



# The Coast is Clear

## (Breakaway Shores #1)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** All Izzy wanted was a happily-ever-after with her husband Jack. She didn't expect to become a widow at the age of 26, with a toddler and a baby on the way.

Fast forward three years and Izzy finally has her feet underneath her as a widow and mom. Izzy is moving back to Breakaway Shores, on the Oregon coast, to find a house where her boys can play in the sand, and she can watch the waves.

Her brother, who happens to be the real estate king of the coast, knows the perfect house. The handsome owner, Zander, is one of his friends who is ready to move out of town. He's a retired football star and is drawn to Izzy's independence and strength.

The more time they spend together, the more Izzy realizes Zander might be worth the risk of opening up her heart again. He's everything she wasn't ready to look for and that scares Izzy. She knows what happens when a couple doesn't get their happily-ever-after.

Can Izzy trust Zander with her heart, or will she stand in the way of the happily ever after she's afraid to lose a second time?

**Total Pages (Source):** 49

# Page 1

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## Coming Back

Sometimes, I could forget that my husband died. He still felt alive in the little things. The quiet of the morning when I laid awake, and the boys were still sleeping. Sometimes, I could still hear his steps coming down the stairs or see him in the dimple on our sons' cheeks. Or as I pulled into our favorite coast town. He always drove, tapping the steering wheel as he sang. That's when I could still feel him.

"Mom, are we almost there yet?" Christian groaned in the backseat, tired after the hour-and-a-half drive from the airport. It had been a long day of travel, and the sun was sinking into the sky.

I nodded, the road ahead twisting to the right as we made it onto Highway 101. "We are here. Just a few more minutes." I glanced in the rearview mirror at Kingston's sleeping face in his mirror. It didn't take him long to fall asleep once we got the rental van. Breakaway looked the same, with bright-colored buildings lining one main road. The town lived and died by the tourist season, but the residents didn't care for the tourists. Tourists didn't love the town like the people who lived here all year round.

My brother, Luke, was one of those tourist-hating residents, but he was also a realtor. He needed those tourists, especially the ones who bought their vacation homes from him. Luke loved the coast, always had, and loved to surf when he could, so he was a lifer. We would be lifers, too, once we officially moved to the coast.

I'd always loved visiting, coming here multiple times a year when I was a kid, but it would be different to live here. To be able to sit by the waves every single day. I hoped the boys would love it. It was different from being in the mountains of

Colorado.

The town was small, and this two-lane road was always busy. I gave Christian my phone, with his favorite bubble-popping video game, to tide him over. The car in front of me slowed, their brake lights illuminating as they turned into the little red drive-in. A big, black truck honked from behind me, and Kingston, my almost two-year-old, stirred in his seat. Frustration building in my chest, I whipped my head around but couldn't see the driver. I'd bet it was a city slicker, someone annoyed by the slow speed of the coast. The road turned into a one-way, and the big truck zoomed past me. "Mommy, that truck is loud."

"Yes, it is, buddy."

"Are we there yet?" Christian grumbled.

I shook my head, "Almost. Almost there." He flopped his arms and legs out around him, and I chuckled. Christian was a resilient and funny kid, but he wasn't immune to being just a kid. "A few minutes, babe." Thankfully, Kingston was still sleeping, and I gripped the steering wheel harder, ready to leave the car. I knew where I was going, even though I hadn't been to Breakaway Shores since before Jack died. Luke had found me a rental house for the summer right near his home so that it would be within walking distance.

We turned off the main road, and I could see the beach entrance at the end of the long road. Like Luke said, our little rental came into view with the bright blue door. A black SUV filled the driveway with Luke leaning against the outside, phone in hand. His head popped up, and he held his arms out, a smile widening. Immediately, I felt lighter, easier than I had in months of being far away from family.

I pulled the minivan beside him in the driveway as Christian wiggled, "It's Uncle Luke!"

Twisting around in my seat, I put a finger to my lips, “Quiet, buddy. Let me get you out.” But before I could press the button, Luke moved around the van and pulled the handle. The door slid open on its own.

Christian bounced in his car seat, “Uncle Luke!” He was old enough to remember him as family, but the weekly FaceTime calls with Luke helped their relationship grow. Our time was up in Colorado, especially after Jack’s parents moved away. We were on our own. So, after the school year ended, Christian graduated from kindergarten, and we left on the first flight. Our truck full of boxes and furniture was coming.

Luke unclipped Christian’s buckles and pulled him into a hug. “I’m so glad you made it. How was the drive?”

“Long!”

“Were you good for your mom?” Luke asked, shooting me a glance.

Christian nodded excitedly. “Can we go inside?”

Luke met my eyes again. “I’ll come back and help you unload.”

I waited for them to head toward the house before leaving the driver’s seat. My legs were stiff as I stood, and I closed the door softly. Kingston didn’t move as I undid his harness straps and held him on my shoulder. His legs were so long. When did they get so long?

The outside of the house was immaculate. The forest green paint on the shingles looked fresh. Maybe it was. The white trim was clean, and the grass out front was cut at sharp angles. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Luke managed rental homes for his clients. He told me he’d only let us stay in his favorite one.

Jack would have loved this house. The front porch was large and wrapped around the other side of the house. A swinging bench sat to the right of the door, and it looked cozy with all the pillows. At home in Colorado, Jack loved sitting on the front porch swing with a hot chocolate and watching videos on his phone. I could almost see him sitting on the swing as I ascended the stairs, holding the son he never got to meet.

The front door stood open, and I pushed it closed with my shoulder. I heard Christian's excited voice from upstairs and moved slowly. I didn't want to wake up Kingston if I could help it. The hallway was short, with two doors on each side. The first one on the left stood open, and Luke sat on the ground, showing Christian a box of overturned dinosaur toys in the middle of a very kid-centered bedroom. A couple of shopping bags were in the corner, and my heart warmed at the thought of Luke shopping just for the boys.

I moved to the door on the left without turning on the light and placed Kingston on the bed. He twisted around, laying on his belly, but he didn't wake up. I moved the many pillows around him, creating a barrier if he decided to roll over and closed the door silently.

We'd made it. We were in Oregon, the beach a couple of miles west, and we were around family again. Something settled in my chest. A tiny piece of me felt like it had just fit back into place. I left Luke and Christian playing on the floor and returned to the car. We only had a few bags, and I didn't want to add more bags because it was hard enough to wrangle two kids through the airport with two car seats. Our stuff was coming, and we'd buy it new if I missed something.

The front door was still open, and as I stepped out onto the porch, Luke called from behind me, "I said I'd get the stuff."

He rushed down the stairs behind me and moved past me. "It's okay. We just have a few bags."

“You go back inside. I’ve got this,” Luke smiled, stepping off the porch backward. I knew it shouldn’t, but it felt strange to accept help, even after so long. I’d been alone for the last year or so and knew I needed the help. Help was okay. It didn’t mean that I couldn’t do it. I was trying to work on it and wrap my head around that notion. Luke didn’t struggle with the weighty suitcases as he brought them inside. I closed the door behind him. “I’ll take these upstairs for you.”

“Kingston is asleep in the second room. I closed the door, so maybe just leave them in the hall.”

“You got it,” He took each one up separately and, on his way back down, said, “Christian is playing. I got some toys for them. I hope that’s okay.” I smiled, fatigue starting to weigh on my shoulders, “I’ve got a few houses for us to look at tomorrow.”

Yes, buying a house. A new house. A house that Jack would never set foot inside, never sleep next to me in. “I hope you’ve lined up some good ones,” I joked and headed toward the kitchen, suddenly starving.

“The first one is at nine tomorrow.” Luke followed behind me. “I wish you guys would have stayed with me. I have room.”

“Luke, I could not do that to you,” The kitchen light was on, and sitting on the counter were three plates with food. “The boys are fun, but they’d kill your game when you brought home dates.”

“I got you some groceries and made you some food. Didn’t want you to have to worry about that.” Luke touched my shoulder, and I tried to bite back emotion. “Do you want to eat on the back patio? Take a little break?”

“That sounds great.”

“You head out there, take a load off. And I think the boys would help my game,” Luke chuckled, putting one of the plates in the microwave over the stove. Luke was a wonderful guy, honestly. Such a great brother. But he couldn’t make a relationship last to save his life. I sometimes thought he preferred it that way.

The backyard was cozy, and the yard was not too large, but it was enough for the boys to run around. The patio was small but held a circular table with padded chairs around it. I sat down and placed my phone on the table, the picture on my screen coming to life. The boys held their tiny pillows with Jack’s face on them. It made my heart ache and swell at the same time. Luke wordlessly brought me my plate of food. He set it down in front of me and squeezed my shoulder before going back inside.

The trees whistled around me as a soft wind blew around. Salt swam in the air, with a new beginning ahead of me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

### Meet Cute

A dinosaur roared beside my head, Christian stretching next to me, pressing his feet into my legs. Kingston was on my other side, his body pressing against my back. I woke up like this a few mornings every week. Christian slept through the night most of the time, but when he didn't, he found his way into my bed. I complained about it to myself, but I enjoyed it. I loved being their safe place, even if I never got to stretch out in bed.

"Mommy, it's morning time," Christian half-whispered into my face. My eyes opened to a soft light filtering through the top of the drapes.

I hated that he was right because I didn't feel well-rested. I wanted to sleep more. "Shh, your brother is asleep," I whispered back, motioning for him to get off the bed. He knew the routine. Christian hopped down, and his little feet padded against the soft floor. I rolled onto the open side of the bed, and the door handle creaked as Christian opened it. He looked back at me, his brown hair sticking up in the back. Christian had my eyes, big and brown, but everything else about him was Jack. "Go downstairs, and I'll be there in just a minute."

Christian nodded and slipped out the door. He left it open just a bit, and I sat up, stretching my arms above my head. My phone was face down on the white bedside table. I grabbed it, standing up. Kingston moved, turning to face the other side. He was my good sleeper. Always had been, which was surprising because I'd had no help when he was a baby. Maybe he knew that and decided to give me a break.

My phone brightness was down, and there were only a few notifications. I turned off



my social media push notifications, which helped to keep me more focused throughout the day. But there was an email from my agent. I knew what it said. She needed pages. She needed me to finish the next book, and I was trying. Not doing very well, though. There were a couple of texts from Luke, links to the three houses he would show me today.

Before diving into that, I moved a pillow on either side of Kingston and grabbed Jack's favorite sweatshirt. I left the door cracked just slightly and made my way downstairs. "Can I have my milk in a cup, Mom?" Christian's voice was loud because the boy had no volume control.

"Coming, buddy."

Christian knelt on a chair at the table, holding a brightly colored box. "Mom, look, it's sugar cereal."

I walked over to him, kissing the top of his head. "You can thank your Uncle Luke for that."

"I'm so excited. Can I have a big bowl?" The excitement on his face made me smile. It was the little things that kids noticed that made their day. Maybe I needed to try that.

The first house was just what you'd expect for a beach house. Luke told me the owner's complete life story on our way there, both boys occupied with brand new dinosaur toys in the backseat of the van. The woman had been single her whole life and loved being that way. She was ready to move near her sister, who lived in Florida. Her house was one story with three bedrooms right next to each other. The shingles on the outside were weathered gray from the salt spray. A sign outside the door with waves and big, bold letters called the house Breakaway Manor. Everything inside was some shade of blue, and I had to give it to the lady. She knew how to

decorate. Everything was cohesive and made you feel like you were on vacation at the beach. Christian got too handsy with a lamp and almost knocked it off the entryway table. Luckily, Luke grabbed it just in time. He locked up, and we headed one street over to the next house. It felt silly to strap the boys into the car for a one-minute ride, but we did it anyway.

“Okay, now this house has three bedrooms as well, but it does have an office space on the main level. It has two levels and a backyard, although it needs some work. This is a second home for the owners, and they have a handful of others, so they just want to offload this one. I bet you could get in this one quickly if you wanted to.” Luke shuffled the papers on his clipboard as we arrived at the address.

Luke exited the car and went to the front door, pressing on the oversized lockbox hanging off the handle. Christian unbuckled himself and jumped out of his car seat to get his brother out. He was a good helper when he wanted to be. I opened the sliding van door and waited for them. Kingston smiled at me, and I picked him up, putting him on one hip. “Let’s go look at this house, babes.”

“Purple house!” He yelled in my ear as I took in the house from the street.

It was purple, a little bit too purple for me. But the paint could be changed. Christian ran ahead to Luke, who opened the door. “I wanna pick my room,” he called out.

“Take off your shoes, Christian.”

He skidded to a stop and took off his shoes before bounding inside. Luke followed me as I walked into the house. He didn’t try to sell me anything at the other house but answered my questions. The living room was off to the left, and everything appeared homey. The layer of dust on the furniture wasn’t super inviting. The downstairs was a circle, with the stairs in the middle. I wanted something more open. To make it easier to see the boys and be with them. I knew it wasn’t the winner for me, but I walked

through all the rooms and found Christian lying on the end of a bed in one of the upstairs bedrooms.

“What do you think, Mama?” he asked as I walked in.

Kingston rested his head on my shoulder, and my arms ached. But I knew the days of him wanting me to hold him were few. Christian still did sometimes, but he was too busy. Too independent at his age. “I think it’s nice. We still have one more to look at.”

“I like this one. There’s so much blue stuff. Blue is the best color.” He flopped down on the bed and let out a big sigh.

“Let’s go before you fall asleep,” I joked, and he popped his head up. He rolled off the side, catching himself with a leg, and followed me out of the room. Luke was on his phone by the front door, and he met my eyes as we came down the stairs. “It’s nice.”

“And onto the next,” he said with a chuckle, moving toward the door.

“I mean, I really like the decor.”

Luke laughed again as Christian ran out the door. “I’m not offended. This isn’t my favorite, but I think it’s good to see a variety of houses.”

Luke was older than me by just a few years. We weren’t close growing up, always pitted against each other. But as adults, our relationship had grown. It is one of the closest relationships I have. The only person in our family who I cared to talk to. The only person in our family who I knew would always listen.

“We can walk to the next one. It’s just around the corner.” Luke said, locking the

door behind us.

Christian pulled on the van's door handle, trying to get it to slide open. "Bub, we're gonna walk to the next one."

His face lit up, and he jumped. "Yes, can we go to the beach after?"

Luke grabbed his hand and pulled him along, "Only if I can bury you in the sand." His eyes went wide, and then he softened as Luke laughed.

Kingston wiggled in my arms, "Let me down," he said against my hair, and I put him on the ground, my hand wrapped firmly around his.

We walked in the middle of the street, with sidewalks nonexistent on most roads. But it was quiet, and the sounds in the distance were very far away. Luke pointed to the left, "Down G street." And we followed behind him.

The houses started to spread out, with more space in between each one. They were more prominent on this street, too, not by too much, but more comfortable. My eye caught on one, the siding weathered but not like it'd been there for decades. The front had a wraparound porch leading to the right side of the house. There was a swing with mismatched pillows facing the street. A bay window upstairs, and I stopped in the middle of the street. Kingston tugged on my hand, "Let's go, Mom."

"This is it," Luke's voice was bright, and I met his eyes as he stood in the empty driveway of the house that I had been staring out.

"Yeah," I said, not sure what else to say. I loved it. I hadn't even stepped inside, but something about it settled another tiny broken piece of me. I could see the boys chasing each other on the porch, and I would read in the bay window upstairs. The grass was beautiful and healthy out front.

The boys followed Luke as he unlocked the front door. He waited for me to go inside before following. The house was clean and well put together. The entryway led right into the living room, and I could see the kitchen and dining room all from the door. Open, so much space. A set of French doors led to what I assumed was the backyard, and the stairs were to my left.

A short table sat on the wall by the stairs, with a smattering of frames standing up. The photos caught my gaze. There was a young boy in football gear and an older man with his arm wrapped around his shoulders. Another picture showed the same boy laughing with a woman who matched his eyes in front of a snowy mountain. The smallest photo gave me pause; it looked like the boy but years later. He wore a blue football jersey with a charging bolt, and his hands were up in the air. He was on a football field, looking like he had been playing in a game. “Who lives here?” I asked my brother, turning around to rest on the table's edge.

Luke glanced up from his phone, smiling, “One of my buyers from a few years ago. He’s a good guy, but he’s just looking to move. He’s retired from football,” he said, motioning to the photos.

Football. Jack loved football. I learned to love it, but it had been hard to watch since he died. I could still hear him cheering, booing, and yelling excitedly at his favorite teams. “But he’s moving?”

“He wants to, yeah. This house is not on the market yet, but he wants to sell it. It’s a great house.”

“Yeah, it is.” And I thought so. The kitchen was beautiful, and the upstairs bedrooms were spacious. The bay window was precisely the kind of space I thought it would be from the outside. I hadn’t lived in a house without Jack since we got married. The house we’d left in Colorado was our house when we married. I thought he would have liked this one. He would have loved the front porch, and seeing the kids while

we were in the kitchen was always a big one for him. Luke let me walk through the house alone, and I walked back downstairs with my heart in my throat.

I wanted this house so badly. It was where I could see myself starting again. I stepped across the threshold onto the large back patio when I heard a voice I didn't recognize. My eyes found Luke standing across from a tall man.

The one in the photos. He was older now, his dark hair shorter, but it was him. Christian and Kingston were huddled by a large rock. The backyard was great and completely fenced in. It was just another thing that I loved about it.

"I'm sorry that we overlapped. I thought you were still in the city," Luke said, glancing at me.

The man followed his gaze, and how he looked at me made something inside me freeze. He looked upset, and it felt like it might be because of me, of us being there. Which was irrational, but the strength of his glare made me question myself. I pushed my hair behind my ears and smiled, walking toward them. "It's fine. I finished early," his voice deep and gruff. He crossed his arms over his chest, and the simple button-up shirt he had on stretched across his forearms. His dark hair was short but styled in a way almost like he spent too much time doing it that morning. His eyes looked blue in the photos, but it was clear this close that they were woodsy green. His face was clean-shaven, and he looked like he should still be playing football. I looked away because I felt like I was staring.

"Zander, this is my sister, . She's a fan of the house."

He nodded to Luke, not to me, "Great. I'd love to get it sold."

"Why haven't you listed it?" I asked, not sure why I needed to know the answer to that question.

Zander glanced at the two boys playing, “Just looking for the right person to sell it to, I guess.” He met my eyes momentarily, and I felt like a heatwave rolled over me .

Luke chuckled, “Well, we will get out of your hair, okay? Guys, it’s time to go.”

Christian’s head shot up, a glare on his face, “I don’t want to go.”

“I thought we were going to play at the beach,” I tried to keep my voice light, not wanting to have a kid meltdown in front of a stranger.

“Can we get ice cream?” Kingston asked, haphazardly dropping a handful of rocks. Zander walked past me, his body entirely too close to mine, and went inside the house.

“Ice cream sounds perfect,” I said, wanting to escape this unfamiliar feeling inside me.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

### Hiding

I saw the kid first. He was hanging from the low branch of a small tree as I came around the side gate. I knew they were looking at the house, but I just wanted to be out of my truck. The drive from the airport had not calmed me down; instead, it made me feel even more antsy. The boy's brown hair hung over his eyes, sticking up in odd places around his ears. He immediately dropped to the ground when he spotted me. "Who are you?" he paused before saying confidently, "This is our house."

I stifled a laugh. "Oh yeah?"

The kid folded his arms over his chest and scrunched his face up like kids do. "Yeah, my mommy is buying it."

I shoved my keys into my pocket and smiled at him. Something about him batted down the frustration that had built up in my chest on the drive home. "That's great news. Your mommy is buying it from me."

His eyes widened and then shot toward the deck. I took a few steps past him and saw another little boy with long blonde hair lying in the grass. Luke stood on the porch watching him. "Man, did I not tell you we were gonna be here?" He wore his work clothes, which consisted of his pants, which were entirely too tight, and a crisp button-up shirt. I kept telling him the pants were not right, but he insisted that the ladies had no complaints. Typical Luke.

"No, you did. I took an earlier flight back." I waved my hand through the air and nodded at my friend.



Luke looked visibly relieved, his fingers holding tightly onto his phone. “Okay, we’re almost done. Christian, Kingston, this is my friend, .”

The boy I saw first stalked over, rushing to Luke. “I met this guy already. He was very protective of the house.”

“Mommy says strangers are not for talking to.” Christian leaned back onto Luke, and it was unusual to see Luke with kids. I hadn’t seen him interact with any kids in the year and a half that I’d known him. Women, yes, but never kids. But these were his nephews, I guessed. He told me his sister was coming to town and that she had two kids. She was a widow, which just made me think of my mom. Until I saw her, I could see where her kid got his steely gaze and confidence .

She held herself so carefully but confidently when she came out on the back patio. Her brown hair was short, easy to maintain, and wavy around her face. Her brown eyes were big, making her more noticeable. She wore a gray pullover sweatshirt without a hood and jeans that she cuffed at the bottom. Everything about her clothes was casual but didn’t hide the curves underneath. And it was the way her shoulders stood tall that was hard to get out of my head.

They were held tall like she wanted everyone to see her strength. And maybe she was that strong. But the glint of sadness in her eyes made me think there was more to those strong shoulders. We’d spoken briefly, and I had tried hard to keep my eyes from lingering too long.

Luke had texted, apologizing again and letting me know she wanted to make an offer on the house. I knew it would be a quick sell, especially with Luke on it, but I had no clue where I was going next. I needed to think about what I wanted to do. I’d come to hide on the Oregon coast after getting my heart broken a year and a half ago, and now, I just felt a bit lost.

I needed a project, maybe. Something that would help others or something that would just get me around other people. More than just Luke, who kept trying to get me to be his wingman. We'd tried that, and it wasn't entirely successful. It was for him, but it wasn't my thing.

It hadn't helped my overall mood that I'd run into my ex in LA. It had been a quick trip. My teammate was being honored by the team. Natalie shouldn't have been there. She was not a fan of football. Not really. Football players and their exposure? Sure, but not the sport itself. But there she was, draped all over one of the current players.

I shouldn't be bothered. It had been long enough, but still. Something about it rubbed me the wrong way.

I'd spent the last sixteen hours unsettled and then came home to a family in my house. Led by a woman who'd been through something you wouldn't wish on anyone, and I couldn't stop thinking about her. I was lying on the couch, some ridiculously dramatized movie playing on the screen, but I'd stopped watching. My phone buzzed on my chest, and I smiled when I saw Dee's face pop up.

"Dee, how's it going, girl?" I asked, putting her on speaker.

"Pops! Today kind of sucked." Her voice broke, and I could picture her fighting tears. Dee was my niece, but I'd raised her for most of her life. "I was late to my class and then the bottom of my backpack ripped. My lunch spilled all over me. It was just thing after thing. And now, I'm trying to study, but my roommate is watching a movie with her girlfriend, and they don't seem to care that I'm here."

I took a moment to formulate a game plan. I knew that sometimes Dee wanted me to advise, and sometimes she just wanted someone to hear her out. I took a chance on this being one of those times. "I'm sorry, Dee girl. That sounds like a truly terrible day. Do you need me to order you a new bag?"

Her voice quivered, “Yeah, can you just get me one you would get and not one I would get because it’s cute?”

This made me laugh because we’d had a whole argument about it before she left for college. I’d wanted her to get a plain but sturdy kind of backpack, and she’d thrown down over a very cute but flimsy thing. I wanted to say I told you so, but this wasn’t the time. “Of course. I’ll order it right now.”

“What about your day? What did you do?” Dee’s voice was calmer, and I was so grateful to hear it. It’d been a few days since she called.

I put a hand behind his head, talking as I stared at the ceiling. “I came home from LA today, and it was a fun trip. Nice to see some of the team, but you know how I’m selling the beach house? Luke showed it to someone today, and she will make an offer. So... that’s good.”

“She? Is it a local there?”

“No, she’s from out of town. Luke’s sister, actually. Her name is Izzy.”

Dee’s voice picked up. “Oh yeah, she has kids, right?”

Luke was a regular at the house and had fallen into a great faux-uncle role with Dee. I loved seeing her have that relationship, considering we had no other family. “Yeah. She was...” ’s voice drifted off.

“Oh my gosh!” Dee squealed on the other end, and I had to pull my phone away from my ear.

“Oh my, what?”

Dee laughed, crackling through the speaker. “You like her.”

I rolled my eyes. Dee always thought I liked everyone. She’d been trying to force me into a relationship since I’d broken up with my ex. “That’s silly. I barely said like four words to her. Her kids were funny, though. Very strong-willed.”

“And what does she look like?”

The answer came tumbling out of my mouth before I could stop myself, “Beautiful. Her hair was short, soft-looking, and like this deep chocolate color.” I stopped, blushing at the realization that I may have a small crush on Luke’s sister.

“Pops, you’ve got it bad. Please, ask her out, okay? Do it for me!” Dee sounded like her usual self now, the sadness and frustration wiped from her voice.

I sat up, running a hand through my hair. “I don’t think that’s the most professional thing to do if she wants to buy my house. And besides, I don’t like her like that.”

“Sure,” Dee said, really dragging out the word. “I feel better now. Thanks for that.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m glad I could help. I’ll order the backpack, Dee girl. I’ll get you some noise-cancelling headphones, too. Get back to studying for me, okay?”

“Thanks, Pops. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I said before hanging up the phone.

I glanced around my perfectly decorated home. I’d paid someone to decorate it, but they’d added lots of touches of me. There were pictures everywhere, Dee and my mom. My late brother and Dee when she was a baby. It felt like home but also not like home. I loved the Oregon coast, the stormy days, and the small town. I’d come to

know many of the locals in town and didn't want to leave. But I also just felt sort of stale, stagnant. I knew I needed to make a change, and for the first time in my adult life, I could do so. Dee was at school, starting her own life. This was my time to try something new.

I just had no idea what to try.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

Offered

“Okay, the offer has been sent. I know that I’m his agent, too, but I’ll make sure that you get a good deal, okay?” Luke closed his laptop and threw me a grin.

I smiled in return. “I believe you.”

“It’s a great house. The backyard has always been my favorite.”

“How do you know him?” I asked, thinking of the stereotypical tall, dark, handsome man who owned the house.

Luke tapped his fingers on the table. “He bought the house from me years ago, and we have just become friends. He’s a really good guy, but he just kind of never stays in one place, from what he’s told me. He likes to move around.”

“Is he always that grumpy?”

He threw his head back with a laugh, “I’m going to tell him you said that. He’s kind of grumpy, yeah. But once you get to know him, he’s not that grumpy. Something unpleasant happened on his trip, to say the least.”

“Yeah, I could tell he was...” Part of me wanted to see what he looked like without the harsh lines of anger on his face. He would probably be even more handsome, which was just unfair to the rest of us.

Christian came running into the room, slipping on his socks. “Mom, I’m bored.”

“Bored?” I asked him, making my eyes wide.

“So bored,” he whined, pulling on the bottom of his bright green t-shirt featuring a dinosaur on the front.

“I guess we should find something to do then,” Luke answered, tapping his hands on the table.

Christian moved over to him, climbing in his lap. “Like what? Can we go to that candy place again?”

I shot Luke a look, not wanting to over-promise on the sugar end before ten in the morning. “Candy? We haven’t even had lunch yet. But what if we went to the arcade?” Luke looked at me, smiling big.

Christian squealed, “Yes! Mom, can we please? Please?”

“Sure, but I need to get some caffeine before we do that. Go get your shoes on.” He jumped off Luke and ran toward the door.

“Yes, I need a tea, something fierce,” Luke said, following Christian.

The coffee shop wasn’t busy. It was just small. There were a few other people inside. One of them leaned against the glass of the pastry container, and I knew it was him the moment we opened the door. Zander wore a green canvas jacket over a deep green shirt and jeans. I pulled my eyes away from him as Luke waved. “Hey, buddy. Good morning, Shelley.”

The woman behind the counter was older, her gray hair pulled into a tight bun. She smiled at Zander, her hand on his forearm. So, he wasn’t mean to everyone, except the person who might be buying his house.

“Hi, Luke. Is this your sister?” Shelley asked.

