I was happy to take. "Ask nicely."

I reached into the nightstand, pulling out the lube and a condom, putting them beside us with more desperation than care. "Please," I begged.

He smiled that smile, the one that went right through me, and pulled me in for another kiss. My hands found his shoulders, then his chest, tracing each line of muscle, every inch of familiar territory. His skin was still warm from the shower, and the way he shivered at my touch sent a thrill through me, electric and urgent.

His lips trailed down my neck, leaving a path of heat in their wake. His hands roamed lower, caressing my thighs before gently pushing them apart. I gasped as his fingers found me, teasing and exploring.

"Is this what you want?" he murmured against my skin.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Please, Tucker.”

He reached for the lube, coating his fingers generously before returning to me. The initial stretch burned slightly, but he was patient, working me open slowly until I was writhing beneath him.

“Tuck,” I gasped, barely getting the word out. “Now.”

He rolled on the condom and positioned himself between my legs. Our eyes locked as he pushed in slowly, giving me time to adjust. When he was fully seated, we both let out a shaky breath.

“You feel amazing,” he whispered, his voice rough with desire.

He started to move, slowly at first, building a rhythm that had me gasping for air. I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him deeper. Our bodies moved together in perfect sync, the room filled with the sound of our labored breathing and soft moans.

His lips found mine again, swallowing my cries as he picked up the pace. I clung to him, my nails digging into his back as the pleasure built. It was overwhelming, this connection between us, more than just physical—it was everything.

“I love you,” I breathed against his ear. “God, I love you so much.”

His response was to thrust harder, hitting that spot inside me that made me see stars. I could feel myself getting close, teetering on the edge of ecstasy.

“Tucker,” I gasped, my voice breaking. “I’m close.”

He nodded; his eyes dark with desire. “Me too. Come for me, baby.”

His hand snaked between us, wrapping around me. It only took a few strokes before I

was falling over the edge, my release hitting me in waves of pleasure. Tucker followed soon after, his hips stuttering as he came with a low groan.

We lay there for a moment, catching our breath. He pressed a soft kiss to my shoulder before carefully pulling out and disposing of the condom. He returned with a warm washcloth, gently cleaning us both up before climbing back into bed.

I curled into his side, my head resting on his chest. His heartbeat was strong and steady beneath my ear, a comforting rhythm. We lay in comfortable silence for a while, basking in the afterglow.

Tucker's fingers traced lazy patterns on my back. "I can practically hear you thinking," he murmured. "What's on your mind?"

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to break the peaceful mood. But there was one thing I needed to know, something I'd been too afraid to ask before. "I was just wondering... is all of this truly enough for you? Staying here in Lakeside Ridge with me and Chloe?" I lifted my head to look at him. "Won't you miss traveling and experiencing all of life's adventures?"

His eyes softened, and he pulled me closer. "Bry, being with you and Chloe is the greatest adventure life has to offer. Waking up every day with the man I love, watching our sweet little girl grow... that's all I'll ever need."

"And the traveling part?" I whispered, unable to keep the hint of worry from my voice.

"Easy," he said. "If I want to travel, I'll just take you guys with me."

My heart swelled at his words. "Where would we go?" I asked, unable to keep the happiness from my voice.

His face lit up, and I could see his mind racing with possibilities. “Oh, the places we could go, Bry. We could show Chloe the world.” He started listing off destinations, his voice growing more animated with each one. “We could take her to see the Northern Lights in Iceland or explore the ancient ruins in Greece. We could go on safari in Africa, or hike through the rainforests in Costa Rica.”

I listened, a smile spreading across my face as Tucker painted a picture of our future adventures. My eyelids grew heavy, but I fought to stay awake, not wanting to miss a single word.

“I want to spend summers showing you guys all the places I’ve been and discovering new ones together, immersing ourselves in new cultures.”

I hummed contentedly, my eyes drifting shut as his soothing voice washed over me. I was happy in his arms, safe and loved... wanted. The last thing I remember before sleep claimed me was his gentle kiss on my forehead and a whispered, “Sweet dreams, my love.” But I already had everything I’d ever dreamed of.