Luke nodded. “Yup, my sister . This is Shelley, the keeper of the caffeine and the best scones you’ll ever have.” Shelley put her hand on her chest in thanks. “And these two little ones are my nephews.”

Shelley grabbed something from the pastry case and brought two small cake pops to the boys. She asked me, “Is it okay if they have these?”

“Sure,” I answered, knowing I could not say no once they saw the treat. The boys jumped up and down, saying a quick thanks before taking bites. I walked up to the counter, ignoring Zander to the best of my ability. It was hard, and I could almost feel his eyes on me. Or maybe not. Maybe being a widow had messed up my radar. “I’d love a chai tea with vanilla, please. Extra hot.”

“And my regular, please, Shelley,” Luke called out.

The woman nodded, turning her back to us as she got to work. The boys sat on a small bench right next to a large window. There were only two tables, one filled by an older couple reading the newspaper. They didn’t seem to care that we were all cramped in together. I walked over to the boys, standing behind them as they ate. Kingston looked up at me, his long, dirty-blond hair covering part of his eyes. “This is yummy,” he said with pure joy. I knew he needed a haircut, but I liked the look on him. Jack had given Christian haircuts, and it was one of those things that Kingston would never experience. I actively avoided the topic of haircuts, so I wouldn’t have to deal with it.

“What are you guys up to today?” I heard Zander ask from behind me. His voice was deep, vibrating through the entire space.

“We have an arcade and candy shop on our to-do list today. You want to come?”



Luke told his friend, but I wanted to take back his offer.

“You know I don’t say no to candy,” Zander responded. I glanced at him over my shoulder, only to find his eyes on me. My stomach flip-flopped, and thankfully, Shelley placed my hot drink on the counter.

“We won’t overload on candy, sis. Promise!” Luke said as I walked around them, giving myself more room than I needed to. There was something about him that just bugged me. Yeah, that’s what it was. Maybe his house wasn’t the right one for me. I didn’t want to deal with him through the process, even if he was Luke’s best friend.

“Thank you,” I said to Shelley and grabbed my purse.

She waved her hands at me, “Oh no. Zander took care of it for you guys.”

Of course, he did. I turned, keeping my face unaffected as I met his gaze. “Thank you.”

He held his coffee cup to me, and then Luke headed toward the door. “Boys, it’s candy time,” he said in a mock-serious voice.

My boys ran after him, and I slipped through the door, feeling Zander behind me. This was going to be an interesting day.

The candy store was exactly how I remembered. Jack hadn’t been a sweets fan, but I always had been. He’d humor me, walking around the store while I filled my basket with too much. The boys were leading Luke around the store, and it seems he underestimated what he was getting into. I was waiting in line at the chocolate counter, reading the fun signs that hung on the bright pink walls of the store.

The man in front of me was getting what felt like one of everything. Someone

stepped up beside me, and I looked over to find Zander. “You a chocolate fan?” he asked.

“In fact, I am. Big fan.”

“Which is your favorite?”

“Seafoam or maybe truffles. It’s a tie, I think.” I glanced over at him. He had his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Are you a chocolate fan?”

Zander smiled just a tiny bit, and his entire face brightened. It was gone quickly, and I knew I wanted to see it again. “Yes. Always. I don’t know why more people don’t know about seafoam. It’s the best.”

“The very best. Sorry you got dragged along with us today,” I told him.

He tilted back, his torso facing me more. “I wanted to come.”

The man in front of us moved, which meant it was our turn. My turn. I ordered too much chocolate, and Zander ordered more when I went to pay. He tapped his card while I wasn’t looking, and I narrowed my eyes at him. “That’s the second time you’ve done that today.”

“And?”

“What’s your game?”

He chuckled and turned away from me, heading toward the other end of the shop. Christian and Luke were both standing with their noses touching the window glass, which gave everyone a direct view into the taffy pulling station. “I can pay for myself, you know,” I called after him, not sure why I was so bothered by him.

Zander threw me a look over his shoulder while I felt someone tug at my elbow. I pulled back, stumbling sideways into Zander, turning to look at whoever grabbed me. Zander's arm wrapped around my back. His fingers pressed into my side. My eyes landed on a familiar face. “, what are you doing here?”

It was David, standing in front of me. He was older, with a few gray hairs throughout his dark facial hair. He had been in our friend circle in college. I guess he'd been my friend first, but Jack had liked him, too. “Wow, it's been such a long time,” I said, suddenly aware that Zander had his hand on my waist and I was still pressed against his side.

I hated myself for it, but I liked how it felt. I didn't want to move but stepped forward as David smiled. “Are you visiting Oregon?”

“I'm moving back here with my two kids. My brother lives here,” I pointed over to where the three of them stood, Zander still beside me.

“That's great. I'm just here with my brother and his family for the day,” his eyes flickered to Zander, “Is this your boyfriend?”

Before I could protest, Zander straightened up and dropped his arm from my side. He stepped forward slightly, holding out his hand to shake David's. “Nice to meet you. Not the boyfriend.”

David shook his hand, and then his face stilled. “Okay. It was nice to see you, . I'm in Portland, but maybe we can get together sometime and catch up?”

I smiled too big, a people pleaser, and nodded. “Sounds fun,” even though it didn't sound like fun.

David waved before turning around. Zander and I stayed there for a moment. I

glanced up, remembering what it had felt like to be against him. His body was so firm, his fingers strong on my waist. “Sorry for smashing into you.”

He shrugged. “That an ex-boyfriend?”

“No, just a friend from college.”

“He wanted to be your boyfriend, I bet.” He bumped his shoulder into mine.

Had he? “Huh, maybe. I was too into my husband in college. Back when we were just dating.”

Zander nodded, and my body tingled as he placed his hand on my lower back, turning me toward the boys. Had I just broken an invisible barrier around us by falling into him? What was wrong with me?

He took his hand off me a moment later, and I instantly wanted him to touch me again.

Uh oh.

### Intrusive

My bed was too small for all three of us. Christian was pressed right into my back, his face nuzzled against me. Kingston's feet were pressed onto my thighs, his head nearing the edge of the bed. It had been a rough night. Kingston didn't want to sleep, and Christian kept waking up from his brother's crying, which meant I didn't sleep much. And now, I was hot from their body heat and needed to pee.

Yesterday had been a good day. Zander had left before the arcade, his phone dinging before he left. I made a mental note to ask Luke what he did for work since he was a retired football player. I never considered what those guys did after they were too old or injured to play. I was glad he'd left because I couldn't stop thinking about his hands, which frustrated me.

I didn't have any widow friends in real life. I had stayed connected with one woman who I'd met through Instagram. She was older than me by a few years, but our husbands passed within a few months of each other. We didn't have heart-to-hearts or anything, but we encouraged each other. She had school-aged kids, and when she would complain about being a widow or doing all this alone, I was there to remind her she wasn't the only one. And she did the same for me. But she wasn't dating yet, and something about that made me feel like I shouldn't be dating yet. Not that I wanted to or had the energy to date. I hadn't even thought about anybody like that since Jack died. But if I was being candid with myself, Zander made something inside me wonder if I was ready to see what it would be like.

And that made me uneasy.

But maybe it would be a non-issue. He was moving. Leaving, and that would mean I wouldn't have to be around him for much longer.

I did my best to sneak out of bed and went downstairs. I grabbed my laptop off that kitchen counter and opened it up. My book was open in one window, and I minimized it. I reread part of it last night but was still completely stuck on where to go next. There was a new email from my agent. She was just checking in. I was still two months from my deadline. I had time, but she knew I was stuck. I shot her a response and tried to make it sound like I was making progress.

The rest of the morning fell into our usual routine. Kingston was up first, followed by Christian about forty-five minutes later. We had breakfast, and they watched a show while I did the dishes. Then, we got ready for the day. Luke popped through the front door as the boys started getting antsy. "Hello, my favorite people."

The boys were building a very intense dinosaur cage out of magnet tiles, but Christian waved at least.

"I thought you had showings today?" I asked my brother.

He shrugged. "I've got assistants for that. I'm taking full advantage of you guys being here and the boys not being in school. Plus, I may have made a mistake," Luke grimaced.

"What?"

"Mom called me," he started, and I knew what he'd done. "And I was late for a date, just trying to get her off the phone. She asked me what I had been up to, and I mentioned being with you and the kids."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“I’m sorry.”

“Is she coming here?” I asked him, my stomach knotting up. It’s not that I didn’t like my mom, but our relationship was tense. Since becoming a mom and then a widow, how I saw her changed. She always put herself first above everyone. It was a hard realization to come to after my husband died, and I needed her. I needed my mom to help me, to pick up the slack with my toddler while also being pregnant, and she just didn’t .

Luke shook his head, “She didn’t say she was, but I mean, you know her. She’s shown up here randomly a couple of times.”

I forced myself to smile. It wasn’t my brother’s fault that our mother was difficult. “It’s okay. She would have found out sooner or later. It’s alright.”

I could see his entire body relax. “I’ll make it up to you if she does show up. I’ll be your buffer.”

“That would be appreciated,” I told him as Kingston trotted into the dining room.

Luke turned his attention to him, switching to his uncle's voice, “Hey buddy.”

“What are you doing, Uncle Luke? Are we playing?” Kingston asked him, his eyes wide.

Luke shrugged, bending down on one knee so they were at eye level. “I’m just going to go hang out with my friend Zander. We were going to watch a movie, but do you guys want to play in the sprinkler? He has such a big yard!”

Kingston jumped up and down. “Yes, sprinkler,” and then looked at me, “Let’s go, Mama.”

“Your friend is okay with them coming? He doesn’t seem like the kid type.”

“He loves kids,” Luke said, picking Kingston up and throwing him over his shoulder.

“I can take them over, and you can stay here if you want?”

The offer tempted me, but I wanted to see Zander. No, not Zander, but the house. I wanted to see the house. So I said, “I’ll go, at least for a little while, to see the house again.”

“You’re smitten, aren’t you?” he joked.

“So, what if I am,” I said, bristling because while I was smitten by the house, I was starting to be interested in the owner, too.

The house was still beautiful, exactly where I could see myself living. I stood in the kitchen while the boys were playing in the backyard. Zander and Luke were out there, getting the sprinkler set up. It was not a sprinkler for kids, just something you’d use to water your grass, but the kids were still excited. It didn’t make a difference to them. The clear glass of water in my hands was chilled, and I wrapped both hands around it as I watched them. The boys were watching the setup so intensely. Zander kneeled, twisting the sprinkler into the hose, and my eyes caught the defined muscles in his arm. I couldn’t stop staring, and my cheeks blushed.

He stood and turned back to the house. Afraid that he would see me, I abruptly turned around. I let my head hang down and chuckled to myself. I don’t know if I could have made what I had been doing more obvious. I put down my glass and grabbed my book. I was going to get some reading in while the boys played, and the older boys did whatever they were planning on doing.

The French doors were already open, and I slipped through them as the water turned on. The boys squealed and started to jump through it, although Kingston was more



running around it than jumping through it. It was probably freezing. I figured they'd play in it for maybe twenty minutes before being too cold to keep going. I sat in one of the lounge chairs facing the backyard and opened my book. I had left off right after a particularly spicy part between my ranch-hand cowboy and the pretty city girl. Zander and Luke stepped onto the patio, and I forced myself to keep my eyes on my book. I did not need to check Zander out again. I knew what he looked like. Knew that he was handsome, so what? Get over it.

"Mom, look," I heard Christian yell, and I looked up. He jumped through the water stream again, and I gave him a thumbs up, which we'd done since he was little. Christian ran up the stairs, dripping water, and began to fall forward, letting out a little cry. I lunged forward simultaneously as Zander grabbed him with both hands. I moved toward them, my heart pounding. I wasn't a helicopter mom. I used to be after Jack died. But I'd learned to let my children work on their independence. It was good for them and me. Christian didn't cry. Instead, he looked up at Zander and said, "I'm okay!"

"You sure, buddy?"

Christian smiled and met my eyes before running back down the stairs and into the grass. Zander stood, wiping his hands on his jeans. I watched him, noticing how large his hands were and how dark his jeans were. The jeans somehow made him seem taller. "That's one tough kid."

"He sure is," I responded, trying to refocus myself. "Sorry if we crashed your bro time. My brother said the boys could come, and trying to backtrack with a toddler isn't a fun experience."

"It's fine. Do you want to come inside? I was gonna put on a movie, but we could find a kid one, too." Zander's voice was light and friendly.

I did want to go inside to look at the house. To plan for how I'd decorate, but he hadn't responded to the offer yet. Maybe he would disagree. Maybe this house wouldn't be ours. But I also wanted to go in and look at him, which would only complicate things. "I don't know, I'll just stay out here."

He watched me for a moment and then nodded. "Okay."

I sat back in the chair, holding my book with both hands. The boys were grabbing rocks, stacking them as high as they could in the shape of a mountain. The time would have been well spent writing and working on my stunted novel, but I didn't want to try it today. Instead, I glanced inside the large windows and saw Luke standing, his phone to his ear. He was on his phone a lot lately, which had to mean business was good.

I heard the door click open and turned to see Zander walking toward me with a white plate in hand. He smiled softly and sat, placing the plate in between us. "Your brother needs to learn to leave his phone on do not disturb."

The plate was filled with meats, different kinds of cheese, and delicious buttery-looking crackers. Zander started to take some food. "Can I ask you an intrusive question?" I said before second-guessing myself.

He looked up at me, his eyes wide. "Oh, jeez. I guess so."

"Why'd you retire from football?"

Zander took a bite and then turned his head toward the yard. He was going to make me wait for the answer. I watched him, his dark hair pushed back from his face. "Let me guess, you googled me?"

I shook my head, "No, but maybe I should do that. I saw the photos, and my brother

mentioned that you were retired.”

He laughed, and the sound was warm. “Man, that’s a hard question. Football was my life and the center of everything I did. But it got to the point where I just didn’t love it anymore. I hated practice and the lifestyle of being in the public eye. We had a good season, not great, but my stats were good, and I decided to retire. Better than waiting until I was too injured to keep going, I guess.”

“Do you miss it?”

“I do, funny enough,” Zander held a cracker between his fingers, “But I’ve realized I don’t miss the league or playing for the big teams. Or the entertainment of it, but I just miss the game.”

I grabbed a piece of cheddar cheese and placed it on a cracker. “Maybe you could coach?” I suggested before taking a small bite.

Zander nodded, taking a bite of his cracker. “So, I know what your brother has told me about you, but can I ask you an intrusive question now?”

My chest tightened, figuring the question would revolve around Jack. I’d gotten better about talking about him, about being a widow. But it was still hard. The ache was still there. Just dimmer. “Sure.”

“Why do you want my house?”

I chuckled, the question surprising me. “I don’t know if I’d call that intrusive.” Zander smiled at me, and my eyes felt glued to his face. The strong nose and the cut of his chin. His skin wasn’t tanned but looked warm in the sunlight. “My boys and I are starting over, I guess. I want a home for them always to come back to. To be their safe spot, and this house feels like it could be just that.”

“How long ago did your husband die?” His question was soft, but my breath stilled at his use of the word die. Most people said pass.

“Almost three years ago. In a couple of months.” Zander’s eyes went to my two boys, and I could feel the next question coming. “He died when I was pregnant with Kingston.”

“Wow, that’s terrible,” and his words felt genuine. I nodded, not sure what else to say. I don’t remember many of those early days or even the first year after Jack died. My therapist told me it was my brain’s way of protecting me, but I knew I’d missed out on precious moments with my two boys.

Moments I would never get back. “How did your husband die?” I looked over at Zander, whose eyes were on me. His gaze was intense, piercing almost, and I cracked a smile. “I see your strategy. You start with the least intrusive question and then make them more and more intrusive.” He shrugged, and I grabbed a piece of what looked like salami off the plate. “He died in a car crash on the way to work. They said it was instantaneous. No pain. I hadn’t thought anything was wrong until the cops were at the door instead of him coming home from work.”

Zander shook his head. “My dad died when I was young, not as young as your boys, but I remember the toll it took on my mom. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks, it definitely has been difficult.”

“You don’t have to do that, you know?” His words came out in a rush.

“Do what?” I asked, watching him.

He met my gaze, and my pulse began to quicken. “Pretend like it wasn’t the worst thing you could have ever imagined happening to you. You don’t have to pretend to

be all fixed. I think grief is something people don't understand. It never goes away."

I was taken aback. The weight of his words hit me square in the chest. I was pretending, always pretending. I had to pretend for my boys. They needed me to be the best version of myself, even if I wasn't. I pulled my eyes away from his, their deep green making my cheeks heat. "I appreciate that. I feel like I have to, though. People accept that you're grieving for a certain time, and then you need to be over it."

"The stupidest thing I've ever heard," Zander scoffed and grabbed another piece of cheese. He took a bite, and I wanted to know more.

More about him, about how he knew exactly how I felt about grief and the process of growing with grief. I opened my mouth to ask him a question when the door behind us opened, and my brother stepped onto the patio. "Sorry about that, Zand."

Zander glanced over his shoulder. "No big deal. Just talking with your sister, the soon-to-be owner of this house."

"Not so sure about that," I retorted.

He looked at me, widening his eyes. "Oh yeah?"

"You haven't responded to my offer."

"Right. I'm trying to decide when I want to move. I guess we should talk about that. I was hoping to spend the rest of the summer here. Could you wait to move in until the end of summer?" Zander asked, and something inside me squirmed. I wanted to be in our own space now. But I could wait. It just meant being in the same town as Zander all summer. Zander, with his green eyes and wisdom on grief,

Luke stood in front of our chairs. “Would you take ten grand off the price?” he asked his friend.

“Definitely.”

I met Luke’s eyes, and he raised his eyebrows. “Not a bad deal. ”

“Okay, I can do that. We’ve already got our rental for the summer anyway.” Luke chuckled, and I held out my hand so Zander could shake it. His gaze was firm before placing his hand in mine. His skin was rough and scratched against my palm, tingling my insides. I pulled out of his grip faster than I should have, but it was too much—that feeling. I hadn’t felt that way in so long, not since Jack.

“Luke, get the paperwork started, and let’s sell this house,” Zander said, and I felt his gaze on me as I stood. I wanted to put some distance between us, but I needed to.

I wasn’t ready for those feelings. To start something in that realm. My boys were my priority, nothing else: only my boys. But I couldn’t stop thinking about how my body had tingled and how refreshing it had felt.

## Page 6

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### Baby in the Corner

“Okay, what about the girl in the corner?” Luke asked, pointing to a woman with long blonde hair and a tight black shirt. She sat alone at the bar, nursing a drink with her head on a swivel. She was here for an obvious reason.

I shook my head. “Not interested.”

Luke rolled his eyes, “You’ve gotta get back out there. Natalie’s moved on, like four times over now.”

“Gross,” I scoffed, even though it was true. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea right now. I’m moving.”

“Do you have any of that figured out yet?” Luke asked, taking a sip of his diet soda. He didn’t drink. We talked about it once. He had an addictive personality, and alcohol was his addiction. He’d been sober for five years. I admired him for it.

“Not at all. I’m glad your sister was willing to wait to move until the end of summer, though.” And my cheeks burned because the feeling of her pressed into me echoed through my body. Our conversation on my back deck made me want to know more about her, which was exactly what I needed not to do.

Luke tore a part of his napkin off. “She is the best. She’s been through so freaking much, and I just don’t know how she does it.”

“Kids are good motivators.”

“Oh, look at this group. They’re tourists for sure.” Luke gestured to the door, where six women walked in, fiddling with their scarves and coats. They all looked slightly different, but you could tell they were trying to emulate the same style.

“Just your type.”

Luke downed the rest of his drink and stood, slapping his hand down on my shoulder. “I’ll be back.” But I knew he wouldn’t be. I watched Luke approach the group, and they all exchanged glances before smiles filled their faces.

I had to give it to him. He was dedicated to the lifestyle. He did not want to be tied down. I pulled out my phone and clicked on Dee’s name. It rang, buzzing against my face, and she answered quickly. Too quick for a freshman in college.

“Hey, Pops!”

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to be casual .

There was chatter in the background. “I’m out getting some dinner with friends. How are you?”

“I’m good. You go, I don’t want to bug you.” Even though I did. It was strange not to have Dee home anymore. She was off to college and beginning her own life. I was so proud of her and knew her dad would be too. But it didn’t mean I didn’t want to check up on her now and again.

“Okay, I’ll call you tomorrow!” Dee said loudly through the phone before ending the call. I flipped my phone around in my hand and met Luke’s gaze. He smiled and gave me a quick wave.

But nothing was appealing about going over and conversing with a group of random



women. Not when my head replayed how it felt to be so close to Izzy. The fresh citrus smell of her hair and the softness of her curves. I wanted to be anywhere but here. I gave Luke a quick shake of my head and weaved around the tables, reaching the exit.

I can still remember the conversation that led us to move to the Oregon coast. It had really been all Dee. She'd been doing school remotely and had been killing it. She wanted to get out of LA, which I totally understood. I had too. And Dee had read a book set in Oregon, so we'd visited and felt right at home in this tiny little town.

Luke had been my first friend and biggest encourager of returning to the dating scene. I had been on a few dates, maybe six or seven. But nothing had fit quite right. No one had made me as excited or interested as Izzy.

And I wasn't sure what to do with that.

### Sandcastles

The sun was shining, which didn't always happen on the Oregon coast. It wasn't like California, where the water was warm, and the sun was always high in the sky. No, the coast was mostly cloudy, and the water was freezing. Even in the summer.

But the boys were having fun. I sat in a low beach chair, a baseball cap pulled down as they played in the sand in front of me. Luke was working today, and we were enjoying being lazy. We'd had a movie morning and were having lunch on the beach. Christian had gone back and forth to the ocean, filling up their buckets so they could make very wet sand right in front of our blanket. I'd given up on leaving without sand once we'd gotten here, and Kingston had crawled over to the blanket, his hands covered in wet sand.

I loved the sound of the crashing waves. It was where I always felt comfortable. The beach was busy since the sun was out. People flocked from the city on sunny days, but it wasn't too crowded yet. I glanced around, little kids running past us to the water. The beach had always been my happy place. Both of my books were set on the coast. It seemed like the best place to fall in love, by the sea with stormy clouds and little coffee shops.

Jack and I had fallen in love here before we really knew what love was. I had the biggest crush on him when we were teenagers. He had been muscular, even if he was still very skinny. His short blonde hair had been brighter back then, and his smile always made me blush. I loved spending summer nights riding around town with him and our friends. We'd texted a few times after my parents sold their house my junior year of high school, but it wasn't the same. Not until college, and once I saw him, it

was over for me.

Thinking about him made my heart ache. I missed him. Missed the way he would have been right in the sandy action with our boys. I loved the beach but didn't want to exfoliate my entire body.

Kingston flipped over his plastic sandcastle mold and took it off, his eyes excitedly bright. But it didn't look like a sandcastle. Instead, it sort of just fell apart. He let his head fall backward and let out a heavy sigh. I had to stop myself from laughing .

Christian came over, "Let me help you," his voice was so calm. Kingston plopped down on his backside and worked with his brother to refill the mold.

My phone buzzed, and it was a text from a number I hadn't saved.

I stared at the text, reading it over again. Why was he texting me? I was buying his house, and he was my brother's friend. We didn't need to text. I put my phone, face down, on the blanket next to me. I didn't want to text back because I did want to text back.

I was mature enough to admit that I had a crush on Zander. He was hot and fit. But it wasn't going to work. He was moving at the end of the summer, and I was a widow with two kids. Part of me felt proud that I even had a crush. Jack would be proud, which was also a little weird.

How'd he get my number? Luke probably gave it to him. I grabbed my phone, unlocked it, and reread the text. My heart fluttered a tiny bit. I was going to text back, to be polite. I had manners. I quickly typed out a short message.

Great. Conversation over. I placed my phone on my leg and looked back at my boys. Christian and Kingston were flipping the sandcastle mold back over, round two of the

building process. This time, it came out much more like a sandcastle, and Kingston cheered. Christian had a cheesy smile, and then they got to work on the next piece. They got along well. I was lucky. Christian had been at a good age when Kingston had been born, even though he'd been in the thick of missing his dad. He loved Kingston from the very first moment he'd seen him. Always wanting to hold him, kiss him, and play with him.

My phone buzzed, and I felt myself getting excited- too excited. It was probably just Instagram or Luke. I flipped it over and saw another text message from Zander, his number showing instead of his name.

Okay, he's being nice. Not a big deal. Just a nice guy placating a lonely widow who was buying his house.

The three dots popped up quickly, and I glanced up at the boys, who were still doing the same thing. My phone buzzed with his response.

Where? What? Why would I tell him that? I let out a little scoff and told him exactly where we were.

I threw on the question at the end to make it seem like he was weird for asking. But I didn't see him responding.

Christian let Kingston turn over the next mold, which worked even better than the last one. "You guys are getting good at that."

They both looked over at me, smiles on their face. "We're building a territory for the sharks to live," Christian told me, his voice very loud.

I rechecked my phone, but nothing. I put it down on the blanket and picked up my book. Just a crush, nothing more. And it was bound to be kind of anxiety-inducing

because it was my first one since Jack. That's all. But I needed to keep my distance because it wasn't an option.

The boys created two more pieces of their castle before requesting a snack. I didn't even try to wipe their hands; instead, we walked down to the water. My feet sank into the wet sand as they leaned down, letting the fresh, foamy water clean most of the sand. They might still have some, but not enough to stop them from enjoying a snack. "Okay, no touching anything now."

They held their hands out in front of them as we walked back to our blanket. "Mom, look," Kingston said, pointing ahead of us.

I followed his finger and found Zander standing right next to our stuff. He had blue shorts and a white T-shirt on. His dark hair looked messed up, pushed back from his face. He gave us a little wave, and I didn't know how to act. I waved too and waited until we were closer to say, "Funny meeting you here."

"I was walking when I texted you and figured I'd stop by and say hi." His attention turned to the boys, who sat on the blanket and grabbed their snacks. "Did you guys build this cool castle?"

Kingston nodded, his mouth full of Ritz crackers, while Christian answered, "Yeah, it's for some sharks." His mouth was also full of crackers.

"It's pretty cool. Sharks are gonna swim right up the beach for a chance to live there."

"We're in a big shark phase right now," I said. Zander nodded and sat down on the blanket. Kingston laid down on his back, his snack bag resting on his belly. He put one arm over his eyes. It was getting close to nap time. "Do you walk on the beach every day?" I felt a twinge of awkwardness at my attempt at small talk.

First, he texted me, and now he is here. Hanging out on the beach with us.

“I try to, yeah. Soaking it all up before I move.” Right, because he was leaving. I had to keep that at the front of my mind.

“It’s busy today.”

“Which means the traffic is gonna be bad, too.” He was right. The main road, which was just two lanes, would be packed. “Where’s Luke today?”

Oh, he was looking for my brother. That made more sense. “He is working down in Lincoln today, I think. Busy day showing houses.”

“Did you see he put up a billboard?” Zander asked, a smile creeping up on his face.

“A billboard?” This was news to me.

Zander leaned back on his hands, stretching out his legs in front of him, “Yeah, it wasn’t really his idea, but his boss thought using his face would help them get more clients. It’s just weird to see his face every time I drive to the grocery store.”

“I cannot wait to bug him about that. It’s going to be amazing. He hates having his picture taken,” I chuckled, and Christian dropped his bag of snacks in the sand.

“Mom, can we go home?”

“You tired, buddy?” Kingston was in the same spot, holding a cracker up to his mouth. I nodded and then met Zander’s eyes, “I’ll tell Luke that you were looking for him, but it looks like I have to get these tired guys home.”

Zander didn’t move for a moment, then leaned forward, “I’ll help you take this stuff

back. I don't think the tired boys will be much help. Did you walk?"

"Yeah," I said and pulled my eyes away from him. His skin looked so warm in the sunlight that little beads of sweat clung to his forehead. "But you don't have to help. I've got it." I was used to doing things alone and didn't resent it. I tried to find gratitude in the fact that losing Jack had made me stronger, a more present mother and helped me carry things in bigger batches.

He shook his head, "No, I'll help."

I stood and started to put away my beach chair while Zander picked up the boys' dirty beach toys. Christian stood, still holding onto his snacks. I walked over to Kingston, who I'm pretty sure was almost asleep, but nudged him softly, "Big guy, it's time to go home." He groaned. "You tired, honey?"

Kingston nodded slightly, and I glanced back at Zander. "I might have to hold him. He woke up really early."

Zander came over, standing right next to me, and the smell of pine was thick in the air. "Buddy, do you want a piggyback ride?" he asked, bending close to Kingston.

"Piggyback?" Kingston asked, dropping his arm from his eyes.

"Piggyback, buddy," Zander answered with a little bit of excitement in his voice.

Kingston held his hands out, and Zander grabbed him, pulling him to his feet. He kneeled in the sand and let Kingston climb up on his back. Christian looked grumpy, "I want a piggyback."

"You get next, okay?" Zander said as he held onto Kingston's feet. I grabbed the two bags, throwing the blanket into one before slinging my chair over my shoulder.

I wanted to thank Zander, but my heart lurched at how Kingston rested his tired head against the back of Zander's. He'd never been around a man like that except for Luke. But it looked so right, him being with Zander. Maybe it was just my hormones or missing Jack, but my heart ached for my boys. They needed a dad in their lives. I knew that, and I knew I was scared to open myself up for that again.

A part of me also worried about loving someone who didn't love my kids, who only tolerated them. I didn't want that for them. There was so much to consider now, so much to think about when it came to starting a relationship. Maybe someday I'd be ready.

Christian trudged up the hill away from the ocean behind Zander. I followed behind them, all of us walking in a straight line. I kept my eyes on Kingston or Christian, not staring at the strong muscles moving through Zander's shirt. The walk back was quiet, and I was ready for nap time. I should try to write and get something done.

The tall grass swayed on either side of us, and the sun was warm on my back. I made a mental note to go for a bike ride later if the weather was still lovely. The boys loved riding in the bike trailer, which was my favorite form of exercise. It kept me active, made them happy, and gave me time to feel like I was doing something for myself. And no one could ask me questions.

We reached the end of the path and stepped into the street. "Remember, there are cars, bud, so please stay close," I told Christian, who was strolling.

Zander turned around, walking backward, "Is he asleep? He feels asleep?" he asked, pointing up to Kingston, who looked asleep.

"He definitely is," I said with an apologetic look .

"Poor guy was tired," he said and turned back around.



We made a left, and I could see the little rental house up ahead. I picked up my speed, grabbing onto Christian's hand. "I'm gonna win," I told him, knowing he'd race.

His eyes widened, and he ran ahead of me, "No, I'm gonna win." It was a game we always played. If he didn't want to go somewhere, I'd tell him I would win, and he'd suddenly change his mind. You had to learn to turn things around as a mom and work them in your favor.

Christian bolted up to the front door, placing both hands on it. He glanced back at me, "I win, Mom!"

I smiled and keyed in the code when I reached the door. I patted his head and heard Zander step up onto the porch. The door opened, and I asked Christian, "I will get Kingston in bed. Do you want to take a nap, too?"

"Maybe, can I watch a show and rest on the couch?" he asked, already heading there.

"Sure, pick a good show, okay?" Christian nodded. Zander stood by the stairs with Kingston fully asleep on his back. "His room is just up here," I told him, and he followed me upstairs.

I kept the light off in Kingston's room, opening the door enough for Zander to come inside. Zander moved slowly as he twirled him around, placing Kingston on the bed. I draped a blanket over him, realizing he was getting sand in the bed—a problem for me to deal with later. Kingston twisted, facing the wall, and I backed out of the room, slowly closing the door behind me. I turned only to realize how close Zander stood to me. My heart fluttered as I met his eyes, "Thanks for carrying him. You didn't have to do that."

Zander waved a hand through the air, "Happy to do it. It's hard to be a single parent."

He was close to me, too close. I could reach out and put a hand on his arm or chest. I stepped away from him, my back pressing into the frame of Kingston's door. "Yeah," I didn't know what to say. That wasn't entirely true. I knew what I wanted to say. I wanted to ask him if he'd wanted anything to eat or what it had been like to play professional football. I wanted to ask him who he had lost in his life. But instead, I cleared my throat and walked down the stairs.

Christian was lying on the couch, the remote in his hand, but his eyes were already closed. I also put a blanket over him and grabbed my laptop off the coffee table. I turned around, and Zander stood by the door, "I'll leave you to enjoy the quiet, ." He smiled at me, and it was such a great smile.

I took a step toward him, "Do you want to eat lunch? I've got this yummy salad that I made last night." My chest pounded with anxiety. What was I doing?

Zander's gaze dropped to the ground for a moment before he shook his head, and I knew I wanted to take it back. "I've got to get going, but I'll see you around, okay?" He opened the door, slipped out quickly, and closed it without a sound.

Well, that went well .

I went into the kitchen opening my laptop. There was no way I would focus enough to write, my chest a slow cooker full of tangled emotions. But I could watch something. I pulled up my favorite food competition show and sat down to forget what happened.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

### Independence

Small-town parades were my favorite, and Breakaway had the best parade for the Fourth of July. It wasn't anything special, but everyone in town was there to watch or walk in it, and the parties afterward went all out. The boys and I wore our favorite American flag shirts and walked down the sidewalk toward Main Street. It was busy, and everyone was heading to the same place we were going to. It had been a week since I'd seen Zander. A week since, I'd awkwardly asked him to hang out with me, and he'd run away. It was fine. I was fine with it, and I'd even written a little yesterday. It had only been about five hundred words, but it was something. Better than nothing.

We passed the little corner grocery store, and I tried to spot Luke. He said he'd be across from the ice cream shop, which was just a little farther up. Kingston poked my leg with his mini flag, and I looked down at him. He wasn't paying attention, just waving his flag through the air. "Luke!" Christian yelled, and through the crowd, I spotted my brother. I'm not sure how Christian saw him before me. Luke turned, holding his arms out for Christian, and Zander caught my eye. He held an iced drink, wearing a white shirt with the words Land of the Free because of the brave on the front. The white of the shirt made the warmth of his skin stand out, and his hair was even darker. So, he was handsome, whatever. I could admire his looks. That wasn't illegal. I was widowed, not blind.

I bit down my frustration over how our last interaction went. How embarrassed it had made me feel.

Luke pulled Christian into a hug, and Zander smiled, watching them. Kingston

spotted them as we got closer, but he went straight for Zander, grabbing his legs. Zander squatted and gave him a one-armed hug, “Hey buddy. Cool flag.”

“Perfect timing, the parade is just about to start,” Luke told me. We moved to the sidewalk's edge, and the street in front of us was empty for now.

Christian squealed, “Is there candy?”

I laughed and ran my hand over his wild hair. “I think so. Let’s make sure we’re paying attention, okay?”

He moved onto the curb and sat down, intently watching the empty street. He held his tiny American flag. Luke moved over to me, “I ran into someone the other day who said he knows you.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“Yeah, he’s looking for a house on the coast. His name is David Richards, and he said he knew you from college.” David, who I’d run into at the candy shop. Weird.

I nodded and noticed Kingston leaning back into Zander’s legs. “Oh yeah, I saw him in town, too.”

“He asked me if you were dating anyone,” Luke said, smiling nervously.

“Seriously?”

He laughed, “I told him he’d have to ask you, like an adult. But thought I’d give you a heads up.”

I glanced at Zander, whose eyes were on mine. Quickly, I looked at Kingston, who

appeared very comfortable standing next to him. I hoped David wasn't going to ask me out. That's not something I would be interested in, and it had nothing to do with Zander. Nothing at all. David had never been my type.

Music started to thump through the air, and Christian stood, waving his flag around. "It's starting!"

What looked like a high school band came around the corner onto the main road and was playing a mash-up of a few songs I recognized. Behind them, a group of girls waved around thin strips of ribbon and threw candy toward the kids on either side of the road. Christian was having a blast, and Kingston moved forward, jumping up and down next to him as candy fell near their feet. They picked up a few pieces, their free hands full. Next was a police car, sirens jolting through the air every few moments. Someone came up behind me, tapping on Luke's shoulder. I glanced and saw a petite woman with curly blonde hair hugging him. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Luke was a lover of all women and couldn't stop himself from finding new ones to date. Luke pointed to Zander, and the woman waved at him before they took a few steps away from the crowd. I turned back to the parade, the boys dancing to the music playing from the back of someone's Suburban. The smell of pine wafted through the air, and I stiffened as Zander came to stand by me.

I needed to play it cool like I hadn't been embarrassed by his not-really-a-rejection rejection. He cleared his throat, "Did Luke invite you guys to my barbeque?"

"No," I told him, keeping my eyes forward.

"Oh, well," I saw him shift on his feet out of the corner of my eye, "It's just a little gathering with some neighbors, but if you guys want to come, you're welcome to."

I forced a nice smile and glanced his way, "I'll see how the boys are doing after this. Thanks for the invite."

Zander's eyes ran over my face, and I felt self-conscious. "Fire truck!" Kingston yelled, and I hollered behind them. They were both so excited, and it made my heart happy. I cherished these moments when they were able to just be kids.

Zander clapped beside me as the firefighters tossed large blown-up balls out of their truck. Kingston and Christian shot out into the road to get one, along with many other kids. Kingston grabbed one, and Christian helped him keep a hold of it as they came back to us. He gave me a thumbs-up, and they turned around and watched the end of the parade.

"He's a good kid," Zander said.

"The very best."

"Has he always been happy to be a big brother?"

I paused, not sure what answer to give. The one where I shared how broken he was after Jack died, how he cried for him throughout the day, and when Kingston came along, it healed him a little bit. Or if I just say yes. Zander's forest eyes were locked on me, so I said, "Kingston was exactly what we both needed after losing Jack."

Luke came up behind us, his arms wrapping around one of Zander's shoulders and mine. "It's almost barbecue time."

The blonde girl stood awkwardly behind us, watching the conversation. Zander nodded. "Are you asking for a plus one?"

"No, I always have a plus one."

Zander rolled his eyes, and I shook out of my brother's grasp. Christian stepped up beside me, "This was cool, Mom!"

Kingston was holding his ball, his grip tight as he approached me. “I got a ball! ”

“That’s awesome. Do you want me to carry it back home?” Kingston nodded, handing the ball over.

“You coming, sis?” Luke asked his arm now draped over his date’s shoulders.

“I think we’ll skip it. I’ve got the boy’s favorite in the slow cooker at home.” Which was true. I didn’t plan on someone else making us food today. I had made their favorite mac and cheese featuring dinosaur-shaped pasta noodles which I paid too much for. It was going to be perfectly done in about a half hour.

Zander turned his body to me, “I grabbed hot dogs for the kids and even some little cupcakes with dinosaurs on them.” His voice was so earnest, and his eyes serious. What was he playing at buying food specifically for my kids? If I weren’t so annoyed, I’d be flattered.

“Um—” Luke was eyeing me with confusion. I shook my head before saying, “I guess we can come for a bit.”

“Great,” Zander smiled as I held tightly to the plastic ball. He turned to Christian, “You want a piggyback ride? It’s your turn.”

Christian’s face filled with excitement. “Yes, yes,” he told Zander as he climbed onto his back. Kingston held Luke’s hand as they started to walk back the way we came.

Again, I watched Zander relax with my kids like he enjoyed them being around. Like they weren’t something extra or annoying to deal with but worth it. I closed my eyes, reliving my rejection when he said no to staying for lunch. I just needed to clear the air and let him know I hadn’t been asking him out. That would help.

Definitely.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

Green

The boys were scarfing down the dinosaur cupcakes, ignoring the rest of the food I'd put on their plates. I tried to remember if Dee had done things like that, but I hadn't seen her that much when she was their age. She was older than Christian when I started taking care of her. I'd wanted to say something to Izzy, trying to diffuse some of the tension I felt between us. I sat on the grass across from the boys, both silently shoving sugar in their mouths.

I should have stayed the other day when she'd asked me to lunch, but I'd panicked. I wasn't sure if she was asking out of politeness or if she wanted me to stay. I hated that I felt so insecure .

I hadn't struggled with that before everything with Natalie and watching Natalie move on so quickly.

I'd always felt so sure of myself. Not anymore. Even if I was sure, I'd wanted to stay and eat lunch with Izzy. I wasn't entirely confident about what she hoped would come from it.

But she seemed like she was having a good time. She'd pulled part of her hair back from her face, and I loved how it brought out the softness of her. Izzy was attractive, beautiful, if not gorgeous. She was in her mom era, with a t-shirt matching the boys and a pair of jeans with holes that gave me a tiny peek at her skin underneath.

Stop it.

I was being weird.

I needed a distraction. Dee would be here soon, so that would help. I was excited to see her and hear about how school had been.

Kingston set his paper cup down on the grass. “I have another cupcake?”

A smile spread on my face, and I seriously glanced at him. “Hmm, what would your mom say?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but Christian said, “She would tell him to have some real food first.”

Kingston rolled his eyes and picked up a piece of fruit, grumpily taking a bite. Why was everything that kids did so funny? Christian licked his fingers. “Did you like those cupcakes?” I asked him.

“So good. They taste like sugar.”

“Sugar is delicious.” Christian smiled at me, taking a big bite from a baby carrot.

“Did you know we are going to do fireworks later?” he said, Kingston’s eyes widening.

“Fireworks!”

I leaned forward onto the table. “What kind of fireworks?”

Christian tilted his head to the side like he was thinking. “Probably just little ones. Mom doesn’t like the fire, but it’ll still be fun.”

“Maybe Uncle Luke help us,” Kingston said, almost to himself.

“Good idea. I’ll ask him,” Christian answered and then met my gaze. “Do you wanna come?”

The thought of watching their little faces fill with wonder and excitement over the fireworks made my decision for me. But I’d need to make sure Izzy was okay with it first. “I’ll ask your mom, okay?”

He nodded and went back to eating. I glanced at Izzy, resting against the deck's railing, but she wasn’t alone. My neighbor, Beau, was talking to her.

My stomach soured, and I hated admitting how much it bothered me to see him talking to her. He wasn’t quite as bad as Luke, but he was a serial dater.

I did not want her to be just another conquest on his list. But instead of intervening, I decided to sit with her kids and ensure they had everything they needed.

Dee

The food was delicious, and I was annoyed that it was so good. Zander had prepared ribs, burgers, wings, a green salad, and a tangy potato salad—all perfect barbecue foods. I stood with my glass of water by the edge of the deck. The boys were having a picnic on the grass, chatting with Zander. He'd had little plates and cups for them, serving their food without asking. It was nice of him, I reminded myself. He was trying to be friendly and helpful. But still, it bugged me.

I was being dramatic because my ego was bruised. I just needed to get over it and distract myself with something else. There were about ten other people here. Some of Zander's older neighbors, a family from down the street and a man living in the house behind Zander. He wasn't particularly handsome, but he seemed nice. We'd made small talk earlier while getting food. I set my glass on the railing, and he appeared beside me. "I didn't introduce myself earlier," he said, holding a hand for me to shake, "I'm Beau. I live just behind those big trees." He pointed straight ahead.

"Nice to meet you, I'm ." I didn't mention that I would be moving into the house in a couple of months.

"And those are your boys?" he asked, glancing over at them.

"Yes, those are mine."

Beau nodded and tapped his fingers along the railing. He seemed nervous. "Are you just here for the summer?"

Everyone else mingled around us. Zander got up from the grass, and my gaze danced up and down his body. Whoops. Nope. Too much. I felt my cheeks blush as I refocused on what Beau had asked. Zander headed to the table where Luke mingled with some of the other guests. He was chatting loudly, and Luke's date was glued to her phone. "We are, yeah. Looking for a place here, but we'll see." I didn't need to tell a stranger my life plan.

"That's great—such a fun place to live. I moved here after my divorce, and it's been refreshing. I think you'll like it." He thought I was divorced, a common mistake.

"My husband and I spent our summers here, so bringing the kids here has been great. Let them experience it."

Beau's eyebrows scrunched together, "Wait, sorry, are you married?"

I shook my head, and that hit me right in the chest. I wasn't married. I was not married. My husband was dead. The hurt bloomed like it was just yesterday that the cops had told me about his accident. When had I stopped thinking about myself as married? When I'd been pregnant with Kingston, after Jack had passed, I still felt married. That was his baby just as much as mine, even if he wouldn't be around to raise him.

I bit back tears, "I'm a widow," and Beau's eyes went wide.

He nodded and glanced over his shoulder. "I am going to grab something to drink. Do you need anything?" He was walking away from me before even finishing his question.

My chest hurt too much to answer, the realization of what I had just said crushing my heart. I wasn't married anymore, and that broke me. I loved being married and had loved being married to Jack. Beau had run scared, learning I was a widow, and I

didn't blame him. I closed my eyes and blew out a big breath. I was not going to cry here. I could do that later. But not here.

"He's slimy," Zander's deep voice said from beside me, his presence suddenly comforting. I cleared my throat again, running my hand over my face before looking his way. His eyes were focused on me, and that made my chest ache differently. "You okay?"

I shrugged, "Who knows anymore."

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but was he trying to hit on you?"

A laugh burst out of me before I could stop it, the emotions inside me on overdrive. "I think so, but he got scared because I'm a widow. A husbandless widow."

He tilted his head to the side, "You know that that is the definition of a widow, right?"

I laughed more; the ridiculousness of this moment hit me. I had a major moment, realizing I don't feel married anymore. And now I had to process that with Zander, who ran out of my house just as quickly as Beau had run to get something to drink. I was good at repelling men. "Yeah, yeah. I know," I put my hand on my chest and closed my eyes. I was going to cry, yup. This was embarrassing. Keeping my gaze on the ground, I said, "I'm okay."

Tears filled my eyes, and I rushed inside, heading through the living and straight for the half bath. The door was open, thank goodness, and I pulled it closed behind me. I let my body slide against the door and put my head between my knees. My chest was tight, and the tears fell hard. My breath was coming quickly, too quick for me to get a handle on it.

Perfect, I was having a panic attack. They felt the same way, overwhelming and terrifying. I sucked in the air, trying to extend it to make it deep, but everything was shaking. I pushed the air out, my heart pounding. I did that a few more times before being able to breathe again. My head hit the back of the door just as someone knocked, “Someone’s in here,” I said, my throat scratchy .

“Can I get you something?” Shame covered me as Zander’s voice came through the door. Dammit. Not only had I embarrassed myself by asking him to eat lunch with me, but now he’d heard me have a panic attack. Just perfect.

I stood and took in my reflection. My short brown hair was fine, boring but fine. I wiped at my cheeks. My eyes were splotchy, but it was okay. I was going to escape from this party as soon as I could. “?” Zander asked through the door.

“No, I’m okay,” I said, my voice groggy. I unlocked the door and pushed it open. Zander stepped backward with his face full of concern. “Seriously, just fine.”

Zander said, “I already told you to stop pretending.”

I let out a deep breath, and the muscles in my chest strained. “Just had a moment there. You think you’ve gotten past the hardest part of losing someone, and then something else hits you.”

“Yeah,” he held out his hand, and I grabbed onto it without thinking. His hand was large, wrapping around mine, and he put his other hand on top. “It’s alright. I know you don’t know me very well yet, but if you want to head home, I can take the boys home. Maybe a walk alone would help.”

The offer was kind, but I only heard that I didn’t know him well yet. Like I was going to still get to know him. “I think I’ll just head out now. Kingston will need a nap soon anyway.”

Zander's thumb rubbed the side of my palm slowly. He nodded, "Okay, well, I'll go get them for you."

"Thanks," I asked, and his hands left mine. I straightened my shoulders as he turned to walk back outside and asked, "Earlier, I mean, last time you were at my house, I didn't mean..." I stopped myself because my words were nonsense at this point.

His eyes searched my face, and then his eyes changed. Zander glanced to his left before stepping back over to me, his body within arm's length of mine. "Oh, I just didn't want you to think I was trying to shove my way in. It wasn't because..." he drifted off.

I nodded, "Okay." Neither of us had said much, but I felt better. He hadn't said no because he'd wanted to, instead, he'd said no to be a gentleman. That lessened the embarrassment I felt. The embarrassment of having a panic attack at his barbeque was fully intact.

Zander walked toward the French doors when I heard a light voice say, "Hey!" His head turned, and I stepped forward to see a young girl with dark black hair pulled back into a braid. Her skin was beautifully bronzed, and she wore a striped red and blue dress that showed off her curves. She was smiling and rushed toward Zander. He hugged her, placing his hand on the back of her head. It was such an intimate thing to do. They clearly knew each other well.

I looked away, passing by them to step into the backyard. Luke stood as I crossed the threshold. "Sis," he called out.

"Bro," I said, with a roll of my eyes .

His date wasn't at the table anymore. "You alright?" Luke asked, his voice quiet.



I nodded, hating when people asked me that. “I am. I’m good.” He rubbed my shoulder. I glanced back and saw Zander with a plate in hand; it looked like he was serving some food to his new guest. “Who is that?” I asked Luke, leaning closer to him and motioning inside.

He followed my gaze to the young girl talking to Zander. It shouldn’t matter who the girl was, but I cared, nonetheless. “Oh, that’s Dee!” Luke said and immediately abandoned me.

I watched Luke cross the deck and place his hand on Dee’s shoulder. The girl was happy to see him, a smile spreading across her face. I pulled my gaze away, trying to act like I couldn’t care less. I shouldn’t care. Kingston was sitting in the grass with a bucket of toys in front of him. Christian was lying down on his belly, holding a phone in front of him.

My heart burned as I thought of Jack and what he would have thought about this place. He would have spent hours in the backyard, making sure everything was just right. He would have loved that it was here in Breakaway. I walked toward Christian, the jingle of his favorite show ringing through the air, “Hey, big guy.”

“Hey, Mama,” he said back to me.

“You all done with the party?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m tired, and Kingston wasn’t sharing the toys.”

I chuckled because Kingston was particularly terrible at that. “Yeah, it’s about time to head home.”

“Okay, can I keep watching this when we get there? I want to see the Gator episode.” He looked up at me, and my heart stilled. He looked so much like Jack. His blue eyes

and the way he raised his eyebrows. The shape of his mouth and the cut of his chin. Just like his dad. It was such a mix of emotions. I loved seeing him in our boys, but it never failed to take my breath away.

“Sure, sweets. Let’s get going,” Christian held the phone as he stood up and went over to Zander, who stood on the deck. Dee, whoever she was, sat at the table and was talking to Luke. It must have been Zander’s phone, which was fine. Christian placed the phone on the table before coming back toward me.

I just wanted to get out of here. I avoided everyone’s gaze as I grabbed Kingston, throwing him on my hip. Luke smiled and stood up from his chair, “Do you want me to walk with you?”

I could feel Zander’s gaze but acted like he wasn’t there. “No, that’s okay. Stay and talk,” I said before heading inside and escaping with the two people most important to me.

### Fireworks

“Can we do them now?” Christian asked, holding the box of Pop-Its. I was unsure who invented these pesky little faux fireworks, but I’m glad they did. That and sparklers. They had always been Christian’s favorite. Luke brought the box of fireworks into the street, where the boys and I sat. We put out some camping chairs that were in the garage and were prepared to have our show.

This had always been Jack’s thing. I didn’t love fire or things that exploded. I’d tried the last two years, but our fireworks were lackluster. Luke was about to solve that issue because he was a pit of a pyromaniac. When we were kids, he melted my beloved Teletubbies while hiding underneath my bed. It was a somber day for me as an eight-year-old, but now it made me laugh because it was just so Luke.

The boys and I had napped, and I’d woken up feeling less terrible. The weight of what I had finally admitted felt less heavy on my chest. I wasn’t married anymore. I said it in the mirror a few times, and it felt less foreign each time.

“Go ahead, buddy. Pop it up,” Luke told Christian, and he threw down a handful of them. The pop was loud, and Kingston jumped, twirling around to watch his brother.

I held out a box of them. A stack sat in the empty chair next to me. “Babes, here’s a box. Do you want to try?” I asked Kingston.

His eyes widened, and a smile filled his tiny little face. His hair was wild today and messed up in the back from his nap. “Thanks!”

I watched the two of them throw down the tiny little paper balls like they were powerful bombs, laughing themselves silly. Luke placed a large firework with a ridiculous name: Flirting with Greatness . I rolled my eyes. The sun had set about fifteen minutes ago, and the warmth was being sucked from the air. “Boys, go sit by your mom,” he said, and he had his serious voice on. It was not significantly different from his usual voice, but I could tell he was focused.

The boys shuffled over to me, their little legs sticking straight out as they sat in the adult-sized chairs. Luke used the lighter to set the fuse and ran back toward us. The boys were still watching the fireworks erupt in showers of light. It made a loud screeching sound as purple and green sparks shot out. Christian’s face was glowing, his eyes so excited, and Kingston held his hands over his mouth as he watched. I loved seeing them so excited, so enthralled by something.

Luke’s expression was the same, just an older version. He was itching to get back out there once that one was done. Kingston hopped out of his chair and grabbed another firework from the box, a bag of tiny cylinders. “Can we do these?”

“Yes, these are ground blooms. You’ll love these!” Luke said, taking them out of his hands. Kingston stayed where he was, watching his uncle very intently. Luke lit one, and it jumped off the ground, spinning around and buzzing.

“Do another one?” Kingston said as Christian threw down another handful of Pop-Its.

I sat back, enjoying this moment of normalcy. The boys were present, not missing anything in their lives, and I was glad about it. Christian was watching Luke and Kingston set out more of the ground blooms when he said, “Hey, look, it’s Zander.”

My stomach twisted, and I followed his finger. He pointed down the street toward Zander’s, and there he was. The girl wasn’t with him, and I was embarrassingly glad for that. He held a plastic bag in his right hand. Luke stood, “Hey buddy, you came.”

Zander smiled and set his bag down next to Luke's big box of fireworks. I gave Zander a quick nod before looking back to the street. There was a group of people gathering a few houses down, and soon, we'd have even more fireworks to watch. They also did a show out on the coastline, which was always fantastic. It wasn't for a couple more hours, though. Maybe I could sneak out and watch it if Luke could stay at the house. "Just in time," Zander said, and they went to work.

The fireworks were fun, and the boys were in heaven. Christian eventually got up, jumping away each time Zander or Luke lit something. I pulled my phone out and took candid photos of them, trying not to get Zander in the frame. I failed when he helped Kingston hold a sparkler, and it was a great photo. The sparkler was shining so brightly that their faces lit up perfectly.

Luke was setting up three fireworks in a row, and Christian turned to me, "Mom, it's getting cold. Could you get my coat?" He turned back around before I could answer.

It was chilly. The light leached from the sky. "Sure, buddy," I told him, even though he wasn't listening. I made my way toward the house when footsteps joined me. Zander smiled, putting his hands in his pockets. "You cold, too? Cause I don't think I've got any coats that'll fit you."

He chuckled, "No, I just wanted to apologize for earlier today." The front door squeaked as we went inside.

"Apologize for what exactly?" I didn't think he owed me an apology. "You weren't the one who had a panic attack at your party."

Zander put a hand on my shoulder, and I twisted, his green eyes on my face. "No, I should have just given you space. I'm unsure what happened or what you felt, but I was just concerned. But I'm sorry."

I placed a hand on top of his, squeezing it. “Zander, I appreciate the apology, but it’s not needed. I was just, your neighbor asked me if I was married, and I told him I wasn’t. I know this sounds ridiculous, but for a long time, even though Jack was gone, I still felt like his wife. I still felt like I was his, but I guess I don’t anymore, and that was just a hard thing to swallow.” His grip on my shoulder softened, but we somehow moved closer together. “I’m pretty sure I scarred your neighbor, though.” I forced a laugh, trying to downplay my words.

“.” He pulled me into a hug, his arms tight around my shoulders. I tentatively put my hands on his back, the hard slope of his muscles comforting me, and I let myself soften into him. When was the last time someone held me? I always held my kids, comforted them, picked them up, or snuggled them to sleep. But no one had held me in a very long time. I moved my face, resting it on his chest, the roughness of the stubble on his chin scratching against my forehead. Zander exhaled, his chest moving against my body. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” I said to him, and I didn’t want to move.

He pulled away from me, one of his hands running along my back, neck, and onto my cheek. His touch left sparks along every inch of my skin he traced. “Can I—” but the sound of Christian and Kingston yelling excitedly stopped us both.

I smiled at Zander and put my hand on his again, “I should get him his coat.”

Zander nodded and moved toward me, kissing my forehead softly. I let out a gasp, the crackle of fireworks outside mimicking the shock rolling through my body. I wanted to hold onto him, not let him go, but instead, I turned and grabbed both boys’ coats off the stairs. Zander’s eyes watched me, and he smiled as we went back outside.

Luke and the boys were watching the fireworks sparkle in the air. Zander’s hand brushed mine, and I glanced at him. But he was looking right at me, fireworks shining

in his eyes.

Oh, man.

### Hunting

Izzy seemed so much more relaxed. Her hair was pulled into a tiny bun on the top of her head, which I hadn't seen before. She held a pillow on her lap as Luke recounted his worst date. "She thought we were going to get married. Which is very off-brand for me."

He chuckled and then shook his head. It was late, but I enjoyed this time with them. Our friend dynamic had always been close, Luke and I, but Izzy was a great addition. "So, how did you two meet?" Izzy asked, gesturing between the two of us.

"You want the real story or the one we tell people?" I answered.

Her eyebrows shot up. "The real one, of course." Izzy held my gaze, and something about it made me not want to break it.

"Well, I was staying in an Airbnb that was technically in Breakaway. Fresh off my breakup, so of course, I went to the local pub. Which, as you know, or maybe you don't, but that is where your brother hunts."

"Ew, you make me sound like some kind of perv," Luke scoffed, throwing his hands up in the air.

Izzy and I shared a glance like we both think he's definitely not a pervert, but he does sleep around more than the average Joe. Something almost unlocked in my chest, like we've known each other much longer than we have. "Okay, not a perv, but I mean, you never date a girl more than three times."



Luke straightened up, moving to the edge of the couch. “And let me tell you why!” He pointed his finger at me first and then his sister, who looked like she was fighting a laugh. “The first few dates are just so much fun. Filled with flirting and delicious touching and sex, obviously. But after date three? They want to know about my childhood, my mother, which girls broke my heart, and I’m just not interested in any of that.”

“Noted. Thank you for that explanation,” I said with a smirk. “Anyway, I was at the bar, and Luke came up to me and asked me to play along. Then he started loudly telling this story, being really dramatic, and I had no clue what was going on.”

“So let me explain. There was this girl that was playing hard to get. She’s from a couple of towns north, and I’d asked her out before, but she said no.” Izzy made an exaggerated, shocked face. “Anyway, I saw this tall, good-looking dude and knew that I could use it to my advantage.”

Izzy’s eyebrows were pulled together. “How so?”

“Well, I know I come across as just wanting to get laid to get laid, and maybe I just wanted to do that, but I knew that this particular lady didn’t want to date me because her friend was newly single. So, I figured I would set her up for the night with someone and be in the clear to convince her friend to give me a shot.” Luke shared his reasoning with such confidence, and it made me chuckle. He really was proud of how it turned out.

“So what happened?” Izzy asked, leaning back on the couch.

“He got this lady’s attention, and she and her friend came over. I ended up talking to the friend, who was very nice and sad. I bought her a drink. She cried into said drink, but Luke had sufficiently distracted her friend by then.”

Luke clapped his hands together, “In other words, my plan worked perfectly.”

“So classy, Luke. And that made you want to be friends with him?” she asked me.

I sat on the floor, leaning against the TV cabinet and facing her straight on. Luke stood, stretching out his back as he walked toward the bathroom. “The next day, I ran into him at the café, and he told me the same story. He’s very charismatic, as you know, and then he told me he was a realtor. I needed one, and it was through looking at houses and all that we got to know each other. He’s kind of a sleazy date, but he’s a really good friend.”

“He’s a great friend. I wish he would settle down, but what do I know? I haven’t dated in such a long time.” Izzy picked at the edges of the pillow in her lap.

“Dating sucks these days,” I said, but then I realized how terrible that sounded. “I mean, dating...” But I wasn’t sure how to lie to him about how awful dating actually is.

She shook her head and smiled stiffly at me. “It’s okay. From what I can tell, it is terrible. I have a chronically single friend, and she has told me some awful stories of trying to date again.”

“I can imagine.” Luke came out of the half bathroom and nodded at Izzy. “Thanks again for letting us help with the fireworks. The boys are so fun.”

“They were in heaven,” she said quickly.

He grabbed his keys, which were on the table by the stairs. “I’ve got a full day of showings tomorrow, so I should probably get going. Do you fly out tomorrow, Zand?”

“I do.” I’d almost forgotten about my trip. I wasn’t excited to go, but I needed to. I needed to explore other places and see where I wanted to live next. It would be informative, even if it wasn’t anything else.

“Where are you going?” Izzy asked, her voice soft.

I pushed myself to stand, my left knee creaking as I stood. Very attractive, thanks to old joints. “House hunting. Nothing exciting. ”

She held my gaze for a beat longer, and I wanted to say something else. I wanted to stay, but I grabbed my coat and slipped it on. “I’ll check in on you tomorrow, okay?” Luke told Izzy as we walked to the door.

Izzy waved, smiling as she sunk deeper into the couch. Luke closed the door behind us, and his SUV beeped as he unlocked it. “Want a ride?”

I shrugged. “I’ll walk. It’s a nice night.”

“Thanks for being flexible. I know it’s probably not your first choice to hang out with my sister and her kids. But she’s cool, right?”

I answered too quickly. “She’s cool.” Luke’s expression changed. “The boys are great. So funny.”

He shook his head at me and slapped me on the shoulder. “Oh boy. Don’t get any ideas, okay? I don’t think she’s quite there yet.”

Luke opened his car door when I asked, “What are you implying?”

“Just remember it’s my sister, okay?” Luke said, his tone somewhere between joking and heartfelt. All I could do was nod. “Have a good trip. Text me when you get

home, okay?”

“I will.” I stepped out into the street and headed back to my house with a heavy feeling on my chest.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

Reality

“, I liked the chapter you sent. It’s great stuff, really. But I know you said you’re still stuck on the falling out?” Amy said through my laptop speakers.

I groaned and nodded, “I’m stuck, yeah. I don’t know how to break them up.”

Amy leaned closer to the camera, “Would it help if I brainstormed some possibilities? We have about six weeks left until this deadline from your editor, and I don’t want you to miss it. We have already been given one extension.”

“Ideas might help, yeah. I’m working on it. I’m trying, I promise.”

“I believe you,” Amy waved her hand in the air, “I’ll get those to you by EOD tomorrow, okay?” I nodded. “Okay, gotta hop onto another call.”

“Thanks, Amy,” I said, and I meant it. She was a great agent. One that I loved working with. She always treated me with respect and was great at editing what I wasn’t.

“Talk soon.”

The call was quick, which I figured. My book was definitely at a standstill. They were happy and in love, but now they needed to encounter something difficult and struggle. I just couldn’t think of a way to do that for the life of me. So much for being a writer.

Kingston was napping, and Luke took Christian to his showings today. I'm not sure Christian would be a big helper in the real estate department, but I appreciated the break. Luke was stepping up to help me, even in little ways, and I was not about to complain. Growing up, he'd been more of an annoyance. Seeing him grow up, be helpful, and succeed in his career was nice.

My phone buzzed on the table next to me while my laptop made a dinging sound. Zander's name popped up because I'd finally created a contact for him. I hadn't seen him since the fourth, and it was now the tenth. I could still feel his lips on my forehead, his fingers sliding up my neck.

I reread the text; strange. It was a check-in text. Were we two people who checked in with each other like that? I typed my response.

The three bubbles popped up, and I waited for his response. The only sound around me was the crunch of the ice maker in the fridge. His response came with a ding.

Another text came.

I tapped my fingers on the keys, excitement filling my chest.

A ding filled the room.

I smiled, glad that I was going to see Zander. And that felt strange to be looking forward to seeing him, seeing someone.

We sat on the floor, the food covering the coffee table. Kingston stood, swaying side to side with a fry in his hand. Christian was kneeling, dunking one of his chicken nuggets into a huge side dish of ranch. Luke and Christian had brought food home—fried tuna fish and chips for the grown-ups and chicken for the kids. Zander had shown up at the same time, and I was glad I didn't have to navigate how to act

around him when it was just the two of us. Well, us and Kingston, too. He'd been excited to see Zander, jumping up and down and asking to hug him.

The tuna was fantastic, which I didn't expect. I loved fish and chips, and these were divine.

"Grizzly Tuna is the best place in Breakaway Shores, to be honest. I eat there way too often," Luke said, taking a bite of his food.

Zander sat, leaning up against the couch, with only his fries left, "It's a gem. I make sure to tell everyone about it."

"These are good. So unique," I said, loving the crunch of the breading. "So, did you sell any houses today, Christian?"

His head popped up, and he spoke, his mouth way too full of fries, "Uncle Luke said I was a really good salesman."

Luke chuckled, "He did great. I let him show one couple all around by himself. It was pretty cute."

Christian's face filled with pride, and I reached out to grab a cup of tartar sauce, my hand knocking against Zander's, also reaching out to grab something. My skin jolted where we touched, and I threw him an apologetic smile. His dark hair was messier today, parts hanging in front of his forehead. "How was your trip, Zander? Find any winners?"

Zander shrugged, "A couple of them were nice. I'm still weighing my options." And it hit me again: he was moving. Here I was, getting all infatuated with him over forehead kisses and soft fingers on my neck. But it didn't matter because he was moving, leaving in about a month and a half.

I tried to keep that at the forefront of my mind as Luke grilled him about the houses he looked at. I reminded myself that Zander was nice, and the boys enjoyed being around him. That was it, simple enough. He could be my friend. I needed more of those anyway.

We continued to chat and laughed a lot while the boys eventually retreated to their toys and left us to clean up the mess of the food. Luke stood in the kitchen, grabbing sparkling water from the fridge, when his phone rang on the counter. The name Layla popped up on the screen. “Oh, it’s Layla,” I said, exaggerating her name, “Is that the girl from the parade?”

Zander laughed, letting his head fall in his hands, “No, it’s not the same girl.”

I rolled my eyes. “Luke, come on. You’re such a player.”

“He is,” Zander said, matter of factly, “And that is coming from me, a retired professional football player. Who was, in fact, a bit of a player when I was younger.”

The admission gave me pause, but I pushed it away. That didn’t matter; Zander’s relationship history wasn’t my concern. “Did you know he had a serious girlfriend throughout high school? They were this close to getting engaged after graduation.”

“I actually did know that.”

Luke scoffed, silencing his phone, “To refresh your memory, sister, she cheated on me almost all of our senior year. I was none the wiser, which sucked. And then I had a serious girlfriend in college, who also cheated on me. After that, I decided never to allow myself to get that deep. That way, I couldn’t be hurt by them.” The raw tone of my brother’s voice made me regret bringing up this conversation, but then I realized I might have some wisdom to share.



I shook my head, “That’s stupid. I mean, I’m sorry that they hurt you like that. I am, and I remember that now.” Luke chuckled, tucking his phone in his back pocket, “But by your logic, I need to stay alone forever now, too, so that I don’t risk my next husband dying on me.” Luke’s face paled, and I waved him off. “Stop with the pity. But I’m being serious. You can’t sabotage the possibility of anything good just because of a bad history.”

“Okay, I hear you,” Luke said, holding his hands in the air.

“Your sister is a wise one, Luke. You must have missed that in the gene pool,” Zander joked from the table.

“You two worry about yourselves,” Luke wagged his eyebrows, and he left us in the kitchen alone.

I grabbed a bottle of strawberry water from the fridge and turned around. Zander had moved from the table and was now just a few feet away. “So, where did you house hunt?” I asked, trying to fill the silence.

“I started in Florida and then went up to North Carolina.” Zander leaned against the wall, and he just looked too handsome for my little kitchen.

“Anything or anyone in Florida or North Carolina?”

Zander paused before answering, “My mom. She moved to North Carolina a few years ago.”

“That’ll be nice. Close to family.”

Zander smiled. “Yeah, it could be. We’ll see what happens. I’m not decided on anything yet.”

I tapped the plastic bottle in my hand. “Luke is going to miss you. I think you might be his only friend.”

“Oh, I am definitely his only friend,” he joked.

Zander turned as I walked toward the living room, his arm brushing against mine. I ignored the way it made my entire body feel.

He was moving.

He was moving.

### Romance

When I came downstairs from putting the boys to bed, Luke was no longer in the living room. Zander lounged on the couch, holding a book open in his hands. My book. Not the ones I'd authored but the one I was currently reading. His eyes were wide, and I could guess which part he was reading. I cleared my throat, and he jumped, which made me laugh. "Enjoying that?"

I plopped down on the chair next to the fire, and he shut the book. "I picked it up wondering why there was a cowboy on the front, but I think I figured it out." He looked like he was blushing, and I made a mental note not to let him read my actual books.

"I'm loving all the cowboy romances lately."

"Seems like a little more than romance," he said, turning the book over. "Is this what you write?"

I pulled my knees up to my chest. "Something like that, but with fewer cowboys. Although, I don't know anymore. I can't finish the book I'm drafting right now."

Zander set the book down on the coffee table in between us. "So, you write scenes like that?" His demeanor changed, and the way he asked was playful.

"It's what the readers want." I smiled, breaking eye contact because it made my insides flip. The way looking at him usually did. "But it seems it's harder to write a lusty romance when you're just a washed-up widow with food stains on your clothes

from being a mom every second of the day.” I still felt his eyes on me and decided a change of topic was needed immediately. “Where did Luke go?”

“He forgot he had a date,” Zander said, biting down a laugh.

“Wow, what a lucky girl.”

Zander put his hands on his knees like he might stand up, “I just didn’t want you to think we both ditched you. But I’ll go now, too.”

I wanted him to stay, but I wasn’t sure why. Okay, that was a lie. I knew why I wanted him to stay because he’d been driving me bonkers in that Henley shirt all day. But I didn’t want to want him to stay, especially when he wouldn’t be here for much longer. “Okay, I was just going to watch this great cooking show. If you want to stay.” I said against my better judgment.

My heart was pounding, which was stupid. I wasn’t declaring anything huge to him. Just asked him if he wanted to watch the Food Network with me. Zander nodded, “Okay.”

I stood, moving over to the couch with him, and once again, wondering who thought setting up this room with chairs that didn’t face the TV was the right thing to do. Zander moved over, and I pulled my legs up under me and turned on the TV. I clicked a few buttons until the show I wanted to watch came on. We sat in silence, and I couldn’t stop myself from sneaking glances at him. His hands were resting on his thighs, and I wondered what it would feel like for his hand to be on my thigh.

“Wait, so they’re cooking in a grocery store?” Zander asked, leaning on the arm that was closest to me.

I glanced over at him, his shirt stretching over his bicep. “Yes, and they have

ridiculous challenges or gross ingredients they are required to use. Like canned asparagus.”

Zander met my eyes and made a disgusted face. “That sounds disgusting.”

“Somehow, they make it into something delicious, though.” I grabbed a pillow and held it in my lap. “It’s a fun show to watch.”

“Do you like to cook?” Zander asked, leaning his head back against the couch.

“I do, yeah. But I don’t usually get to make food like this, you know? It’s just whatever the boys want to eat.”

The way he looked at me was so direct, so unwavering that I wanted to look away but couldn’t make myself do it. “What’s your favorite thing to cook for you?”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had the energy to cook something just for me. “Honestly, I don’t know. Which is sad.”

“We’ll have to work on that,” he said, turning his head back to the TV, where they were working hard at their cooking stations.

“And how are we going to do that?”

He didn’t look at me, but he smiled. “Let’s cook something because now that I’m watching this show about food, I’m hungry again.” Zander stood and held out a hand to me. I put my hand in his and let him help me up. He led the way to the kitchen and flicked on the light. Zander opened the fridge and pulled out a handful of things: roasted chicken, cream, parmesan, and a bag of brussels sprouts. “Actually, now that I think of it, I’m just going to cook for you. I bet it’s been a while since someone has done that.”

“It has,” I told him, pulling myself up to sit on the counter opposite the stove. Zander moved around the kitchen, looking through cabinets like he’d been here before.

“You like to cook, I take it?”

Zander had pulled out a cutting board and placed it next to me. He pushed up the sleeves of his Henley, exposing his forearms, and I had to peel my eyes off them. He washed the brussels sprouts. “I do. I had to learn how to, I guess, because otherwise, I’d have nothing to eat. But, in actuality, I love to create something delicious from something else.”

“And what are you making me?” I leaned my back against the edge of the raised bar and watched him cut the brussels sprouts into small strips like a pro.

Pro at football and pro at cooking, apparently. Pro at wearing that shirt, too. Stop.

“Just let me surprise you, okay?” he smiled, and my stomach flipped. He was handsome. Very handsome with green eyes and his dark hair pushed back from his face.

“Fine.” I bit my lip as he moved the brussels sprouts into a hot pan on the stove. “I guess I’m just not used to this.”

He glanced at me over his shoulder, “Used to what? People doing things for you?”

I shrugged, letting my eyes travel up and down his body when he turned back around. Man, I needed to get control of myself. I was not remotely ready for this, but no one else had made me interested in them since Jack. I needed to reel it in. “Yeah. I’m usually the one who is doing everything.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Your boys are really lucky to have you as a mom.”

I hoped that was true. I certainly felt lucky to be their mom. “You said your mom was a widow, too?” I asked him.

He didn’t turn around as he threw some butter in another pan. “Yeah, my dad died when I was twelve. My older brother was out of the house by then, but it was, well, you know.”

“How did he die?” I asked, remembering how he had asked me about Jack that day on the porch.

Zander sprinkled some flour in the pan next. “He had alcoholism. He’d been sober most of my life, but I guess he’d also relapsed multiple times when I was a kid. My mom told me that bit later. But he’d gone out and gotten himself very, very drunk and drove straight into the divider.”

I didn’t know how to respond. Jack had been hit head-on by someone who’d been looking at their phone, but I imagined Zander’s dad crumpled and broken. “I’m sorry.”

He glanced back at me and gave me a small smile, “It was a long time ago. I’ve had enough time and space from it, so it probably doesn’t seem as hard as I’m sure losing your husband does.”

“It has gotten easier with each year. And harder, I guess, in different ways.”

“How has it gotten easier?” I enjoyed watching him make dinner from this angle. He stirred the brussels sprouts as they sizzled against the hot pan. And Zander turned back to me, bringing the cooked chicken onto a new cutting board.

“I’m used to being alone now. In those first months, I could hardly sleep. I was overwhelmed by how alone I was in every moment of parenting and had to absorb his

role and do my own, too. There was no one to give me breaks, no one I trusted to be with the kids like I would be to relieve me. But now, I've got a good flow. The boys and I have our routine, and that's definitely better." Zander chopped the chicken and looked right into my eyes when he was done.

He put the knife down. "And what has become harder?"

The answer was on the tip of my tongue, and it came out before I could stop it, "Being alone is hard, not in the parenting sense but in not having a partner. Not having, well. All of it. No one to talk to or connect with in that way."

Zander's face stayed stoic, even though I felt my cheeks burn. "But you don't want to date?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Who would want to date me with all my baggage and my two kids? Instant dad, anyone?" I laughed awkwardly because otherwise, it was too sad to say out loud.

"Way to undervalue yourself." Zander put a hand on my thigh, and I couldn't help but look down at it. I'd wondered what it would be like earlier, but now I just wanted to know what it felt like for him to be on my bare skin. A tiny flame struck inside as he squeezed me. I met his eyes, and their deep green reminded me of the tall grass on the hill before reaching the ocean. "You're worth it and don't even get me started on those boys. They are something special."

I looked away, not sure that I could even respond to him. He took his hand off me, and my thigh felt cold as he put the chicken in the cream sauce he'd made. He drained the pasta, and I watched him put everything together on two plates. Zander grabbed a fork and brought me a plate right where I sat. It smelled delicious, and I tried to remember the last time someone made me a meal, something meant for me.



It had to have been Jack; he wasn't the best cook, but he tried. "Thank you," I told him before taking a bite. The sauce was flavorful, and I loved the bite of garlic from it. "This is amazing," I said with a mouthful of food.

Zander leaned on the other side of the kitchen, facing me with one leg over the other. "My favorite. I love brussels sprouts, and my mom taught me how to make this sauce. She's an excellent cook."

We ate for a moment, and then I asked, "So what about you? Anyone special in your life?"

He smiled, "Are you asking me if I'm dating someone?"

"I guess."

Zander put his plate down next to him on the counter and took the two steps to cross the kitchen. He put a hand on either side of me, bringing his face close to mine. "No, . I don't have a girlfriend."

"Okay," I swallowed, and it felt like my throat was bone dry. He was so close to me, his lips just inches from mine. The plate in my hands separated us. Zander's eyes dropped to my mouth, and my stomach dropped. It was strange to admit, but I wanted him to kiss me. I hadn't felt that way before now, but if I was going to kiss anybody after Jack, I wanted it to be him.

He leaned down closer, and I held my breath. He was about an inch away from me when I heard the squeak of a door opening upstairs. I blew out the breath, and Zander stepped back, turning his back. "Mom, I need potty," Kingston's little voice came from the stairs.

"Okay, buddy. Do you need me?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even.

“No, it’s just pee,” he answered, and then I heard his little feet padding down the hall.

I put the plate on the bar behind me and jumped off the counter. Zander’s back was still to me, and part of me wanted to pick up where we had left off. But the air was different, and the moment had passed. “Zander, I—”

“It’s getting late. I should probably get going,” Zander cut me off and turned around, avoiding my eyes.

My heart sank, and I wondered if I got it wrong. He didn’t really want to kiss me. Or maybe he had, but Kingston reminded him of what it meant to kiss me. Like I’d said, baggage and potentially being a stepdad. I forced a smile on my face and walked out of the kitchen. Zander followed me and slipped his shoes on. He put his hand on the handle and then turned around, stepping close to me. I stepped back, afraid to run into him, and he grabbed my arm, leaning down to kiss my cheek softly. The kiss made my skin tingle, and he said, “Can I get a raincheck on that kiss?”

He smiled slightly as he turned and slipped out the door, moving too fast for me to respond. I stood there for a few moments, my hand covering the spot where he’d kissed me. This all felt so unfamiliar. Being a widow was difficult in that I loved Jack, and I would always love him. We didn’t get divorced. We didn’t break up. He died. He died, and I loved him, and that feeling wasn’t going to just disappear. But with Zander, I could feel the beginnings of something new.

The complication was that I was buying his house. He was leaving Oregon, so what was I doing? Why was I starting to feel things for someone who wouldn’t stick around?

Chance

The bell above the door jingled, and I caught the eye of Shelley, who was currently ringing someone up at the register. I froze, recognizing the long dark hair of someone I wasn't hoping to run into. I hadn't dated much since I'd been here, very casually. But there was one woman, older than me, who owned a house on the next street over who had been interested. That was putting it mildly. She was very obvious with what she was hoping for from me; every encounter was the same. "Morning, ," Shelley said with a little wave.

Brigette's hair flung over her shoulder as her eyes narrowed on me. "There he is."

"Good morning," I said with a slight nod. I placed my hands inside my jeans pockets, standing off to the side and pretending to scrutinize the menu I knew by heart. This was the only good place to get coffee in town, and I knew exactly what I would get. Brigette grabbed her purse as Shelley asked, "The usual?"

"Yes, please." I moved to pull my phone out of my pocket, wanting to send a text to Izzy, when Brigette's cold hand landed on my forearm.

She squeezed, and I stepped back, trying to shake out of her grasp without being too obvious. "You're looking so tan today, ."

Tan? What a strange thing to say because my skin was literally always this color. I opened my mouth, trying to figure out the right thing to say, when my phone buzzed. I held it up to her and walked as far away as possible, only about two feet. "Hey, Luke. Perfect timing."

He chuckled in response. “Oh no, let me guess. It’s the cougar?”

How he knew was beyond me, but his timing was impeccable. “What’s going on?”

“I am planning on playing hooky a little bit this afternoon. I’m going to take the boys to a movie, some dog superhero thing. Do you want to come?” The sound of his busy real estate office bustled in the background.

I did not. But I also didn’t want to be rude. Kingston and Christian were my buddies, but I wasn’t sure I was up for a kid’s movie in a public theatre. “Um, I don’t know about that, but what is your sister doing?”

Luke laughed. “Seriously? Dude. ”

“What?” I asked as the bell above the door rang again. Shelley placed my drink on the counter, and I grabbed it, knowing she’d add it to my monthly tab.

“I am not her keeper, Zand. But I’m sure she’ll be free to do something with you,” he said, his tone serious.

I stepped out onto the quaint Main Street sidewalk and headed toward the beach. “If you want me to back off, just tell me. I just, I like her.”

The background noise on his end quieted, like he went into a separate room. “I know. I can tell. I also think she really likes you, too.” freaking hoped so. He’d been one second away from kissing her last night. He thought she wanted it, too. But he spent the walk home second-guessing the whole night. “But, like, I don’t need to hear all the details, okay?”

“Understood.” I chuckled. “What time?”

Luke told me when I should meet him there and jumped off the phone. I couldn't help the rush of excitement that rolled through me. Izzy was something so special. She exuded strength, but what I loved most was watching her with her kids. She was so present with them, so focused on whatever they needed.

She had looked so relaxed, which had been incredibly sexy, sitting on the kitchen counter as I cooked. I could feel her watching me, and I loved that feeling. I wanted to soak it all in.

Someone like her, wanting me? It didn't feel quite real, but I wanted it to be true.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

### Paw Patrol

“Can we call Grandpa and Grandma?” Christian asked, holding two dinosaur figures. We were playing with their toys in Kingston’s room. I hadn’t showered yet. We’d had breakfast and spent the last hour building towers that they would knock down aggressively. I hadn’t slept well. I’d tossed and turned, thinking entirely too much about Zander. And then I felt stupid for caring so much about it and then spiraled even further. I’d thought about how we’d almost kissed and struggled with some guilt. Guilt about wanting to kiss him and then guilty because I didn’t think I should feel guilty about that.

“Sure, let’s call them,” I said, remembering that they hadn’t answered the last time we called them. They hadn’t answered the time before that either.

But I didn’t want to say no; I didn’t want to be the one holding my kids back from knowing Jack’s parents. They were doing that well enough on their own. I grabbed my phone off the ground as Kingston stood, stacking Legos atop the tower. I called Jack’s mom and put the phone on speaker. It rang three times. Christian stared at the phone before it went to voicemail. He pressed the red button before I could ask if he wanted to leave a voicemail. “Mom, I miss Grandma and Grandpa.”

I pulled him into my lap, his arms wrapping around my neck. “I know, honey.”

“Why did they move away from us?” His voice was so small, so fragile.

I wanted to be careful with my words. “You might not remember your uncle, your dad’s brother, but he got married and had a baby. So, your grandma and grandpa

wanted to be close in case they needed help.”

Christian didn’t say anything, but I held him anyway. I wished I could take away this part of losing Jack, of growing up without their dad. But I knew the best thing I could do was just be there for him. “Hey, should we see what Uncle Luke is doing today?”

Kingston rammed a stegosaurus into the Lego tower, making a loud roaring sound as he did it. Christian sat up, nodding, “Can we call him now?”

A knock sounded on the door as I sat the boys down for a snack. “Door, Mom!” Christian yelled, and it made the ache in my head even worse. I padded to the front door in my favorite sweatpants and black tank top. I pulled it open without even checking and found Luke and Zander standing side by side.

Luke held a white paper coffee cup, “Brought you a chai, dear sister.” He came inside and handed it off to me, brushing a kiss against my cheek.

“Thanks,” I muttered, moving to the side as Zander came in and copied my brother. Only Zander’s hand found my waist first before placing a kiss on my other cheek. It made my back stiffen, and I swore I could hear him chuckle.

“Boys, what are we doing today?” Luke was already in the dining room talking to Christian and Kingston.

“Snack time, Uncle Luke,” Kingston said with what sounded like a mouth full of food.

Luke nodded as I closed the door. After the night I had, I took a sip of the fragrant chai and felt grateful that my brother brought it. “Well, I got us movie tickets. Are you guys ready to see the new Paw Patrol movie?” Luke said, drumming his fingers on the table.

Christian dropped his carrot stick and looked at me. “Mom?”

I knew nothing about Luke’s plans, but I knew that the boys wanted to see the movie. “It sounds like an Uncle Luke day.”

Christian squealed, standing up in his chair. Kingston had a mouth full of cheese and didn’t seem to be paying attention. Zander went to the kitchen, pulled out a water bottle, and Luke walked over to me, smiling. “I hope that’s okay. Figured you could use a few hours break.”

“Thank you, Luke. I didn’t sleep well at all last night.”

He nodded and then shooed me away. “Go, I’ve got this. Movie is in an hour, and I’ll text you when I’m done.”

I stepped backward and caught Zander’s eye. “I didn’t take you for a Paw Patrol fan.”

“I’m definitely not. I wanted to show you something at the house, actually,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

Luke looked at me, “You better go before they realize you’re not coming with us.”

My boys weren’t clingy and didn’t have significant separation issues, but Kingston could be challenging at times. I couldn’t blame Luke for not wanting to deal with a meltdown right now. “Going, going.”

Zander followed me out of the kitchen and trailed me as I went up the stairs. I stopped, and he froze on the step right below me, his body almost touching mine. “I need to change quickly.”

He nodded and stayed where he was as I went to change. I didn’t want him to think I



was trying to impress him, so I pulled on my favorite pair of boyfriend jeans and an oversized t-shirt. It was my mom uniform and did not scream date me in any way. That's exactly what I needed right now. He was waiting right near the door when I came back down, and I could hear Luke and the boys still in the dining room. Zander and I snuck out, grabbing my small purse on the way out. "I told your brother I needed to show you something at the house, but I just really didn't want to go to that movie. I figured I could keep you company instead."

"I don't want to make you regret your choice, but the Paw Patrol movies are well done. I may or may not have cried at the first one," I said as we walked down the street toward his house just a few blocks away.

Zander turned on a dime and started to walk back toward the house. I caught his hand, and we both laughed. I could feel the calluses on the inside of his fingers, and he squeezed my hand, smiling at me as he turned back around. I let go of him, unsure why I was still allowing myself to do this. It wasn't smart.

We walked close together, our arms brushing against each other. "Want to walk on the beach first?"

I craved the freshness of the ocean air, hoping it would help me keep my head on straight. "Yes, let's."

### Questions

I wasn't sure if it was the warmth in the air or the sand between my toes, but the ache in my head began to lessen. It couldn't be Zander walking quietly beside me. I had hoped that walking beside the crashing waves would help calm my desire for him, but it didn't seem to work. If anything, I felt more aware of him. His arm brushed against mine over and over.

Zander's hands were loose at his sides as we walked, but I kept my grip tight on my purse strap. I wanted to hold his hand again, to feel it on my skin. All over my skin. That was a line that I wasn't sure I'd make it back from crossing. I wasn't sure my boys would either. They'd already grown to care about him, asking about him when I half expected them not to think about him daily.

"So, did you grow up here, or did your husband?" Zander asked, and the question sobered me quickly.

Jack.

"We both spent our summers here. We grew up in Portland, but our families each had houses here. We were very fortunate. However, my parents sold theirs when I was in high school so they could pay off their house. And then Jack and I connected again in college."

Zander nodded, the crashing of the waves filling the silence. "Is it strange to be back here now? After my brother died, I found it interesting to go to places where he had been or where we had been together. It felt wrong that things were still the same, but

he was gone.” I looked at him with shock, my mouth dropping open. “Oh no, did I say something wrong?” he asked quickly.

I shook my head, “No, I just didn’t know your brother died.”

A flash of something I couldn’t quite decipher moved across his face. “I just figured Luke would have told you. Since you seemed to know so much about me when we met.” The words came out more playful at the end.

“He didn’t,” I offered him a small smile. “What happened?”

Zander points to a long log sitting in the sand. “Let’s sit and we can play a game.”

“A game?” I couldn’t remember the last time I played a game.

“Yeah, a question for a question.”

“Okay.”

The waves licked up the sand near my boots. “My brother was a single dad when he died. His wife had left them when his daughter was little.”

“Why did she leave? I hate that so much. How old was his daughter when he died?”

Zander chuckled. “That was two questions. But yes, it wasn’t his plan. He turned things around to be there for Delaney. She was his world. But then, he went to sleep one night and never woke up. It was...” His eyes were on the ground as he drifted off, “shocking.”

I didn’t know what to say. It never felt genuine when people told me they were sorry for my loss. Or when someone told me I should be grateful to know I’ll see my

husband again. Or the always hard to swallow: everything happens for a reason . But I had never needed people's platitudes. I just needed them to be there. So all I said was, "I'm sorry."

"What's your favorite holiday?" Zander asked, and I was surprised by the change of topic. He smirked at me, "Let me ask my two questions."

"Okay," I tried to think of the answer. Before Jack died, it was Christmas, hands down. But now Christmas was just brutal. It was lonely and exhausting to be the only one doing everything. "Maybe Thanksgiving? I can order a pizza or something, and the boys are happy."

"Solid answer. What is something you've always wanted to do? "

"What?"

"Seriously? I feel like it's kind of self-explanatory."

I hesitated. "I guess I haven't thought like that in a long time. It's hard to do things for myself right now."

Zander touched my knee, his touch so light I could barely feel it, "So think about it now. The boys are getting ready to stuff their faces with popcorn at the movies right now. What would you do if you got two hours to yourself without worrying about someone else, clean, or walk with some guy your brother knows?"

I laughed and watched the waves ahead of us. He was more than that, and I couldn't deny that.

What would I want to do? Just for me. Something that I liked. "I almost said writing, but I'm stuck there right now. That's been my job lately, you know? I used to do it

for fun until everything went--well. That's another story. I'm under contract for one more book and need to work on it, so maybe that? Maybe that would be good for me. But I'd also love to get a massage. Just to be alone for a couple of hours and have no one need anything from me would be nice."

"What happened with the book thing?" Zander asked, his hand still on my knee, and I wanted to touch him. Wanted to place my fingers in between his.

"The book thing. Well, I self-published my first book. I had tried to be published traditionally for years, but it never worked out. So, I published my book and then one week after I did, Jack died. I'm not even sure how it happened. I had posted a couple of things about how my husband had died, and I was going to postpone some of my readings and different marketing things that I had planned. And then, everything just blew up," Zander's eyes widened, "In a good way. My sales went through the roof. People loved the story, which was a romance and I kept writing. It was so therapeutic in those early days of grief to live in a completely different world than the one I had found myself in. Then, I had a couple of agents reach out to me, and before I knew it, I was represented and had an actual book deal. My next book came out when Kingston was a year and a half and did great. Better than great. But now, as I try to write this third book. I've finished half of it but can't find any more words. I keep wondering if all of my success was just because Jack died." It's the first time I've said the words aloud, said them to someone else instead of just shoving them back down whenever they pop up in my head.

"If that were true, your second book probably would have tanked." Zander was watching the waves as he spoke, and I let my eyes rove over his features. His dark hair was moving just slightly in the wind. He turned, meeting my eyes, and felt so close to me. "I just mean, if it was purely about the spectacle and not your writing or storytelling, I bet your second book wouldn't have done well."

Without thinking, I moved my hand and placed it on his. He didn't react except to

make space for my fingers to intertwine. “Where are you planning on moving after the summer? ”

Zander’s head fell forward, and his fingers squeezed mine ever-so-slightly. I felt an ever-so-slight flutter in my stomach. “Truthfully, I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know where I’m going to move.”

“Just a hard life, being rich and having nothing and no one to nail you down in one place,” I joked, but it came out more pointed than I thought it would. I bumped his shoulder to try and lighten my words.

“What made you decide to move back here?” he asked, pulling our intertwined hands onto his thigh. His thigh .

I had to look back out at the waves, my insides churning. I wanted to move closer to him, but it was hard to allow myself to. To take that leap, to move forward with another man. A man who wasn’t Jack. “My in-laws moved away, and they were a big help to me. They’d babysit or grocery shop or help me fix things. They were great, but their other son had a baby, and they moved closer to them.”

“That’s... I’m not sure what the right word for that is.”

“Yeah, but I figured it was time to find a place where I had reliable support and start to figure out this whole truly single-mom thing.” It felt scary to admit that out loud, too. My brother was happy to help, and I knew that. But I hated asking for it. I hated admitting that I was in a place where I needed help. I’d been taught all my life to be strong, and it seemed so backward to admit that I wasn’t always strong.

I felt emboldened by our honesty, by the feeling of his calloused skin on mine. “Who is Dee?”

Zander's head popped up, and he had an inkling of a smile. "Dee?" He laughed and nudged me with his shoulder, "Dee is my brother's daughter. Delaney. But I guess she's kind of my daughter, too. In a way."

I twisted my torso, needing to face him to take in this information entirely. "Your daughter, too? How?"

"When my brother died, he had a will. He'd put me down for caring for Delaney, which was ridiculous. I was twenty-two years old and had just finished college. It was my first year in the league. It was not the time for me to have a kid. But Dee's mom didn't want her. She signed away her rights without any pushback, and I became her legal guardian. Luckily, I had a lot of money to help me find great help taking care of her when she wasn't in school. My mom was a huge help, too. She went to college last year and is such a good kid." Zander smiled, his eyes holding mine.

"So that's why you're so good with Christian and Kingston."

I'd thought about moving on so many times since Jack had died. Not because I wanted to or felt ready to, but because I knew I'd have to someday. Someday, I'd be prepared, and deep down, I knew that Jack would want it for me. He wouldn't want me to be alone forever. He'd want me to be happy and loved again. I never felt like anyone could fill that spot, or rather the shadow of Jack. No one would be able to make me feel comfortable like that again. But at that moment, I could feel a glimmer of it. A glimmer of something cozy, something that I wanted more of. "Would you like to get something to eat?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Zander smiled and stood, bringing our hands with him. "I'd like that."

I let him lead me up the steep path. I glanced back at the horizon, the cloudy gray skies mixing with the water's edge. A tiny ray of sunlight came through a break in the clouds and something about it settled something in me. This was okay. It was going

to be okay.



### Strike

Fultano's looked just like I remembered. Zander wanted pizza and to bowl, so it was the obvious choice. It was exactly what you'd imagine—worn-down carpet, outdated signs, and a bowling alley off to the right. But the pizza was outstanding. It made everything around us seem charming as we changed into borrowed shoes. "I'm terrible at bowling," I admitted, tying up the slippery laces.

The pizza sat in front of us, half-eaten. I hadn't realized my hunger until we arrived, and the pizza was brought out. My giant Pepsi paper cup was filled with Dr. Pepper, the only Pepsi product I could stand to drink.

Zander stood with his bright pink bowling ball in hand. "I'm very good at this."

"Oh, so that's why you wanted to come here. To woo me with your bowling skills?" I joked, standing, and then noticed the look on his face. His smile has broadened, and his dark eyebrows were raised.

"Woo you? Is that what I'm doing?"

My cheeks burned, and my stomach felt sick. He was wooing me, right? It had been so long. I didn't know what it felt like anymore. "I mean, to buy your house. You don't want to burn this bridge." I threw the words out there, hoping they'd be enough to diffuse that look on his face.

We had held hands. Right? And he'd almost kissed me. Was I just second-guessing everything? I was overthinking this. It didn't need to be more than two people getting

to know each other. That's all.

"Right, right. Woo you in our real estate relationship. Not the other one." He spoke the last part as he walked toward the lane. I wasn't going to say anything. Zander wound up his arm and rolled his bright pink ball straight down the middle. He hit seven pins and, on his second roll, hit another two.

It was my turn. I had found a sparkly blue ball that felt okay. I walked straight up, past the little dots on the floor, and was ready to throw my ball when Zander put his hand on it. "Wait, have you ever—do you know how to bowl?"

He was standing behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder at him, his large body entirely too close. "I mean, I've bowled before. You just roll it and see where it goes."

"Okay, but where do you put your feet?"

"What?"

Zander laughed, and then his hands were on my waist, my skin tingling, pulling me back a couple of steps. He moved to the side and motioned to the little lines etched into the floor. "These are what help you know where to line up your feet. Depending on where you want your ball to go." He moved me closer to the right-hand side, softly touching my calves, and I followed his touch. Zander pointed to the line of markings closest to the lane. "Now, you should pay attention to these when you roll. Look at the one you want your ball to go toward. Your eyes have just as much to do with bowling as your hand, arm, and ball."

Zander stood, and I picked the middle marking, swinging my arm backward and forward. I let go of the ball, which slid right over the middle marking. I watched it roll down the lane and hit the center pin. The clatter of every bowling pin falling to

the ground made me clap my hands. I turned, and Zander was right there, his hands finding my arms. “I did it!” I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him close. I felt the slight scratch of his beard on my cheek. His hands slid down around my back, and he held me tightly. His lips pressed softly against my ear, and every inch of me froze when he said, “It’s all part of me trying to woo you.” His breath was warm against my skin, and I leaned into him more. “Is it working?”

I dug my fingers into his neck, pressing my chest into his, and he returned my gestures, his hands splaying out on my back. I didn’t want to let go. The way he held me and the pressure of it were things I hadn’t felt in so long. I liked it. I pulled back just enough to see his face, and my traitorous eyes flickered down to his lips. They were so close to mine, just right there. I forced myself to look away as my fingers played with the edges of his hair, “It’s your turn. Let’s see if you’re as good as you said.”

He was. I had a streak of beginner’s luck, but he was very precise with his rolls. It was impressive to watch, but maybe I just liked watching him. We finished the entire pizza, and I checked the time. The boys were done with their movie, and it was probably time for me to relieve Luke. Hopefully, Kingston was taking a nap. Zander returned our shoes for us and held the door as we walked back out to his truck. “Where to next?”

“I should probably go check in with Luke. See if the boys need me.” I said as we walked together.

We touched playfully after our celebratory hug. He’d brush past me, a hand on my side. I touched his arm a lot, and it felt so nice. It’s just comfortable to touch him like that. But luckily, there hadn’t been any more whispering in my ear. I don’t know if I could have handled much more of that. Zander opened the passenger door for me. “Sounds good. This was a fun first date, though.”

He stood behind me as I made my way to the inside of the truck. I glanced over my shoulder at him. “This was not a date.”

Zander smiled and leaned closer, the open door and the truck boxing me in. “We had food, we bowled, there was flirting, and I paid for it. That’s a date.”

A date.

Had I just gone on a date without knowing I had? I’d tried before. My in-laws, of all people, had set me up. They wanted me to find someone to fill Jack’s shoes, but I’d chickened out beforehand. It had been too soon. Jack still felt like he was all around me then.

“Interesting. Does it count if you didn’t know it was a date?” I ask. The playfulness warmed my chest. I leaned against the car door.

Zander put a finger on his chin and then shrugged. “I think so.”

“But we didn’t kiss.” I blurt the words out and almost want to turn around from the close by embarrassment.

“True,” Zander said as he took one step toward me. His hands found my waist again and I bit back a sound of delight. “But we could remedy that.”

Words were lost to me. I couldn’t say it. I wouldn’t say that I wanted it. But I did. I could still hear Jack’s voice telling me to be happy. To do what made me happy. I put one hand on Zander’s face and moved toward him. He held my gaze until we were close enough for our lips to brush against each other. It was soft and hesitant, and then I moved closer. I wanted to feel more of him and pressed myself into him. He kissed me, not roughly, but enough to make me feel it throughout my body.

We broke apart, leaning our foreheads tighter. “Okay, so it was a date,” I muttered into the small space between our faces.

I was nervous as we pulled up in front of my rental house. Zander put the car in park, and I turned to him, “Did you tell my brother?”

“About us almost kissing the other night?”

“Yeah,” I finished, unclicking my seatbelt.

Zander shook his head, “I did not, but he also told me that he didn’t want to know the details.”

“Oh, so you’ve talked about me?” I said with my eyebrows raised.

He rolled his eyes. “Actually, I am just really obvious, apparently. I didn’t have to say anything because he already seemed to know.”

That’s Luke for you. He’s good at reading people, so he excelled in his dating life and career. “I don’t think he’ll be mad. He’s always been protective but not overprotective like that.” I was more trying to convince myself.

“I agree. I’m sure he’ll give me the threatening older brother talk, though.” Zander smiled and grabbed my hand, bringing it to his mouth. He pressed a kiss to it, and I wanted to kiss him again. “But before we go in,” he started and leaned toward me. I met him halfway, pressing my lips into his with more need. It felt incredible to be wanted again, to be kissed. Zander moved his lips down my neck, and everything inside me hummed. I let out a moan, and he spoke against my skin, “That might be my favorite sound.”

I grabbed his face, pressing another kiss to his lips before opening the car door and

breaking the spell around us. I couldn't keep my eyes off Zander as he walked around the car to meet me. I stayed put, wanting to head inside but not ready to face reality. He pulled me close to him, leaning against the garage door, and wrapped his hands behind my back. "We should go inside," I murmured as his fingers spread over my shirt.

"It's more fun out here," he said, and I stepped on my toes to kiss him again. We unhooked ourselves, and he trailed behind me, heading back inside to my two boys.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

Break

I wasn't sure what to do with myself. I had been sipping at my scalding coffee for the last twenty minutes, replaying yesterday. Izzy was different than anyone I'd dated before.

Being in the spotlight as a football player led me to women who enjoyed being in the spotlight. Maybe a little more than they enjoyed being with me. But Izzy was so real.

Very herself.

And I couldn't get enough.

I was trying to figure out how long I needed to wait to text her or, call her or see her. Probably longer than I wanted to.

I needed to brainstorm something we could do with the boys. But then I remembered our little game of questions yesterday. Izzy had been a solo parent for almost three years and was a great one.

But she also deserved a break. Like any parent.

I pulled out my phone and texted Luke, hoping he'd have the connections to help me arrange my surprise. Excited about my idea, I took a large sip of my coffee and stood. I needed to get going if I was going to arrange all of this.

And Izzy was going to love it.

Yourself

Luke popped his head into the living room. “You ready?” I was sitting on the floor with one boy on either side. We were watching one of their favorite shows that, of course, starred dinosaurs.

“Ready for what?” I asked, trying to remember a conversation I must have missed. I used to be able to remember and keep track of everything, but since Jack died, my mind struggled.

He smiled, “It’s a surprise. But if you had to go somewhere right now, would you be ready?”

I narrowed my eyes on him. Something was weird. He had a goofy smile on his face. “I guess. ”

The doorbell rang, and he moved to the door very quickly. “Oh,” my brother turned to face me, “You need to grab your laptop, actually.”

“What is going on?” Christian nuzzled his head into my shoulder.

“Come on, get up,” Luke said, talking with his hands.

I shook my head. He stood by the front door, his hand on the handle as I walked up the stairs. I could hear the door open and close but only heard hushed tones. I flicked the light on and glanced at myself in the fading mirror on top of the dresser. My hair was thrown out of my face, and I didn’t put any makeup on today.



I had no clue what was going on, but this had better be good enough. My laptop was plugged in on my bedside table, even though I hadn't opened it in days. I grabbed it and went back out into the hallway. Standing next to Zander, Luke looked up at me from the bottom of the stairs.

Zander smiled at me, and I felt a flutter of nervousness in my stomach. I could still feel his lips on my neck. I hadn't been able to let go of what that felt like, how electric it had felt. "Okay, now you really need to tell me what's going on."

"You're going out," Zander answered, the timber of his voice so attractively low.

"Grab your stuff," Luke said with a smile, grabbing my keys off the hooks by the front door.

"Okay, guess I'm just going to be ordered around."

Zander chuckled. Luke opened the front door and walked out toward his car. I went to follow him when Zander caught me by the wrist. The spot where his fingers touched my skin made something inside me squirm. "Try to enjoy yourself, okay? Everything will be okay. The boys will be just fine."

"Is this your doing?" I asked, frozen on the spot.

He nodded and then looked over my shoulder. "Boys, say see ya later to Mom," he called to my sons.

Their little voices overlapped as they called out, "Bye, Mom," and "See ya later, Mama."

Zander let go of my wrist and nudged me out the door. He closed the door with a smile, and I walked down the stairs to the front path, confused. Luke sat in his car,

waving me toward him. “Let’s go! We’re on a schedule here. Don’t want to be late.”

“Late to what?” I asked, almost frustrated, as I slid into the passenger seat.

My brother had the audacity to laugh at me as he pulled out of the driveway.

I never wanted to get up. I wanted to lay on this massage table for the rest of my life. I wanted to fall asleep and listen to the sounds of a stream forever. I’d spent the last ninety minutes being treated to the best massage of my life with essential oils and hot rocks. I couldn’t stop thinking about Zander as I lay there, my muscles relaxed. He had set this up for me, Luke had told me. He’d wanted me to have some time to myself, so he was at the house to hang out with the boys.

I knew he had experience with kids, but leaving them with him still felt strange. Luke was at the house, but it was a Zander playdate. The boys hadn’t ever spent time like that with a man who wasn’t family. I pushed myself up to a sitting position and held the thin white sheet to my chest. The room was darkened, and a huge bowl of white Lifesavers mints sat on the little counter. A stack of envelopes for gratuity and another envelope sat up where the wall met the counter. It was yellow and had my name written on it. I stood, taking one short step to be able to grab it.

I left the sheet on the table, and my bare skin felt cold. The envelope was sealed in the very center, and it tore quickly. There was a small piece of white paper inside.

,

I hope that you enjoyed your massage. Now, you’ll find an Uber waiting outside for you to take you to the coziest coffee shop in town. Take your time, write. Work on that story, or just read something. The boys are taken care of, and we’ll see you for dinner.

Zander

I wanted to kick and fight, to make a big deal about how I didn't need a break. But truthfully, I liked it. I wanted the time just to relax, take care of myself, and try to take another stab at this terrible draft of my book. I leaned back against the massage table, holding tightly onto the note. Jack used to do this for me when Christian was little. He made pockets of time for me to write, go to the store alone, and get a break, even if it was short. And now Zander was doing it, too.

I looked down at my left hand, my rose gold wedding band on my ring finger. It moved around more easily than it had before. I'd lost weight since Jack died. It was harder to take care of myself, and some days I had no appetite. I put the ring on each morning because it felt strange not to.

And I thought of my conversation with Zander's neighbor and realized I'd reached a new milestone. One where putting this ring on didn't have as much meaning anymore. Not like it once did.

The thought made my heart ache, even though it was true. I folded the note up and placed it in my purse. I dressed, grabbed a handful of those mints, and headed to the front. The ladies behind the front desk smiled and waved me on, telling me it had been taken care of. A white car was parked in one of the parking spaces, and a young girl stood next to it. She met my eyes as I came out the door, "?"

"That's me."

"Great, I've got strict orders to get you to a coffee shop."

I laughed and sat in the passenger seat next to her. I didn't use ride shares very often, but when I did, I sat up front. It seemed strange to sit in the back and let someone else drive me around. The drive was short, and I probably could have walked, but the girl

dropped me off in front of Insomniac Coffee. It hadn't been there when I'd been growing up, but the floor-to-ceiling windows made the inside bright, even though it was cloudy. The smell of coffee filled my head when I walked inside. I ordered something decaf because it was already three o'clock and sat at a small table in the corner. My laptop engine almost groaned when I turned it on, and it felt like it knew that's how I was feeling, too.

My manuscript opened quickly, and I began to reread where I had been and where I had left off. I'd written myself into a corner and needed to figure out where I went wrong.

Mist filled the air as I turned onto my temporary street. I'd walked home, not sure if there had been another driver waiting for me. But the coffee shop was less than a mile from the house, and I needed the break. I'd figured out at which point I'd gone in the wrong direction, and it had felt equally terrifying and satisfying to delete about ten thousand words. Sometimes, you had to write an idea out to know if it worked. After deleting a fifth of my writing, I sat at that table and looked down at my wedding ring again.

I couldn't remember what it felt like not to wear it, so I pulled it off my finger and attached it to my necklace instead. As I walked home, it was like the skin on my finger had never been exposed to the open air. Sometimes, you had to try something to see if it felt right.

My rental house came into view, and a woman with her dog turned onto the sidewalk and headed toward me. Her eyes widened, and she waved, "Are you Stanton? The author?"

I glanced behind me, unsure why, almost like I wasn't sure if she was talking to me. But she was. "I am." I smiled, not used to being recognized in public.

I had done book events and tours for my last two books, but I wasn't a household name. The woman was older than me, maybe in her forties. "I just loved your books. Your brother lives in town, but I didn't think I'd run into you. I'm sorry to bug you, but I just can't wait for your next book to come out."

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate that."

She smiled and wrapped her dog's leash around her hand, "When is your next book coming out? Do you know?"

"I'm still writing it right now, so I don't have any dates for you."

The woman nodded, "That's okay. You take your time. It'll be worth the wait." She waved, "Thanks for letting me say hi."

I waved back, and we passed by each other. I walked up the front path to the rental house, and when I reached for the handle, the door opened on its own. Christian stood in the doorway with his hands outstretched. "Right this way, my madam."

"Why, thank you, my sir," I smiled and couldn't help but remember the first time he said that to me. It had been so random, and I loved it when he called me that. It always made me chuckle a little.

Christian led me down the hallway to the kitchen at the back of the house. The long ranch-style table was covered with food. There was a tray of chicken nuggets and a bowl of mac and cheese. There was some bright green jello and a jug of lemonade. Zander stepped out of the kitchen with a salad bowl, "They chose the menu, but I figured we better have something healthy."

Luke was outside, the French doors open. He picked up Kingston as he laughed, kicking his legs. Christian went outside, jumping on Luke's leg, and I leaned against

one of the dining room table chairs. Zander placed the salad bowl down, and I grabbed his arm. He stopped, moving closer to me. I leaned back, looked up at him, and smiled. "Thank you for today."

He placed a hand on my arm, rubbing it up and down. "You deserve it." I glanced outside, and the boys were tackling Luke in the grass. I leaned onto the balls of my feet and kissed Zander's cheek. The feeling of his short scruff on my face made my core heat up. His arm moved around my back, and he stepped, moving so his back was to the backyard. "That's my thank you?" he whispered, a smirk on his face.

I laughed, and the feeling was so warm in my chest. "You want something else, Zander?"

His eyes closed for a moment, and he took another step into me, our bodies pressed up against each other. "I love it when you say my name." My stomach flip-flopped, and I wanted to touch him even more. I wanted to feel his hands on every part of me, and that scared me. He softly touched my chin, pulling my face up and kissing me. This kiss was soft and tentative but only made me want more. I pressed into him harder than I thought I would and kissed him back. His other hand traveled down my arm, onto my waist, and I felt him tug at the waistband of my pants. Every part of my body was on fire, and I wished we were alone. Christian yelled from outside, not an angry or hurt yell but just loud. The sound made us both pull away. I touched my fingers to my lips as Zander glanced outside, the three boys heading in our direction. "We'll finish that later," he whispered.

He turned, pulling out a chair for me as Luke came back in, carrying Kingston on his back. "Let's eat, boys," Zander called out, and I avoided my brother's eyes.

Could he see it on us? The kiss we'd just shared and how I wanted to rip off Zander's shirt and let my hands trace his body. Christian sat next to me, and Kingston was on the other side. They both reached across the table, grabbing chicken nuggets. "Did

you have a good day, Mommy?” Christian asked, shoving a nugget in his mouth.

“I did.” I put some salad on my plate as Luke sat beside Kingston and Zander across the table. “I had a great massage and then worked on my book.”

“Good job, Mommy.” The words came out garbled as Kingston spoke with the cheesy noodles in his mouth.

“What did you guys do today?” I asked, glancing between my two sons. In turn, they both looked at Zander and then back at me. “What is that look for?” I asked, my eyes turning toward Zander. He chuckled, placing a large fry in his mouth before shrugging his shoulders. Luke coughed, avoiding my eyes. “Let me guess, you guys did something I would have said no to?”

Kingston nodded, sitting on his knees to grab his drink with both hands. “We had a water balloon fight, and then we got to shoot Uncle Luke’s paintball gun!”

It wasn’t as bad as I had been imagining in my mind. While I didn’t love the idea of them shooting a high-powered gun, I knew that Luke would let himself get hurt before he let them get hurt. “And then, we went swimming at the beach for a bit before coming back to make you dinner. So not too bad.”

“It was such a fun day,” Christian said, a smile on his face.

I looked across the table at Zander and smiled, hoping he understood how grateful I was for the day he’d planned for me. His face broke out into a grin, and I knew he did. We both laughed. It was strange to be able to communicate with him like that when we’d only known each other for a short time. Luke looked between us and then rolled his eyes, “Oh great.”

“What?” I asked, stabbing my fork into my salad .

“You guys are gross.”

“Mom is gross?” Kingston asked, his little face scrunched up in confusion.

Luke leaned close to him, his face silly, “The grossest.”

Kingston giggled, and I threw my brother a glare. He stuck his tongue out at me, and Christian copied him. Perfect. But as we sat and ate, the boys told me a story about a seagull who wouldn’t leave them alone. That’s what I kept coming back to.

Perfect.



### Bedtime

“I don’t want to go to bed!” Christian whined, flopping himself down on the ground. Zander was washing the dishes after making the boys a special dessert. Not that they needed any more sugar. Luke had gone home, telling me he wanted to give us some space and told me to be happy. It relieved some of the anxiety I felt about the whole situation.

“Buddy, it’s bedtime.” I stood over him, trying to keep a straight face. Kingston had gone to bed alone, asking me to put him to sleep. Today had worn him out. But Christian always fought bedtime. Always.

“No, Mommy. I’m never going to sleep. I hate sleeping.” He spread his limbs out, his cheek on the floor.

Zander came around the corner, putting the dish towel on the bar. “Buddy, I have this really special song I want to play you.”

Christian’s head popped up, “What song?”

“It’s special, but I can only play it for you if you’re in bed.” He jumped off the ground and headed up the stairs. I rolled my eyes as Zander came to stand by me. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing, just wish I had a magic trick like that every time he doesn’t want to sleep.”

“That’s what I’m for...” He kissed my cheek and followed Christian up the stairs. I

walked behind him but let him take the lead. Christian brushed his teeth and then crawled into his bed. Zander turned off the light and lay down on the floor. He held his phone over his head, the light shining down on his features. I sat on the floor next to him, resting my elbows on my knees when the music started to play.

It was soft, the piano notes relaxing, and Christian rolled on his side, facing the wall. Zander put his phone down next to him and put his hand on my leg. He motioned with his head, pulling on me. “Lay down,” he whispered, and I moved beside him. Zander’s arm was around my shoulders, and I rested my head on his chest as the room filled with the music. It was a special song, if only because it had gotten Christian off the floor and into his bed. I put my hand on Zander’s chest, trying not to notice how strong it felt under my palm. His heart beat smoothly against my ear, and his woodsy scent surrounded me. We lay there like that until the song ended and another began to play. I pushed myself up and stepped over Zander to check on Christian. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was hanging open a bit. That might be a magic song.

Zander followed me out of the room, and I closed the door very slowly. “Cooking show?” he asked, and I smiled at him.

We went down to the couch and fell into the overfilled pillows. I placed my legs over his, and he rested his hands on them. It was interesting to me, and maybe a bit alarming, how easy it felt. I clicked on the show, and Zander started to run his hands up and down my legs. I was grateful to be wearing my yoga pants, knowing that if he touched my skin, I’d be a goner. “Thanks again for today,” I told him before I lost the ability to speak.

He smiled. “I wanted it to be a surprise. I’m glad you liked it.”

“It was so nice, and I made some progress in my book.”

“What is it about?” he asked, his hands moving to my feet, pressing into the tired muscles.

I let out a soft sound of delight, and a smile spread across his face. “It is about a single mom who has to move back home after her divorce. She runs into her ex from high school, except he’s a little more grown-up. And her daughter just adores him. ”

“Classic. Gotta love a guy who is good with kids.” Zander said with a wink. He began to rub my feet, and it sent shocks of relief up my legs.

“But you see, he cheated on her when they were young. Was a real douchebag. And now he’s the owner of the coffee shop and wants another shot. Pun definitely intended.” I chuckled. Sometimes I could be funny.

A piece of Zander’s hair fell in front of his face, and I loved how it changed how he looked. A little more relaxed. “So what’s the hang-up? What are you stuck on?”

“I’m stuck on their all-is-lost moment, actually.”

“What does that mean?”

“In every romance, they fall in love, and everything is amazing until it all falls apart, right? I can’t bring myself to break them up, I think. It’s too sad. Logically, I know they’ll make it back to each other, but I hate to damage their relationship.” Zander’s face changed, and I had a hard time deciphering it. “It’s stupid because they’re fake, but I’m stuck regardless.”

Zander shook his head, “It’s not stupid. It makes sense to me. You had the worst all-is-lost moment with Jack. And you guys didn’t make it back to each other. I can see why that would make it hard for you.”

His words are so simple but so powerful. I stop momentarily and realize that is precisely why it's difficult for me. Jack and I won't get our happily ever after. "Is it weird for you to talk about Jack? I don't want you to—"

"No, absolutely not. If my mom showed me anything, you can love more than one person. In fact, you kind of have no choice when you're a widow." I watched him, trying to find cracks in his very confident facade. "I don't know if you knew this, but I was aware you were widowed when I decided I wanted to kiss you."

"And when was that?"

He moved his hands to my other foot. "It was when you showed up to the parade in those tight pants with your American flag shirt on."

"Sounds like you weren't really focused on my lips," I said and was surprised at how forward I was being. It wasn't like me at all.

Zander's eyebrows shot up, and he stopped rubbing my feet. "You've got a great ass."

We were inching close to dangerous territory. Another line that we wouldn't be able to uncross, and surprisingly, I felt okay about it. "I've caught you checking it out a couple of times."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Ditto, honey. I know I've got a good ass, too." The way he said it, so confident and cocky, made me laugh. "So, Dee is coming into town for the weekend. You didn't get a chance to meet her last time. I'd love to have you guys over to the house when she's here."

"Dee? Your daughter?"

Zander looked taken aback. “I don’t usually call her that, but yes. Dee.”

“I mean, you raised her, right?”

“Yeah, but my brother, man, he loved her so much. I just would never want to erase him from being her dad.” Zander’s fingers rubbed over the ball of my foot.

“What was he like?”

Zander’s face changed, and I could tell that he went somewhere else. “My brother was older than me by eight years, so he was always just so cool. I always wanted to be like him and follow in his footsteps. He played football and did well in college but then got married. His ex-wife didn’t want him to play football. She wasn’t--well, she was very controlling. But Marco was vibrant, strong, and stepped up to help be a pseudo-dad to me after our dad passed away.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Every day, yeah. We were close, and he was my biggest fan in my football career.” Zander placed his hands around my feet, resting his head against the couch.

“When we were sitting out on the deck, you said something about grief to me about how people expect you to just be over it at a certain point, but it doesn’t work like that. I was so curious about how you knew that and had that insight, and I should have realized that you only knew that because you’d lost someone.”

Zander nodded. “It was the worst day of my life. His wife was long gone by then, and Dee woke up for school. She found him and called the cops. And then she called me. I can still hear the panic in her voice. The way she was sobbing.”

“Were you in the NFL at that point?”

“Not yet. I was headed there, but my team was flexible with me. I was in LA, so I flew to Texas, where they lived, and stayed with her. My mom came in, too, and she was the rock. If you asked her now, she’d say that her heart was broken that day, just like when my dad died. But she kept it together for Dee. She also moved to LA for that first year to be with Dee. She saved me and Dee.” I reached out and put a hand on his arm.

“That was a lot for you to deal with so young.”

Zander smirked at me. “Look who’s talking.”

I chuckled. “We’re a perfect match when it comes to that.”

His hand trailed up my leg. “I think other things make us a match, too. But yes, we do understand what it means to grieve. To live with grief.”

“Yes. Thank you for not being scared of me because I’m a widow. Your neighbor, Beau, seriously ran away so fast.”

“He’s a player and a bit annoying.”

I held Zander’s hand and focused on the show, nestling into the couch. “Yeah, but being a widow comes with baggage.”

“No, it comes with history. That’s okay with me.” Zander’s voice was soft, and we said nothing else while watching professional chefs make food with ridiculous ingredients. I knew that we could do more. I wanted to do more, to touch him. But it felt nice to sit there together.

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### Introduction

The boys circled the living room, trying to see who could last the longest. Luke shook his head. “I wish I had that much energy.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” I said, watching them as I yawned. I’d stayed up too late writing. It had felt exciting and good to be making progress finally.

The door opened, and Luke turned his head. “Dee!” he yelled out.

I spotted the girl coming into the living room as Zander stepped back inside from the back deck. He was manning the grill, and it was crucial that no one else touch the food. I admired his body as he walked. He wore a blue t-shirt that hung onto his shoulders snugly and a pair of black pants that looked made for his long muscular legs. “I’m so glad you made it safe,” Zander said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

She hugged him, smiling, “I have someone I want you to meet, actually.”

Luke looked at me, his mouth in the shape of an o . I could see Zander’s shoulders stiffen as a young man peeked his head inside the door. He was cute and put his hand out for Zander to shake. He wore a light-blue polo, and his hair was spiked up at the front. Dee looked at him like he was everything good in the world. It was obvious that she was smitten. Zander just stared down at the boy’s hand, and Dee watched. I came up beside Zander, my hand finding a place on his back before saying, “It’s nice to meet you, Dee. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

She threw a glare at Zander before pulling me into a hug. “My uncle has talked a lot about you. It’s nice to meet you!”

To his credit, the boy still had his hand out, waiting for Zander. Luke shook his hand instead and asked, “Dee, could you introduce this young man to the group?”

She put her hand on the boy's bicep, stepping close to him. “This is Matt. He’s my boyfriend.”

I squeezed Zander’s hand and made a face at him. He cleared his throat. “Sorry, Matt. I was not expecting Dee to bring home a friend. Why don’t you both come in, and we can get some food?”

We made our way to the kitchen, and Dee and Matt dropped their bags in the living room. “So how is Oregon State, Dee?” Zander asked.

Dee’s face lit up. “It’s so amazing. I love campus, and my classes have all been so interesting so far.”

The boys were sprawled out on the couch, their chests heaving. “This is Christian and Kingston,” Zander told Dee as we all kind of awkwardly stood around and observed them. “They are ’s boys.”

My boys. They are. My heart swelled at how glad I was that they were mine. Kingston popped his head up. “I won.”

Christian pushed his whole body up, glaring at his younger brother. “No, I won.”

I put my hand on Christian’s leg. “It’s okay. Why don’t you guys go see who can reach the back fence first?” They loved competition, and it was the perfect way to tire them out.



Christian was up first, running around the oversized couch as Kingston followed, but he waited at the French doors for his brother. I watched them, ignoring the conversation going on around me. They were such good kids.

“It’s a really great program. Matt is studying sports medicine as well.” Dee stepped toward her boyfriend, who smiled, his eyes flickering between Luke and Zander. I sure hoped that Dee prepped him before coming and didn’t throw him into the lion’s den without any heads up.

“Sports medicine is a great field. So Matt, where are you from?” Zander asked, crossing his large arms over his chest. I loved how his muscles sloped, and suddenly, I wanted to have my hands on them. I stood, hoping to shake off the lusty feelings surging through me, and stayed about an arm’s length away from Zander.

“I’m from Medford,” Matt said simply.

Dee rolled her eyes. “If you’re going to interrogate him, at least feed him first.”

Luke chuckled and nodded to the backyard. “Everything’s ready. Let’s go out on the deck.” And Zander relaxed a bit as he served everyone up. He made a plate for Kingston and Christian, and it felt strange just to sit down and eat my food. The boys sat across the table from me, choosing their spots on their own.

Luke decided to dominate the time, telling stories about crazy clients and complaining about his latest romantic pursuits.

The time passed quickly, and then the boys were ready for bed, but I didn’t really want to leave. Luke was getting a fire started in the pit, and Dee was giving him a hard time. I had Kingston in my arms as Zander came back outside and right over to me. “Little guy tired?”

“I’m not little, I’m big,” Kingston murmured, his little voice tickling my neck.

Zander laughed and rubbed his hand up and down Kingston’s back. “Sorry, buddy.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have to head out. But this was such a fun night.”

“Do you want to stay? They can sleep in the guest room. The bed is big enough that I don’t think they’d bug each other.” Zander’s voice was small, and I held his gaze. This felt like a big step, something you couldn’t return from. Just like kissing him and knowing what that feels like.

But this was life with kids. I couldn’t just parade around town, having late nights because I wanted to date someone. But he was not shying away from that; he didn’t mind them being there. In fact, he really seemed to like it.

I was overthinking this. I nodded. “Sure.”

Zander led us to the guest room. Kingston yawned as I sat him on the bed and removed his socks. “I’ll be downstairs, okay?” Zander whispered, tapping on the frame of the door.

I glanced over my shoulder and nodded just as Kingston asked, “Mommy, can I see a photo of me and Daddy?”

An ache shook through my chest. We’d had this conversation before. Christian had a little book my mother-in-law had made for him filled with pictures of him and Jack. But there were none of Kingston and Jack, which continued to break my heart. Kingston’s little eyes were watching me very intently. “Well, baby, Daddy went to heaven while you were still in my belly. So, I don’t have any. Do you want to look at some photos of Daddy?”

He broke my gaze and looked down at his fingers, weaving them together. “Why did Daddy die?”

I sat on the bed next to his tiny frame and wrapped my arm around his shoulder. He leaned into me, putting his little hand on my thigh. “You know, I don’t know why Daddy had to die.” My voice broke, and the tears were there before I could stop them. “But I do know that Daddy loves us. And he loves you very much.”

Kingston leaned into me and let out a big sigh. “I miss him.”

“Me too.” And just like that, a heavy fog settled into my chest. It had been there before. This fog, this sick feeling that came with missing Jack. Sometimes, it dissipated quickly, and sometimes made me want to lay in bed for days. Everything about this was unfair. Kingston crawled by the pillow and patted the spot next to him, “Lay with me?”

And so, I did.

Zander had taken Matt inside with him, and I was sitting out by the fire with Dee, trying to shake off the suffocating weight on my chest. Christian had been very excited about sleeping over at Zander’s, while part of me just wanted to be alone. That was easier when we were in Colorado, even though it wasn’t the healthiest thing for me to do, to pull away. I pulled the blanket up over my legs and smiled at Dee. “I just want you to know that Zander is head over heels for you. After his last relationship, it makes me so glad.”

“Yeah, he told me a bit about Natalie, right?”

Dee nodded. “I try to keep my opinions to myself because I may have scared off some of his girlfriends when I was younger. They were terrible, in my defense. But I couldn’t stop myself with her.” Dee waved her hands through the air. “But that

doesn't matter because now he has you."

"Zander is...well...the best," I said, my cheeks burning because he was terrific. And sexy, but I wasn't going to tell his daughter that.

"I remember bits and pieces of my dad, mostly because Zander talked about him so much growing up. He stepped up for me when I really needed him. He's a great dad, even if he won't let me call him that." Dee folded her hands on her lap, eyes on the fire.

"He is good at that, stepping up." And part of me doubted everything at that moment. Was that his MO? Did he like to fix things? Help people? Was I just another wayward person who needed him to save them? My heart ached because that couldn't be true. I wouldn't allow it. I pulled at the rough Pendleton blanket and was glad to see Zander and Matt coming out of the house.

"We have treats," Matt said, handing Dee a white bag of cookies before sitting beside her.

"And your favorite, Iz," Zander said, my heart leaping at the shortened version of my name. He sat next to me on the couch and handed me a box of iced oatmeal cookies. I started to open the box and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He put his arm around me, settling right next to me. "So, Dee, Matt told me how you guys plan to visit his parents over winter break." The feeling of him and his warmth chipped away at some of that terrible heaviness around me.

Dee shot a glance at Matt, and it made me chuckle. "Yeah, we were thinking about it."

"Do you think you'll still visit for Christmas, though?" And I could hear the real question in his voice.

Dee leaned forward, “Yes, always Christmas, Pops.” Zander nodded curtly, and I loved that she called him Pops. “But where will you be? I know that well...” she drifted off.

I felt my shoulders stiffen, and Zander squeezed my shoulder. “That has yet to be figured out, but I’ll let you know.”

“Yeah, so she’s buying your house and you’re moving but dating?” Matt asked with a mouth full of cookies.

Zander and I exchanged glances, and I rolled my eyes, trying to diffuse the annoyance I read on his face. “Yeah, it’s a unique situation, but I fell for the house first. To be clear.”

“Oh yeah?” Dee asked, her eyes bright. “Because I think this one was smitten immediately. He called me the day you met—”

“Dee, what—” Zander started, but Dee kept going.

“He doesn’t call me just to chat usually. I’m a college student, we text. But he told me all about seeing you and how nice you were. Nice was code for gorgeous.” Zander rubbed his other hand over his face and leaned his forehead against my hair. “I knew he was a goner right then.”

“We need to have you visit more often, Dee,” I laughed. I put a hand on Zander’s leg, squeezing it slightly.

He whispered against my hair, “Unfortunately for me, she’s right. I was very attracted to you from that first day.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, “You were so grumpy that day. I thought you were annoyed by

us being there.”

We were whispering, trying to have a private conversation in public. “I had come back from a trip that day. Everything was delayed, and I had run into Natalie in LA. I was grumpy, but not because of you.”

I leaned into him, running my fingers over his thigh. Dee and Matt were facing each other in their own conversation. I placed a tiny cookie in my mouth. The fire was warm, blazing high, and Zander nuzzled into my side.

“You’re driving me crazy with those fingers,” he whispered, tickling my skin. While the sadness of my conversation with Kingston was still partially there, it didn’t feel as suffocating. It was strange, the mix of emotions inside me. To want to touch every part of Zander, and the need to sit quietly by myself in a dark room.

The desire to touch him won out, and I smirked, moving my hand farther up his leg, grateful for the blanket covering us.

“Pops, I think we’re gonna call it a night. I wanna take Matt on a hike in the morning.”

“Okay, I’ve got the couch all made up for him,” Zander said with a smile.

Matt nodded as Dee rolled her eyes. “That’ll be fine for me, sir.”

The two stood, holding hands, and walked back inside. I twisted into Zander, resting my head on him as I moved my hand a little further up. He opened his legs a bit more, and a rush of desire moved through me.

Zander’s hand pulled at my chin, turning my face toward him. His mouth found mine. It felt so good to kiss him, to be held together by him like this. He pushed into me,

and I moved backward, his body coming over mine. I loved the weight of him on top of me and didn't want it to stop. His lips moved to my neck, the tiny pricks from his scruff setting my skin on fire. A moan escaped my lips, and Zander chuckled against my throat. "We should stop."

He sat up, pulling me with him, and I let out a big breath. I didn't want to stop, but I knew we should. The boys were sleeping inside, and Dee and her boyfriend were there. This wasn't the time or the place. But instead, I said, "I can be quiet." Because I wanted his lips on my skin, I wanted his weight pressing down on me.

His eyes were full of desire, and I smiled back at him. He groaned, "You're impossible." Before he could say anything else, I straddled him, settling down right in front. His hands clapped onto my waist, and his fingers slid underneath my shirt. There, that's what I wanted—his skin on mine. I ran my fingers through his dark hair before placing my lips on his. This kiss was hungry as his fingers dug into my skin, and I pressed myself into him. I could feel how much he wanted this through my thin leggings. It made the fire inside me burst, and I knew we should stop because it was too soon. We needed to wait to give this some more time before getting lost in the lust of it all.

His hands ran up my back, and we separated, looking at each other. I was panting and shook my head, "Okay, we should stop now."

I leaned my forehead on his and closed my eyes. He began to scratch my back lightly, the sensation sending tingles through my body. "Let's go in." I nodded and got off his lap. He covered the fire with sand, and then we went inside. Matt and Dee were talking on the couch, and Zander waved awkwardly before we went upstairs.

My little overnight bag was on the end of his bed. I grabbed my toothbrush out of it and went into the ensuite bathroom. When I came out, Zander made himself a bed on the ground, making me laugh. He came out of the closet wearing a pair of jogger

sweatpants. He looked stupidly good in them.

“You don’t have to sleep on the floor,” I said with an eye roll.

“It’s the gentlemanly thing to do,” Zander said with a straight face. “And I don’t think I could keep my hands off you if I tried. So yes, you enjoy the bed.”

I stood by the bed as he crossed the room. “You’re being silly.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t want our first sleepover to be like this.” He stepped over his makeshift bed and into the bathroom.

“What? With my kids in the other room or your daughter’s boyfriend downstairs?” I said with a chuckle.

He popped his head out, toothbrush in hand, “Both, I guess? I just figured it would be something more romantic.”

I pulled the comforter and top sheet back, my hand running over the soft fabric. Great sheets. It did feel weird to be sleeping in his bed without him, but I wasn’t going to push him. I wanted something a bit more romantic, too. Zander brushed his teeth and then came over to the bed, where I was casually lying on my side, my arm tucked under the pillow. He kissed me quickly before turning out the light. I watched him get situated on the floor. The only sound around us was the chirping of crickets outside. “Goodnight, Zander.”

I closed my eyes. “Goodnight, Iz.” And a smile filled my face.



### Sunshine

The drapes in my room were not equipped to keep the sunlight out. I tried to turn away from the window, but I couldn't go back to sleep. I'd been telling myself to get new drapes for the last year and a half, but I never did. It had honestly not bothered me much before.

But now, I really wanted to just stay in bed, even if it was on the floor, without the annoyance of the bright sunlight.

I glanced up to see Izzy lying on her side, softly snoring in my bed. The floor had not been my first choice, but it was the right call. I wanted our first sleepover to be a little more special and without Dee's new boyfriend downstairs. Dee's boyfriend.

She'd had boyfriends before but none that seemed serious. She seemed kind of serious about this guy, and that gave me some serious anxiety. I kept thinking about what Marco would have thought about him. And if he would have been sterner or interrogated him more.

"Mommy?" Kingston's little voice whispered through a tiny opening in the door.

"I'm here, bud," I said, sitting up on the floor. Kingston's eyes locked onto mine in an instant, and he ran toward me, stepping over the blanket to sit beside me. "How did you sleep?" I asked him, pushing back his long blonde hair from his face.

He laid down, resting his head on the pillow I'd been using. "Good."

“Is Christian still asleep?”

“Yeah.” Kingston looked up at me, “Is Mommy leeping?” His misspoken word made me smile.

“She is sleeping. Should we go get some breakfast and let her sleep longer? I was going to make some pancakes.”

His eyes went wide. “Pancakes!” He said it a bit too loud, and Izzy stirred in the bed. Kingston laid on his back, his eyes on his mother.

Izzy’s eyes opened slowly, and a smile filled her face. “Well, good morning, little boy.”

“ is making me pancakes.”

I chuckled, and Izzy snuggled into her pillow before her eyes flicked to mine. “How did you sleep down there?”

“Oh, I’m going to need to stretch later, but it wasn’t too bad.” I lied, and her cheeks warmed with color.

Kingston hopped up, pulling on my arm. “Let’s go. Let’s go.”

“Okay, but first, Mommy needs a good morning kiss. Don’t you think?” And part of me felt a twinge of embarrassment at calling her mommy. Oops.

Kingston crawled up onto the bed, giving Izzy a big kiss on her cheek. I leaned down, putting a hand on either side of her, and she grabbed my face and pulled it down to hers. Our lips met with passion behind them, and the kiss radiated throughout my body. Maybe she liked it when I called her mommy.

I had the idea while Kingston was sitting at the breakfast bar drowning his pancakes in syrup. I kept replaying the kiss in my head, and I wanted nothing more than to head upstairs to Izzy and lock the door. But we had a house full of kids.

Kids I adored, but kids all the same. I wanted to have a night to ourselves. A real date. One where Izzy could relax, knowing her boys were taken care of and just enjoy herself.

Christian was still sleeping, and Dee and Matt were gone, the blankets on the couch folded back in a pile. Dee had left a note they'd gone for their hike and would be back after lunch.

Izzy came down for a quick moment and told me she was going to shower, and I grabbed my laptop. It was time to plan the perfect surprise.

### Date Night

I came downstairs to Christian and Zander, whispering on the couch. Kingston was sitting on the floor, rummaging through his backpack. There was another backpack at Christian's feet. "What do we have here?"

Zander and Christian jumped, and Christian let out a giggle. "We're going on a sleepover to Uncle Luke's!"

My stomach twisted, and I gave Zander a face. The front door popped open, and Luke walked in with his arms wide. "You boys ready?" They both attacked his legs, wrapping their arms around him like crabs. He pretended to be stuck, unable to walk.

"Hey," Zander said, crossing the room and coming to hold my hand. "This is a surprise and I figured then you'd have less anxiety about it. We're going on a date of the overnight persuasion."

I widened my eyes and felt the rush of excitement and a boil of anxiety. I hadn't been away from Kingston, ever. We'd spent every day of his life together and never been separated overnight. Jack and I had been on a couple overnight trips away from Christian, but since he died, they'd been my buddies. But Zander had probably guessed that. He was being sweet, and I needed not to be upset by this sudden change in plans. It was going to be fine. They were safe with Luke, and I was going to get some much-needed alone time with Zander. It was going to be okay.

"Thank you," I said back to him after a very long pause and squeezed his hand back.

He kissed the side of my face and turned to the boys. “You gotta give your mom some love. Say, ‘See you tomorrow!’”

The boys detached themselves from their uncle and rushed over to me, giving me quick side hugs and mimicking Zander’s see you tomorrow. Luke shot me a smile as he led the boys out the door. And then, they were gone. A panic began to erupt in my chest, and I wanted them to come back. I wanted them to come back so I could know where they were, that they were safe.

But it was okay, I tried to remind myself. They were just with Luke, and he wouldn’t let anything happen to them. Zander came over, pushing a piece of hair behind my ear. “Do you need a minute? Because we need to head out in about thirty minutes.”

I was taken aback. “Leave where?”

“It’s a surprise, . Can you indulge me?”

I nodded, reminding myself again that this was okay. It was going to be just fine, maybe even a ton of fun if I could let myself relax. “I’ll go pack a bag.”

Zander kissed me softly on the lips and I could see how excited he was.

We were in Portland, and I hadn’t been to Portland in years. Since before having the boys. It was different than I remembered, a little grungier. I had my hand wrapped around Zander’s bicep as we walked down 23rd. It was a cute street, full of little shops and restaurants—a must-see on the list of things to do in Portland. “Luke just texted,” Zander said, pocketing his phone, “The boys are doing wonderful. Very happy campers.”

I loved how much he tried to reassure me that everything was okay. “I’m glad. Now, where are we off to?”

Zander put his hand on top of mine, squeezing my fingers. “We are going to get some dinner. Have you ever been to Papa Hyden?”

Had I ever. “Yes, definitely.”

“Perfect. It’s one of my favorites.” There was a bit of a line coming out of the very poorly planned doorway, but apparently, we had reservations. A young woman dressed entirely in black led us to a tiny circular table in the corner. There was a single candle lit on the table.

The restaurant was busy tonight. There were families around bigger tables and couples surrounding us. That’s what we were, a couple. “So, how did you end up in Portland? I don’t think I’ve ever asked that.”

Zander sat his menu down on the table softly. “Well, I guess it’s kind of an embarrassing answer. Natalie, my ex, had family here and we came to visit once. It was early on in our relationship, but I remember loving the quaintness of the city and the coast, of course. It was stormy that day, and I just thought it was incredibly cozy.”

“That’s not embarrassing. She introduced you to this part of the Pacific Northwest, so that’s something positive.” I knew exactly what I was going to have, so I folded my hands over the large menu.

“If you say so.”

It felt like as good a time as any to get deeper into the ex-girlfriend conversation. “What happened with Natalie?”

Zander pursed his lips as the waiter came to the table. He took our drink orders, and then Zander cleared his throat, “She was...a lot. And I don’t say that in the way some people do about women where it’s a dig. Natalie was loud, always full of energy, and

just wanted to do what she wanted to do. She didn't much care for what I wanted to do a lot of the time, and we just wanted different things."

"Did you end things, or did she?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We had a huge fight. She was angry at me for not wanting to go on this ridiculous trip with her and her friends. She was packing in the closet and started throwing stuff at me: clothes, shoes, her bags. I feel like I've blocked out most of what she was saying to me, but it wasn't great. I told her I was done and packed a bag, and left. She went on her trip, and when she was gone, I moved out. That was it, really."

His eyebrows were furrowed, and his eyes flickered down to the flame between us. "That does sound like a lot."

"Yeah," Zander shook his head. "Did you and Jack ever fight?"

I leaned back in my chair, trying to remember. I feel like I'd memorialized our relationship. Everything turned rosy because of what had happened to him. "We fought like people fight. Jack was very sarcastic, too sarcastic, and it was hard for me. Jack was a little more traditional discipline-wise, so sometimes we disagreed on how to handle things with Christian. Jack was very into his hobbies, and I remember struggling with that as a new mom who had no freedom to do anything." I paused for a moment and knew that it hadn't been perfect. We'd had our hard times, but it all seemed unimportant now. "We did, yeah. But normal fighting, I think. We didn't fight like my parents did when they were married. "

"What do you mean?" Zander asked simply, placing his folded hands on his menu.

"They fought a lot, like screaming matches, but most of the screaming was my mother. I just remember playing with Luke in his room at the furthest end of the

house to try and not hear their argument. It was... well, I don't know. To this day, I get anxious in a serious way when confrontation comes my way. Jack knew that and so I think we both tried to work things out before it got to that point." I smiled weakly, hoping that that wasn't too much to share.

Zander nodded, and the waiter came back to our table. I ordered a chicken sandwich and a slice of cake. You couldn't go wrong with any of their desserts. Zander got a burger and another piece of cake. The waiter left, and Zander reached his hand out for mine. His skin was warm, and his fingers were rough in places, but I liked the way it felt. "I hate fighting, for the record. But I will say that I struggle sometimes to say what I'm feeling." He smiled and then squeezed my hand. "Just so you know."

"That's good to know. What I'm feeling is usually written all over my face. I'm bad at hiding my emotions."

"I've figured that much out," Zander chuckled.

The food was delicious, and we opted to finish the cake over our main dishes. It was the right choice. The night air was chilled when we walked outside, and I slipped my arm through Zander's. He glanced at me before saying, "Okay, so the next stop is one that I think you'll really like, but it's about a mile walk. Want me to call a car or just go for a stroll?"

"Stroll."



### The Stacks

The night was perfect. Exactly what I wanted when the idea came to me. Dinner had been delicious, and after the initial wave of anxiety, Izzy relaxed.

We were a block away from Powell's when she saw it. "Yes, yes. That's where we're going, right?" She tapped my arm with her free hand, and everything about her excitement made me so happy.

"We are. You can get any book you want on me." I said, knowing that she didn't hesitate to buy herself any books.

She rested her head on my arm as we walked. "I have to see if they have my books there."

"And we will complain very loudly if they don't. "

Izzy rolled her eyes as we came to the crosswalk. Powell's was the best and biggest bookstore in Portland. Admittedly, I wouldn't call myself a big reader, but I'd been to Powell's before. It was a destination when you came here. It was three floors of rooms filled to the brim with books. The cars on the busy street stopped, and we crossed paths with a group of other people. I held the door open for Izzy, and we slipped into the warm atmosphere. Books were everywhere, and we didn't speak. I let Izzy lead the way, wandering around the open area in the front of the store filled with books displaying Powell's favorite and most popular books. She would pick up a book, read the back, flip a few pages, and then put it down. Izzy seemed very much in her element here. I loved watching her. I pretended to look at books, but everything

about her was captivating.

We made it to the back of the front room, where the wall was lined with so-called bestsellers. Izzy stilled and pointed. “There it is.”

It was her book. Remember Me by Izzy Stanton. The cover was pretty, a kind of cartoon drawing of a couple standing on the beach, their eyes on each other. “The original cover was so different, but I like this one.”

“The original cover?” I asked her.

She picked up the book and ran her hand over the cover. “I self-published it. I’d been trying to be published for a handful of years and Jack convinced me to just publish it. It was so terrifying but so freeing to just be in control of the whole process. The original cover was a photo I took off the Oregon Coast. And it came out one week before he died. This version was republished a year later after it blew up, and I got a slew of offers from agents.”

“Do you like it? Being published the way you are now? Or do you miss when it was all up to you?” She was clutching the book to her chest now.

She leaned against the bookshelf, smiling at me. “I haven’t really thought about that. I don’t know.”

I grabbed one of the books and mimicked her, running my hand over it. “Well, let’s see if you can sign these!”

Izzy pulled at the front of my coat, bringing me closer to her. I settled into her, resting on the bookshelf next to her. “Thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone. This is fun.”

“Of course, Iz. You’re the best mother, hands down. But even the best mother needs a night off every now and again.” I brushed her hair behind her ear and pressed my lips softly against hers.

She moved closer, her hand moving down my front. Our lips moved against each other, the kiss deepening. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted an older man rounding the corner into the same aisle and pulled away. My cheeks burned a bit. Izzy laughed at me and shook her head, “You’re no fun.”

I glared at her and grabbed the book from her hands. “Let’s go get you a Sharpie.”

The hotel room was nice but cozy, even with the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of the room. We’d spent an hour at Powell’s. She’d signed all the copies of her two books that they had, and then I bought a copy of each for myself, along with the twenty books she’d found for herself. On the way out, I saw this dinosaur book that looked exactly like the kind of book Christian would adore. Izzy got quiet but kissed me hard when I went back to buy it. We’d grabbed a bite to eat from a food cart on our way back to the car.

Izzy placed her small overnight bag on the desk and then turned around, biting at her lip. “?”

“Yes, dear?” I responded, pulling out my diddy bag from my backpack. Izzy’s face was serious as she watched me. I set the bag down and walked over to her. “What is it?”

She placed her hands on my sides, pulling me closer. “Thank you again.”

I brushed her hair out of her face, letting my fingers slide down to her neck. Her breath hitched, and she closed her eyes. I ran my fingers down her neck and to the center of her collarbone. Her hands were glued to my sides as I pressed my lips to her

neck. She let out a little huff of air that sent fire straight to my core. Izzy moved with me as I pressed kisses down her neck and to the center of her chest. “You’re welcome,” I spoke against her skin. Izzy’s hands pulled at my shirt, slipping one of the buttons out of place. I leaned back, watching her undo the rest of them with fire in her eyes. She pushed the shirt off my shoulders, her soft skin running against mine. “Izzy, we don’t have to do anything. That’s not why I planned this.”

Izzy smiled, pressing a kiss on my pec. “I know.” She looked up at me, “I don’t know if I’m ready to have sex tonight, but we can still do other things.”

“Other things? Like what?” I asked, pulling at the bottom of her shirt.

Izzy trailed her hands down my arms and leaned up, kissing me. “I have some ideas. I just want to touch you.”

“Ditto, baby.” And then I stripped off her shirt, the lace bra underneath almost undoing all my willpower. No sex, which was okay with me. I didn’t want to rush it. But I wanted to touch as much of her as I could.

I hooked my arms around her torso and pulled her up, her legs hooking around me. I turned us around and laid her gently on the bed, pressing my chest into hers as we kissed. Her tongue slipped against mine, and something inside me unlocked. This felt so right. Me and her.

There was nothing about this that scared me. Nothing that made me second guess. I was all in. I pulled away, taking in her face. “You’re so pretty.”

She blushed, and I wanted to see that again. Make her do that again. “What are you thinking right now?”

“Right now? I bet you could guess.” I said with a quick peck on her lips. I rolled to

the side, pulling her leg over mine. “I was just thinking about how much I want this. How I’m all in on this.”

Izzy’s fingers moved over my chest, the feeling sending sparks down my body. “Even though I’ve got so much baggage?”

“It’s not baggage.” Izzy smiled, and I could tell it wasn’t her real smile. “I love that you have kids and that you have a history. You wouldn’t be you without it.”

She met my eyes and kissed me, wrapping her foot around my leg even further. “Question for a question?”

“What about question for a touch?”

Izzy’s eyebrows shot up and she gave my arm a little squeeze. “I like the after-dark version of our game. I’ll go first. What was the worst date you ever had?” Izzy asked, pulling at one of the pillows up above. I grabbed one, too, and we both settled down, watching each other, our bodies entangled.

Dates flashed through my mind, although most of them didn’t quite seem to qualify. Women who wanted to date me while I was in the NFL didn’t care to do real things. They just wanted the chance to be photographed. And then one particularly bad one came to my mind, “In college, my roommate set up like a group date basically. He’d invited some girls over to have dinner and to watch a movie. He had his eye on this one girl, Addie, but she was like hyper focused on me for absolutely no reason. I’d never met her before that night. We all sat down to watch the movie and I was trying to just distance myself from her for the sake of my friend, so I sat in the recliner chair all by myself. And she came and sat in it with me. It was so awkward. Eventually, people started to fall asleep, and I went up to my room, and she followed me. It was so weird. She didn’t really even say anything to me, but my friend was so pissed.”

Izzy covered her mouth with her hand. “What in the world?”

I laughed, tracing the curve of her neck with my finger. “Tell me about your parents.”

She rolled her eyes. “My parents are...well, my dad was always there. Always constant and strong. He was just quiet, you know? And my mother was the opposite.” I slid my finger across her chest, running along her collarbones. “My mother was flighty, loud, and always let you know what she thought. It was usually something negative, hurtful. You could never count on her to follow through. They got divorced when I was nineteen. My father told me later that he waited until we were both out of the house to do it, but that almost made it worse. Like he stayed with her in such a miserable environment and one that I can still remember so vividly for us? I wish he would have divorced her so much earlier.” She put her hand on my chest and said, “Now it’s my turn to touch.”

Under

I woke up in the middle of the night, sweat covering my body. I shoved the covers off and put my hands on my stomach. Nausea roiled inside, and I pushed out a large breath. I did not want to throw up. No. That would not be attractive. We hadn't dated long enough to throw up in front of each other. Zander turned over, pulling the covers I'd discarded with him. I moved slowly, sliding out of bed, and crept toward the bathroom.

The bathroom door squeaked as I rolled it closed. I flicked on the light and sat in front of the toilet. The floor was cold on my legs, and it cooled the fire raging inside me. I thought back to the food we'd eaten. I'd wager it wasn't Papa Hyden but the food cart gyro that I'd insisted on eating after we left Powell's. It had smelled so good, but the memory of it made me even more queasy.

The door squeaked open as I laid my cheek against the lid of the toilet. "? What's wrong?"

"It was the gyro. I think." I mumbled, keeping my head facing away from him.

"What can I do?" His voice was so soft, and it made me emotional. Tears burned in my eyes. I waved my hand toward him, hoping he'd leave, but instead, I felt his hand on my back. "It's okay. I'll bring you some water."

I felt another wave coming and moved up to my knees. It felt horrible, and yet, when it was done, the relief that rushed through me was so strong. I flushed the toilet and sat back, waiting for my body to settle down. "I've got the water right here." Zander

placed the glass on the counter, and then I heard him turn on the water. “This is going to be cold.” I felt him kneel behind me, and then something wet touched my neck. Zander pressed it into me, and I melted into the hard porcelain of the toilet.

He pushed my hair behind my ear and ran his fingers up and down my back. I hated being sick. Sick meant doing everything I normally have to do but while feeling terrible. “I think I’m done,” I said, my stomach finally empty and feeling settled.

“I’ll help you back to bed.” Zander kept a hand on my back, and I reached for him, his hand finding mine. I looked at him, and he had such concern in his eyes. His chest was bare, and his hair tousled in a messy way. Guilt hit me. I hated that I’d woken him up. “We’ll go slow.” I let myself lean into him, and Zander’s arm wrapped around my back. My muscles were tired like they usually were after throwing up. I’d been sick a lot when I was pregnant with Kingston, and it never seemed to get easier.

Zander had pushed the covers back on my side of the bed already and placed me very gently onto the bed. I let out a breath of what was probably disgusting-vomit-smelling air and smiled weakly at him. He squeezed my hand and helped me lay down. “There’s water on the bedside table. Rest, and we’ll take it easy in the morning.”

The gauzy drapes let in the dim light from the city streets, and it gave a coziness to the room that I hadn’t noticed when we’d gone to bed. I could make out the edges of everything. I rolled to the side as Zander got into bed. “Sorry that I ruined our night away.”

He chuckled. “You stop that. If anything, it gives me an excuse to take care of you.”

“What?” I asked, watching him mimic my positioning so we could look at each other.

“You are always taking care of everyone else. And now, you can just let yourself be taken care of.”



The words stung a little, and I wasn't sure why. I was always taking care of everyone else. Because everyone else was a five-year-old and a three-year-old. That was my job. But I'd been like that before if I was being honest with myself. Even when Jack was alive, I did everything myself. It was one of my stubborn traits. "Thank you," I ended up saying.

Zander nodded, and I reached out to him with my hand. He grabbed it, and we stayed like that for a moment before he spoke, "Do you think you'd ever want more kids?"

I try to keep my face composed, not wanting to let my emotions run rampant like they usually do. "I always dreamed of having like six kids." Zander's eyes widened, and I let myself laugh. "Jack thought that was entirely too many, so we'd settled on having three. Which, obviously...but I'd have another kid, yeah. I think that Kingston would make such a great big brother."

"After Dee, I wanted my own kid. You know, to raise from the beginning. Natalie was firmly against children, though, so I feel like I kind of let go of that dream when I was with her."

"Natalie was dumb; we've already established that." He squeezed my hand. "How do you feel about being a stepparent?"

Zander smiled, and the sight of it warmed my heart. "The boys are great, . They really are, and I know my situation with Dee was different, but I'd be happy to take on that challenge." It was the fear, an anxiety, that kept me awake at night after Jack died. I knew that he'd want me to move on someday. And I knew that I'd want to someday, too. That the boys would need a man in their life to help guide them like Jack would have. It was terrifying to think of finding someone who I could love, but the boys wouldn't. Or he wouldn't love the boys enough, or the right way.

It hadn't been that long, but I'd watched them together. The boys enjoyed being with

Zander. He didn't seem annoyed by their silliness or their tantrums. Zander handled some of them better than me. "Do you think Jack would approve of me...for the boys?" Zander's question came out small.

"Jack loved everybody; truthfully, he wasn't the best judge of character," I laughed, remembering the time when he got hustled by a homeless man outside his office. "But he was very protective over Christian. I think you would have passed his scrutiny, yeah."

Zander brought my hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to my fingers. "Are you feeling okay, still?" I nodded. My body was tired, but the throwing up part had passed. Thank goodness. "Okay, well, as long as you're still feeling good in five hours, I've got something planned for tomorrow."

Honestly, I wanted to go home to the boys. I wanted to see them and get squished by their little hugs, but this was good. This was okay—more than okay. "Can't wait," I said with a quiet voice, and we lay there together, holding hands, until we fell asleep.

### Flag on the Play

Zander was taking me to a freaking football game. We were supposed to drive up to Seattle, but my late-night throw-up session messed up that plan. So, instead, we took a plane, which felt very strange. It was a forty-five-minute flight, and we landed just before lunchtime. The game started at one fifteen, and we had just arrived at the stadium. “I’ve never been to an NFL game before.” I’d said it already a few times, but I think part of me was in shock.

I kept thinking about how much Jack would have loved this. He’d always wanted to go to an NFL game. He’d been to football games when we were in college, but we’d never gone after that. “Well, it’s going to be quite the experience. Seattle is playing my former team from LA. It should be a good game.”

We were walking toward the front entrance when Zander turned to the right. “Where are we going?”

There was a separate door, with a single guard, that Zander was walking right to. “Special entrance. It’ll take us right to the suite.”

I followed him inside as the male security guard checked my small bag and let us through. I was expecting the typical large concourse, with concessions and people milling about. But instead, we walked into an elevator bank. Zander seemed to fit in here, pressing the button to go up and leading me inside. He pressed the number three and leaned against the wall. “A suite? Does it have like a chef and stuff, too?”

Zander chuckled, and I let my eyes rake over him. He was wearing a dark blue

button-up shirt with a tan canvas jacket over top. His jeans fit him like a glove, and I let myself replay how he looked while he pulled them over his muscular thighs this morning in our hotel room. “It is catered. My old teammate got me the tickets. Truthfully, I don’t go to a lot of games anymore.”

“Why not?” I held onto the cold metal railing edging the inside of the elevator.

He looked off to the corner like he was trying to think up an answer. “I don’t know. It’s just different now to watch them after playing in them for so long. I prefer to be at home, I guess.”

The elevator doors slid open, and Zander held out his hand. I grabbed onto it and let him lead me down a few twists and turns of the hallway. We passed doors that led into suites, a kitchen area directly inside, and the padded stadium seats past that. We stopped at one with the number thirty-seven, and he went inside. There were a handful of people inside. A man with a buzzed head rested next to the counter with a can of something in his hand. His eyes flickered over to us, and he threw a hand in the air. “Zand! So glad you’re here.”

Zander squeezed my hand before letting go, fully bro-hugging this guy. He then turned to me. “Eccles, this is . . . this is Eccles. He and I were on the team together.”

Eccles nodded and flashed me a smile. “It’s nice to meet you, . . . I’ve heard a lot about you.” The statement made my stomach kind of twist in on itself. Did he really talk to his friends about me? Why did that make me so nervous?

“Nice to meet you, too. I’ve never been to an NFL game before.”

“Well, this is going to be a good one. LA is leading the AFC West.” He was talking to me like I knew more about football than I did. I knew how the game was played but Jack had really been the football fan. “Grab some food and sit wherever.”

“Zander?” A female voice asked from behind us, and Eccles’ mouth dropped open.

Zander stiffened beside me, and his hand found mine quickly. He met my eyes and whispered, “I’m sorry.” I didn’t understand, but as we turned around together, things became clearer.

She was pretty. Her blonde hair was long and perfectly styled. She was wearing a very fancy outfit for a football game. A glittery sweater that dangled off her shoulder, her lipstick dark red, and her black skirt shiny. My feet hurt just looking at the height of her heels. She was hanging off a tall man who had his lips pressed into a line. “Natalie,” Zander said flatly.

Eccles stepped up beside us and shook his head, “Hey Barker. Nice of you to show up.”

“I didn’t realize I needed to RSVP,” the man standing next to Natalie said. Barker, what a strange name.

Zander shrugged. “No big deal, everyone. Barker, Natalie, this is .”

Natalie eyed me and then smiled, but without any teeth, and I tried to keep my face flat. “Nice to meet you. How do you two know each other?”

I wanted to point to our hands held together and let her figure it out for herself, but instead, I leaned closer into Zander’s side. I opened my mouth to answer when Zander cleared his throat. “ is my girlfriend.”

“That seemed obvious,” Eccles joked beside him, and Natalie moved past the group, setting her tiny purse on one of the seats.

Eccles slapped Zander on the shoulder. “Sorry, buddy. I thought she and Barker were

over. He told me they broke up a couple of weeks ago.”

Barker had his back turned, grabbing some of the food, which I had just then noticed. There were platters of everything. I saw noodles, sandwiches, sushi, wings, and even some burgers. Zander tugged my arm, moving over toward the door just slightly. His finger touched my chin, and he moved it up so I looked directly into his eyes. “We can go.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m good if you’re good.”

“Okay,” and then he kissed me quickly on the lips.

The game was exciting like Eccles had said it would be. We sat in the front row of the suite, with Natalie and her beau behind us. Zander didn’t seem bothered by her, and so I tried not to be bothered by her either. I also tried not to have to interact with her at all, just trying to ignore her presence. But then I needed more food. The food was great, teetering on incredible, and I just needed one more California Roll.

I was placing the sushi on my plate when Natalie came up beside me. “Sorry if we crashed your date.” I glanced over at her, and she was smiling in a strange way. It was a mixture of wanting to try to be nice but also wanting to let me know she knew Zander, too.

“Oh, okay,” I said, not sure I wanted to play the mean girl game. “It’s an exciting game.”

Natalie scoffed. “You actually like to watch this?”

And I could understand why the two of them didn’t work out in that instance. Not that you had to like the same things, but football had been Zander’s career. It would be hard not to be at least a bit into football. I grabbed a can of Diet Coke and took a

step back. “I actually do. My late husband loved football, so I learned to love it, too.”

Her perfectly colored-in eyebrows pulled together, “You’re married?”

“I was,” I replied, unsure of why I even brought that up. I didn’t need to be talking to her. I glanced over her shoulder. Eccles had moved over and was talking to Zander, waving his hands around excitedly. I liked seeing him around his friends. It was a different side of him.

Natalie turned to the food and shook her head. “Sorry, it’s just weird. I don’t—” and then she whipped back around to me. “Zander never wanted to get married when we were together. That’s kind of why we broke up, so I guess it’s just weird. I guess I don’t know if you guys are even on that path, but I imagine you...never mind. I shouldn’t have even said anything.” My mind whirled, and I wasn’t sure how to respond. So, I didn’t. I just smiled awkwardly and walked back down to the seats.

Zander and Eccles let me squeeze past, and I sat down with a sick feeling in my stomach. Maybe Natalie was trying to start something, but the look on her face made me think she was telling the truth. But Zander had told me the opposite. Isn’t that how breakups always went, he said, and she said?

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Fever

“You’d be perfect for it. Just let us interview you on the podcast, and it will sort of serve as a test job interview.” Eccles was trying to sell me hard on a new job. But I didn’t feel like this was the time to add another hard decision to my plate.

I needed to figure out where I was going to live first. I wanted Izzy to have my house for her and the boys. Ideally, I wanted to be there with them, but I didn’t want to put too much on this relationship.

“What podcast?” Izzy asked from my left. She’d just got back from grabbing some more food.

Eccles leaned forward, turning his body so he could talk to both of us. “My friend and I, now retired from football, started this podcast out of pure boredom. It started out by just talking about our experiences in the NFL, and then we would talk about the games that were happening. We just got an offer from ESPN to do halftime segments for Monday night games, and we’re looking to add more people to the table. ’s name was thrown around, and I tried to convince him to join us. At least try it out. I mean, you’re moving soon, right?”

I avoided looking over at Izzy. I didn’t want to see the look on her face and know that I needed to make a choice even more than I already knew. I wanted to just live in the in-between for a bit longer. “You should totally do it,” Izzy said from beside me, and I had to look over at her.

She popped an entire sushi roll in her mouth and smiled at me. “See, she knows that



this is a cool opportunity, too. Just say you'll do one show with us?"

I leaned back in my chair and shrugged. "Fine, one show."

Eccles settled back down beside me and let out a big breath. "Now I can enjoy the game. You won't regret it, dude. I promise." I fought the urge to roll my eyes. I didn't know if I would.

My phone buzzed in my pocket once and then again. I pulled it out and saw Luke's name. I flashed it to Izzy, whose eyes narrowed in on it. "Hey, buddy."

"I'm so sorry to call and I'm calling you because I feel like you'll freak out less, but Christian is really sick. He woke up with a fever, and I've had him resting but now his fever is really high. I don't know what to do. I gave him some medicine, but he isn't eating anything." All of Luke's words came out in a rush, and the panic was obvious.

I leaned forward and tried to keep my voice calm. "It's okay. Just hold on, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said on the other end of the line, and I heard Kingston's little voice say something, but I couldn't make it out.

I held the phone to my chest. Izzy had already moved her plate to the table next to her. "What's wrong?"

"He says Christian is sick. Has a fever and he's clearly nervous about doing something wrong." She nodded and took the phone from me. I could still remember the horrible anxiety I had the first time Dee got sick. It happened during my first off-season after my brother died. She came into my room in the middle of the night and threw up all over the floor before saying a word. I was a mess trying to make sure she was taken care of.

“Hey Luke, it’s me.” She waited, probably listening to the exact same thing he told me. “He gets like this every time he’s sick. Super high fever and doesn’t do anything but lie down. It’s okay. If it gets higher than it is now, let me know. Thanks for taking care of him. Is Kingston okay?”

Eccles wasn’t paying attention to us anymore, which made me feel more relaxed. He’d moved over to the other side of the box and was sitting next to Barker. Natalie sat one row behind them, and her eyes were on me. I nodded with a grim smile and then turned back around. “Okay, it’s alright. We will head back. I don’t know when we’ll be there but let me talk to . Okay, bye.”

I could tell she was upset, maybe a mixture of worry and embarrassment which didn’t make sense. She handed me my phone and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I can take the train back or something if you want to stay.”

“Iz,” I started to say, “I am definitely not staying here without you. Let’s go. We can take the first flight back down, and then I’ll drive really, really fast to get you back to the boys.” She let out a big breath, and I pushed her hair back behind her ear. “You ready?”

Izzy nodded, and we stood, grabbing onto each other’s hands. Eccles turned around and leaned back in his chair. “You guys heading out?”

The three of them had their eyes on us now, and I avoided looking at Natalie. “Izzy’s boys are sick, so we need to head back to Portland.”

Eccles stood and opened his arms. “It’s good to see you. I’m going to call you tomorrow and set up the interview, okay?” We hugged, and then he stepped around to hug Izzy. “You make sure he answers my call, okay?”

She smiled and huffed a laugh. “Will do.” Izzy waved at Barker and Natalie. “It was

nice to meet you guys.”

Barker waved, and Natalie nodded slightly before we snuck out. I slid my fingers in between hers as we walked out into the hallway. I grabbed my phone with my other hand and started to find us a way home .

Us.

Back to the boys that were only hers but were starting to feel a little bit like mine, too.

### Dinosaurs and Snakes

The house was dark when Zander pulled into the driveway hours later. We'd managed to get onto a flight right after getting to the airport, but Zander wouldn't tell me how much it cost, which probably meant it was ridiculously expensive. But it was worth it. It was just after dinner time, and Luke had been giving us updates since he called.

Christian had managed to eat two pieces of toast and was now sipping some soup on the couch. Kingston was fine, which was good news, but I knew that he'd probably get sick next. The boys liked to pass these sicknesses back and forth like toys.

Zander hopped out of the car and walked around the front of the truck, opening my door for me. He held out a hand, and I let out a sigh of relief. He had driven fast, but I'd still felt safe. He knew the windy road between the Coast and Portland, unlike some of the other people on the road. You could always tell who was from here and who wasn't. "You look pretty."

"What?" I asked him, my feet hitting the concrete of the driveway.

The air was chilly, and I leaned into his chest, wanting to steal some of his warmth. Zander smiled down at me. "Yup. You. You're pretty today. Just thought I should mention it."

I pressed up on my toes and kissed his mouth. "Thank you. You always look pretty."

The door swung open, and Luke's voice rang out. "Stop necking and get in here."

Kingston is asking for you.” He was panicked, and I fought the urge to laugh. It wasn’t funny and he had been so nice to take the boys on short notice. But it made me chuckle. Maybe because I’d been the only one worried about the boys for so long. Maybe it felt nice to have someone else to share the anxiety with. Or maybe it was just nice to see my brother worried about something besides real estate and his latest fling.

Zander shut the door, and Kingston stood in the doorway where Luke must have been. “Mommy!” he said with his arms spread wide.

“Hi, babes, I missed you,” I squealed as I rushed toward the front steps. He met me at the top, and I picked him up, noting how heavy he felt. Gosh, they were growing too fast.

“Christian is icky. But I’m okay.” Kingston laid his head on my shoulder as we walked inside. Christian was lying on his side on the couch, his eyes closed.

Zander closed the door behind us, and I walked into the kitchen. “Looks like he’s asleep.”

Luke leaned against the counter, stretching his arms out wide in front of him. “I’m so sorry.”

“What for?” I asked, watching him carefully. He looked tired and stressed out. His hair was all tousled and a tad greasy, like he hadn’t showered.

“That he’s sick. I did the best I could.”

I smiled, and Luke narrowed his eyes. “They get sick, Luke. It’s okay. You were great. I have no doubt that you did exactly what I would have done.” His shoulders seemed to relax, and I nodded at him.

Kingston popped his head up. “We got a fish!”

My eyes went wide, and I looked past him to my brother, who was now avoiding my eye contact. “A fish, really?”

“Yes, it’s a betta fish. I love him.” And then he settled back down against my shoulder.

Luke put his hands up in the air. “They tricked me into it. But I mean, it’s a cute little fish. And I’ll clean its tank for you.”

Zander laughed, clapping Luke on his shoulder. “Do you and Rebecca still have a date tonight? This has got to be the fourth one, right? ”

“What? Four dates?” I asked, my voice a little too loud.

My brother’s face brightened, his cheeks getting red, and I knew that it was serious. “It is date number three, just to be clear. And I will not be saying anything more about it.” He yawned, covering his mouth with both hands, something that our mother taught us. Well, taught isn’t the right way to put it. She badgered us about how ugly it looked to yawn and would glare every time we did it without covering our mouths. It was easier to cover it than deal with her remarks. “Is it okay if I get going? I need to shower.”

“You didn’t shower?” Zander asked.

“I didn’t want to leave them alone,” Luke practically squealed, and Kingston’s breathing changed on my shoulder. He was falling asleep.

“Go ahead. Thank you again. We had such a fun time.” I said to him, and then he scrunched his face up in a gross way. “What is that face for?”

Luke shook his head. “Stop. I don’t want to hear about the fun times. I really don’t need to know.”

“Oh, grow up,” Zander said, pushing him toward the door. I followed behind them as Luke grabbed his backpack, and Zander followed him outside. Christian was out, his arm dangling off the edge of the couch. Kingston’s arms were loose around my neck, and I took each step carefully, not wanting to wake him. The upstairs was dark, and I felt my way around his room before lying him on the bed. He grumbled a bit before flopping over to his other side. I brushed his hair back from his face, and the way he was positioned made him look just like Jack. My heart ached, and I just stood there, watching him sleep.

There was a pang of sadness at the fact that Jack never got to see him, hold him, or know him at all. He never would, and Kingston could never look back on memories of the two of them. That had been one of the cruelest parts of losing Jack. I had another piece of him, a child we’d created together, but one that would always be missing something.

Kingston was happy, he was, and I knew that in my bones. But I know he’d have his own journey with the loss of his dad and everything that comes with it. I just had to make sure to be there for him. And then, I heard the front door click closed. Zander. He’d filled part of that sadness, not by replacing anything but just by being what we now needed.

Zander was good for them. Good for all three of us. I just needed to learn to let someone else in, to let someone else help me. I could do it. I slipped out of Kingston’s room and went downstairs to find Zander clicking off lamps in the living room. I checked on Christian, pulling the blanket up to his chin. His forehead was hot against my lips but not too hot. My lips were about as accurate as a thermometer. He’d be okay. “Should we move him?” Zander asked, standing beside me, his hands settling on my hips.

I leaned back into him, pulling his hands around to my front, wanting to be held. “I don’t know. We probably should. Do you think you could carry him?”

He kissed the top of my shoulder. “Yes, I got him.”

We didn’t speak as Zander picked up Christian, cradling him against his chest. My heart was about to explode, watching him hold my first baby like he was a baby again. Christian stirred a bit but didn’t open his eyes, instead turning his face into Zander’s chest. We moved in sync as we went up the stairs, tucked him into bed, and backed out of the room. Zander closed the door and pressed his forehead to the frame. “We did it.”

“Now what?” I asked, and Zander’s eyes dropped to my lips.

He raised his eyebrows up and smiled. “I need to shower all that airplane off me.” I nodded, and part of me stilled. I wasn’t sure what he meant. If he was going to leave, but then he took a step closer to me and kissed the edge of my mouth before whispering in my ear, “Want to join me?”



### Come Clean

Showering seemed like a good idea, like a sexy idea, but now, I wondered if it was too soon. We hadn't done anything super intimate yet, and I'd asked her to shower with me. Smooth move, . Smooth.

The water was scalding against my skin, just the way I liked it, and Izzy stood somewhere on the other side of the curtain. She'd told me to go in first and that she'd join me. I wondered if she was as nervous outside as I was inside the shower. "You still there?" I asked softly.

"Yeah," her answer gave away how she was feeling. The word was slow and quiet. "I'm nervous."

"Do you want me to close my eyes?" I asked her, trying to put myself in her shoes. I hadn't been with anyone since Natalie, but she hadn't been with anyone since Jack. Who had died. It was a whole ball game that I didn't understand, and I didn't want to push her.

"Yeah, maybe do that," Izzy told me from outside the shower, so I took a step forward, letting my head hang down, and the water hit my scalp.

"Eyes are closed." The shower curtain clinked against the rod, and the fabric swished. I felt her step in behind me, and part of me tensed, only because I didn't want to do anything wrong. But I also knew, maybe hoped, that she was eyeing the back of me. I cupped myself with both hands. "Do I have to keep my eyes closed the whole time?"

Izzy laughed behind me, and I felt her hands on my back. I jolted for a moment, and she said, “Sorry, I scared you.” She put her hands on me again, running her fingers down my back. I loved the way she almost tickled my skin.

“You’ve got a great behind, even better without clothes on.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked her and reveled in the feeling of her touching me.

She didn’t say anything else for a few breaths, and then she put her hands on my waist, twisting me. “You can turn around.” I let her lead me, but I kept my eyes closed and my manhood covered. “You can open your eyes.”

I opened them slowly and let my eyes rake over her naked body .

I took a step toward her, and Izzy put her hand on top of the two of mine. My eyes met hers, and she smirked at me. “You’re all covered up.”

“All covered up?” I threw back, and she giggled before peeling my hands away.

“It’s just not fair,” she mumbled.

“What?” I forced out, her finger still caressing me.

“You, looking like this, and me, looking the way I do. All soft and flabby.”

I took another step toward her and put a hand under her chin. “You are beautiful. Way more than I could have imagined. Sexy.”

“But I’m just—”

“No,” I cut her off. “You’re not just anything. You’re everything. Amazing.

Incredible at being a mother, at being an author, at being a sister, and a girlfriend. I don't want to hear that again. You're more than I ever thought I'd have." Izzy's eyes glossed over, and she pressed up on her toes to kiss me. I held her close, running my hands over her back, and then I grabbed the soap from behind her. "Let me get the airplane off you."

And washing her was even worse, even more tempting, than just looking at her. Her skin glistened underneath the bubbles. It felt like the most intimate thing to do as my fingers slipped around her skin. Izzy took the loofah from me and lathered up my body.

We kept touching each other and exploring each other, but we didn't cross the line. I held back because I didn't want the first time we had sex to be in the shower. I wanted to do it right. To give her what she needed and deserved.

We eventually turned off the water and wrapped ourselves in towels. Izzy brushed her hair and said, "Do you want to watch a cooking show? I've got a TV in the bedroom. Or do you have to go?"

I didn't have to be anywhere, and I didn't want to go anywhere. "Let's watch," I said, grabbing my briefs out of my pants and slipping them on. I followed her out of the ensuite bathroom and straight into her room. Tonight was the first time I had been in her little section of the house. I'd been in the boys' room but not here.

She grabbed the remote off the dresser across from the bed and underneath the wall-mounted TV. Izzy sat on the left side of the bed and patted the spot on the right. "This is all you."

I moved slowly and noticed her watching me as I sat. I wanted to lie down and get under the covers, but I felt like something needed to be said. "Is this weird?"

She shook her head. “It’s not weird. Weird isn’t the right word. It just sort of feels big, like something new.”

“I get that,” and I did.

Izzy stood, still only wearing a towel, and went to the dresser again. She grabbed two items from the top drawer and pressed play on her favorite grocery store cooking show. I tried not to watch her as the towel fell to the ground, and everything that I’d been able to see in the shower was right there. I wanted to touch her again. She slipped on a pair of tan boy shorts and a white tank top. Izzy eyed me before getting into the bed. “What?”

“Is that really what you wear to bed?” It seemed like the outfit was only for my benefit.

She settled back into her pillows. “Yes, this is what I normally wear to bed.”

“Just underwear? How lucky for me.” I turned my attention back to the TV, still only halfway sitting on the bed.

“You can lay down, Zand. It’s okay.”

I did. I lay down, slipping my body under the covers and relishing in the coolness of the sheets. Izzy scooted closer to me, resting her head on my shoulder. The man with the bright blonde hair on the TV was giving these poor chefs incredibly disgusting ingredients to cook with, but all I could think about was Izzy. Her body pressed into mine, and how I never wanted to leave this spot.

Fire

“How are they possibly going to make a high-end dinner with a can of asparagus and marshmallows? I mean, that just seems cruel,” Zander spoke passionately, his hand waving toward the ceiling.

I pulled at the pillow behind me, leaning back in my bed. There was a boy in my bed. And I didn’t hate it. I’d really tried to lean into sleeping alone and enjoying the space when the boys actually slept through the night. But I liked having Zander next to me, his fingers interlocked with mine. “That’s the whole point of the show.” Zander scoffed, and I continued, “I would make a puree with the canned asparagus and add in fresh asparagus, too. Easy play.”

Zander chuckled. “But the marshmallows?”

“Use them in a sauce? Melt them down, maybe and do like a sweet and spicy thing? I’ve seen too many of these.” Which was true. There was something about the Food Network that was so comforting to me, especially after Jack died. I loved to watch these chefs make incredible food from ingredients that were sometimes just ridiculous.

“Now I’m hungry,” Zander said as he sat up.

“For what?” I sat up, running my hands over my soft leggings that I’d put on when I’d gotten cold.

We’d showered together, which had been amazing. I’d never thought that I’d love

just showering with someone so much.

“I would settle for just a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” Zander stood, stretching his arms above his head, which gave me a glimpse of his abdomen. The same tan skin that I’d washed a couple of hours ago.

“Let’s go.”

I checked on the boys on our way down. Christian’s fever felt a touch cooler, and Kingston was sleeping soundly. I was prepared for an early morning since they went to bed right after dinner. Zander was already in the process of making sandwiches for us when I got downstairs, and we ate in almost silence, standing close together.

Zander held his sandwich in the air and turned to me. “I would use the liquid nitrogen that that one guy is always using to freeze the marshmallows. Then, I would grind them up because they are always grinding things up. Then, I would fry it, maybe. It could be delicious on top of some scallops or a steak or something.” A smile filled his face, and he looked at me expectantly.

He was so excited about his idea, and all I could do was set my sandwich down with one hand and put my other on his neck, pulling him close to mine. “That’s so smart. I’d give you ten in gameplay.”

“Oh yeah?” Zander put a hand on my hips, dropping his sandwich on the paper towel. Our legs fit together as we stood, so there was no empty space between us. “What score would this get me?”

His lips skimmed across mine before moving down my neck. Zander’s hands settled on my backside, giving me a light squeeze. I fell into him, sparks erupting under my skin.

“Maybe an eight and a half,” I whispered against his hair, running my hands down the curve of his back. Zander’s head shot up. His eyes filled with a fire that made all of me warm. I pulled his face to mine, needing to feel his lips. The kiss was more urgent, his tongue finding its way into mine. He grabbed me, lifting me up, and I wrapped my legs around him. Our kiss didn’t stop, and I never wanted it to end. Zander brought us to the couch, sitting down softly. I adjusted my legs so I was straddling him, and Zander kissed my neck again. It set my entire body on fire. I pulled away to catch my breath and rested my forehead on his .

He ran his fingers up and down my back and let out a shaky breath. “Things escalated quickly there.”

As we sat there, entangled on the couch where my firstborn had been lying earlier, I thought of Natalie, which was a total buzzkill. But her comment about Zander earlier was still nagging me. “Question for a question?” I offered up, still pressed against him.

“Yeah.”

“Natalie said something weird to me today. She said you didn’t want to get married or have any kids, and that’s why you broke up. Is that true?”

Zander sat back and I met his eyes. He shrugged. “I was in a different place with Natalie, you know? I was getting ready to send Dee off to college. I think that I liked the idea of marriage, but maybe not with Natalie. Before her, I had a handful of other relationships. Some were longer, and a couple of them were really short. I dated women who knew who I was, the football star, so I’m not really sure they wanted to be with me, but just like what being with me put them around. I feel like since I’ve been single, I’ve really been trying to figure out what I actually want.”

“And you’ve been honest with me?”

He nodded, and everything about his face made me feel like he was being genuine.

“Okay, I have two questions now.” He stretched his neck, “What was Jack like?” The question took my breath away. I wasn’t sure why. I loved talking about Jack; it kept his memory present and very much alive. I loved that Zander was asking about him, and so I settled in. Telling him about Jack and about his favorite movies. How he loved to sing off-key to make me laugh. How he wrestled with Christian and stomped around the house so he wasn’t the only dinosaur around. How he had a little bit of an adrenaline junkie streak and would jump off every cliff that had a body of water underneath it. I told him that Jack hated when I left my clothes inside out and was the only one who ever vacuumed our house. I wasn’t sure how long I talked, but Zander’s attention stayed on me the entire time until my eyes started to get heavy.

He kissed me softly on the lips when I was done, shifting us so we could lie down. “I wish I could have met him. I’d thank him for loving you so much.”



Rubble

The light shined through the gauzy drapes in my room, and I groaned. I had debated putting up blackout shades, but it felt silly when we'd be moving in just weeks, and I'd have to buy them again. I rolled over and was surprised to find Zander still there. I don't know why. He didn't say he was going to leave, but he was asleep on top of the covers, his hand behind his head. The sleeve of his shirt pulled up enough to see a small tattoo on the underside of his arm. I could only see a tiny part of it. I kept my fingers light as I moved his shirt further down, and the small tattoo became visible. It was a tiny bird, wings in flight with a small chain attached to his right foot, the end of the chain broken like it had pulled away and torn it open. "That tickles," Zander muttered my fingers on his arm still.

"Sorry," I said quietly. "What does this mean?" I touched the tattoo, and he twitched underneath me.

Zander's eyes were still closed, "To not let anyone hold me back from what I'm capable of or what I want for my life, even me."

"So, you're a free spirit, huh?" I joked and fell back into my pillow.

He turned on his side, cracking his eyes open, and my heart warmed at the deep green. "You know it, babe. Just one of those hippie kinds of people."

"Any others?"

"Tattoos?" he asked in response and shook his head. Zander smirked, "Wanna check

and see if I'm lying?"

The flirtatious tone made my core tighten, and I suddenly felt like playing along. The soft light drenched over him as I sat up. I didn't let myself think as I straddled him. He helped me, moving so I could pull his shirt over his head. Zander's hands traveled up my legs, leaving tiny tingles in his wake as they came to rest on my hips. "This is ridiculous. So not fair."

I moved my hands up and down his chest, letting my fingers run through his chest hair. "Hey, I'm just looking for tattoos." Zander's fingers dug into my hips, and I felt one of his fingers dip underneath the top of my underwear. I sucked in a breath as he made little circles on my skin. "That is not fair," I repeated back to him, my words choppy .

Zander pulled me closer to him, and I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling of his rough hands on my skin. "You mean this?"

My head was next to his, and I leaned against his cheek as he massaged me. "Yes, Zander. That." Knowing that saying his name would only encourage him.

Before I knew it, he'd grabbed me and flipped us over on the bed so he knelt above me. My legs fell open, and he pulled at my underwear, "These need to come off." They came off quickly, and he moved closer to me, taking my lips with his.

I wrapped one leg around him, wanting him closer and needing his pants off. I broke the kiss, holding his face back from mine for a moment. "What about you, you have too many clothes on."

He pulled away, kneeling over me again, with a delicious smirk on his face. "What clothes?"

I sat up and tugged at his pants, “These.” My fingers found the button and undid them, keeping my eyes on his. I was past the point of caring anymore. I just wanted him. “Need to come off.” My fingers shook slightly as I unzipped his pants and pulled them down. He watched me carefully, and once his pants were on the floor, he flipped us back over. Zander’s mouth found mine, and we dove into oblivion.

Zander fell onto the bed beside me, pulling me close to him. I met his eyes and knew that we’d moved into a different category now. I placed my hand on his chest and smiled. “The best way to start the day.”

He laughed and kissed my lips softly. “The very best.” His fingers lightly ran over my side, and I closed my eyes, the thoughts in my head swirling to the surface. I had thought I’d never be ready to be with someone else after Jack died. The thought had repulsed me and made me angry with myself for thinking it. No one had even interested me until Zander. But it felt right like it had with Jack. This had felt right with Zander, not scary. Not revolting. “I still have a question from last night.”

I opened my eyes, and Zander's face was very serious. “Shoot.”

“How are you feeling?”

I chuckled, smiling. “Good. Great. Amazing.” Zander tilted his head, and I almost felt like he needed some reassurance from me. Reassurance that that was okay. “I wanted to do that last night, but I wasn’t sure if you did.”

Zander let out a breath, “I just didn’t want to rush it, you know? I didn’t want you to wake up and regret it or feel guilty. I was probably overthinking it.”

“For the longest time, the thought of being with anyone or even feeling anything for another man made me feel really guilty. I didn’t feel like it was right, as if I owed Jack more than that. I’m not sure when it started to change for me, but I know that

he'd want me to be happy with someone again. He wouldn't be upset. So no, I don't regret it or feel guilty. "

I heard footsteps from down the hall, and Zander's eyes widened. "The wild ones seem to be up." For the first time since we woke up, I checked the time. There were still ten minutes until seven. The boys shouldn't come out until then.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom before they storm in here." I let my eyes drift down Zander's still-naked body and ran my fingers down his chest. "You should probably put your clothes on."

He nipped at my ear, "So should you."

I felt the fire inside me flicker and wanted to stay in bed with him even longer. Zander kissed me, and I pulled away, grabbing my shirt and walking across the room to my bathroom. A pair of sweatpants lay on the chair in the corner of the room, and I took those, too.

My reflection in the mirror after going to the bathroom and getting dressed gave me pause. My hair was messed up, but I felt like I looked brighter. Beaming with life. Little voices came from the other side of the door, and I opened it quietly to see both boys crawling into bed. Christian pulled the covers over him, snuggling into Zander's left side while Kingston put his head on Zander's right shoulder. I stopped, frozen by the smiles on their faces and the way that Zander pulled them closely into him. The bridge of my nose burned, and suddenly, I felt terrified. Terrified that something would happen to Zander, happen to us. Terrified that we'd just made a terrible mistake because if this all burned down, it would be my two sweet boys who would be left in the rubble.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

Carolinas

“You’re doing a podcast now?” Mom asked, sitting across from me at her dining table. Her house was little, cozy, and bordering on too small for all her trinkets. I felt cramped, my knees hitting the underside of the tabletop.

I put my fork down, my third serving of her Shepherd’s Pie on my plate. “I did one, yes. It’s sort of like a sports commentary show at this point, and they might be getting a segment on ESPN. They want me to be a part of the host lineup.”

“Is that what you want to do?” she asked, and I could see her watching me intently.

She had always been very observant, always hyper-aware of my emotions. I’m not sure where she got that from but it’s what I loved about her. I didn’t need to say a lot because she knew. “I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“So, tell me about the girl.”

“What, girl?”

Mom looked at me with annoyance. “Spill.” And so, I did. I told her the story from the start, and the whole time, my chest panged with missing Izzy. This trip had already been planned. She knew I was here, and I was going back tomorrow. But it was starting to feel strange to be without her.

“I didn’t tell her I was house shopping here, though. She’s just starting over.”

Mom scooted back in her chair. “You’re not really moving here. That’s ridiculous.”

“It would be nice to be closer to you,” I said, leaning toward her.

She shook her head. “Too far from Dee. She needs you to. So does Izzy, it sounds like. You love her?” Mom asked it too simply.

I nodded. “I think so.”

“Then figure out a new plan. Ask her what she wants to do.”

“I know what she wants to do. She wants me to move out and let her have my house.” I tried to play it off as a joke, but the doubt was there.

Did all this mean as much to Izzy? I hoped it did. I needed it to mean as much to her. “You’re selling yourself short, . If she loves you, she’ll want you to stay. ”

And that was the last we talked of it.

Mom came with me as I looked at houses. Not one to cancel appointments at the last minute. I didn’t like any of them, but there was one that Mom did. More than liked. I could see her whole face come alive.

She’d never admit it, but she’d love to live there. Which is why I made an offer on it. I’d always wanted to be that kid who made it big and then bought his mom a house, but she’d never let me before. This was my chance.

We spent the night with her, cooking and watching old movies. I got up early, hugged her tightly, and went to the airport. It was a long flight, and I couldn’t sleep. Wanting to get back to Izzy and the boys. I’d tried to call them last night, but they were busy, burying themselves in the sand, which Izzy told me in a voice message later.

I missed them. I missed Christian's excitement over the smallest thing and the way that Kingston used words the wrong way.

The drive from the airport was the worst. And the rush hour traffic didn't help. I told Izzy I was on the way, and she sent me a bunch of heart emojis. I didn't go home instead, I went straight to her little cottage. It was almost bedtime for the boys, but I'd made it. I left my suitcase in the car and rushed to the front door, not bothering to knock.

I opened it, peeking my head inside, and met Kingston's eyes. He was sitting on the living room floor in his pajamas, with a tower of multicolored legs in front of him. His mouth formed a little o shape, and he stood, "Daddy is home!" My heart lurched. A vice grip so tight on it I wasn't sure I could breathe. Izzy turned to me, the door swinging inward, and there was shock all over her face. Christian jumped off the couch beside her and ran toward me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"Hey, big guy," I said, leaning down to hug him back. Kingston came over, reaching up to me. I kneeled, pulling them both in tight. I didn't know what to do or say. But I knew that I was deeply honored. Kingston had never known what it was like to have a dad, but he seemed to feel like I was doing a pretty good job.

Izzy stood, coming over to us, and I could see the tears in her eyes. "Hey, handsome. We missed you."

I stood, pulling Kingston with me, wrapping an arm underneath his legs, and Christian went back to the couch. Izzy shut the door behind me, and I grabbed at her wrist. "I missed you."

She leaned up, holding my chin as she kissed my lips. Izzy opened her mouth to speak when Kingston spoke, "Can you put me to bed, Daddy Z? I'm tired." His voice was muffled, and I patted his back.

I searched Izzy's eyes for any sign that something was wrong or that she was upset, but I didn't find any. She gave me a slight nod and sat back down on the couch next to Christian. The weight of Kingston on my chest seemed greater, more important than before.

Before, I was just seeing where this was going. I had feelings for a beautiful woman, and I was lucky enough to see if she had those same feelings back. But now, I had love for these two boys. I wanted to see them be happy, to be cared for, and to grow up strong. Whatever this was, it had bigger ramifications than I'd acknowledged before. I walked slowly up the stairs and tried to soak in every moment of putting Kingston to sleep. I gave him a kiss on the forehead, and he pulled at my shirt. "Tell you something in your ear," his little voice failed to whisper to me. His fingers grabbed my face, and the air from his words tickled my skin. "I love you. Goodnight."

And he turned over, pulling up his blanket to his chin. I closed the door and then rested against the doorframe, my chest overflowing with emotion.

Oh man, I was in so deep.



### The Worst

We didn't talk about it after Zander put Kingston to bed. I wasn't sure what to say or if I should mention anything. He seemed normal throughout the rest of the night, but now, as he made breakfast for all of us, something felt different. Kingston knelt on his chair and threw his head back, sucking down juice from his water bottle. Then he said, "Is it ready, Dad?" Zander flinched, and I felt my shoulders tense.

He'd gone on a trip, something he'd had planned for months, he told me. But we hadn't really talked while he was gone. Something about it felt strange to me. Off-putting. I stood up from the table. "Why don't you go into the living room with your brother, and I'll call you in when it's ready?" I waited a moment for Kingston to shuffle out of the room. "Is everything okay?" I asked Zander, standing at the end of the counter.

Zander flipped a pancake and then shifted toward me, holding the spatula with both hands. "Dee never called me Dad. She calls me Pops, which is close, I guess, but no one has ever called me Daddy before. I just feel like this immense pressure now. I guess I should have thought about all of this before now, maybe."

My heart seized. "Thought about all of this?" I asked with fire in my veins. All of this. Which had to mean me and my kids. Lumped in together like something terrible that he hadn't quite considered.

His eyes went wide. "That's not what I meant. I shouldn't have just..."

I could feel the walls around my heart slam back down. I stepped forward and gently

pulled the spatula out of his hands. “Well, why don’t you go and think about all of this.” I tried to keep my voice even.

Zander stepped aside as I grabbed the empty plate meant for the pancakes. “—”

“Go, Zander. We’ll be fine.” And he didn’t fight any further. I put the finished pancakes on the plate and listened as he said goodbye to the boys.

Kingston rushed on in. “Pancakes are done?”

I forced myself to smile and walked toward the table. Christian followed his little brother, and I tried to shut out everything else as we ate breakfast.

This, all of this, was all that mattered to me. I’d been reckless, falling for Zander so quickly that I’d let them spend too much time with him. And now, reality was settling in.

Kingston shoved a big piece of pancake in his mouth, and syrup dripped from his chin. We’d be okay. The worst had already happened, and we had ended up okay. Everything was going to be fine.

I’d almost managed to finish my book. I just needed to write the epilogue. I hadn’t heard from Zander since he left that morning. The boys asked about him, and I’d made something up.

We’d had a movie night, and now I was sitting up in my bed, writing. I was so close, close to finishing this book and having some actual time off. I wanted to take a trip. Maybe a weekend away would be fun for the boys and give me the ability to have some space, too.

I decided to wait for my agent’s feedback before deciding what the epilogue should

be. It was a little bit taking a shortcut, but I wanted to be done. I attached the file to our email chain and sent it off.

Then, I started searching for places to stay. I was ten internet browser windows deep when my phone buzzed. I picked it up embarrassingly fast, only to be slightly disappointed that Luke was calling me. It wasn't super late, only eight-thirty. He was probably getting ready to hit the town. "Hey, big brother. "

"Hey," and the way he said it let me know that Zander told him. Or talked to him.

"How was your day?" I asked, focusing in on the KOA just an hour north. The boys would love it. But it was fully booked this weekend.

I heard the ding of Luke's car, like he had the door open, as he answered, "Good. Busy day with a new client. How are you today?"

I chuckled, trying to play it cool. "Just peachy. I think I'm gonna take the boys up to the KOA soon. Have you been?"

"Me? To the KOA?" Luke laughed on the other end of the phone. "No, can't say I have, but do you want me to come?"

"The boys would love it. I'm going to get a cabin because I don't want to deal with any kind of tent camping."

"Okay, I'm down. Is Zander coming?" The question made my chest seize up.

I wanted him to come. I wanted him to say that Kingston calling him Daddy scared him, but not to the point of leaving us. I wanted him to say it but because he wanted to. "I think it'll just be family this weekend."

“Zander isn’t family at this point?”

“Luke—”

He cut me off, “He told me what happened, and he’s mildly freaking out. I think he definitely has some groveling ahead of him, but you two are great together.” I didn’t answer, not sure what I wanted to say. “I know. I mean, I can imagine that this is terrifying for you. But he loves you. He loves the boys. Just give him a chance.”

“You think he loves me?”

Luke chuckled. “Yes, I really do. He told me as much today. I’ll back up whatever you do, but when he decides to man up a little bit, give him a chance for me?”

“Maybe.”

Zander showed up the next morning with two kid-sized hot chocolates and an iced chai for me. “Hey. I figured that the boys might be distracted enough by the hot cocoa for us to talk for a minute.” He wore a canvas jacket with a Henley tee underneath. Tiny drops of mist covered his coat. It was a cloudy morning.

“Maybe a minute. We can try,” I said with a smile. I hadn’t liked the silence, the space from him, even though I’d been the one who initiated it.

Zander got the boys settled in front of the TV with their tiny to-go cups. I followed Zander back out onto the front porch, leaving the door wide open. He stood on one side of the stairs, leaning against the railing, and I mimicked him. The chai was perfectly mixed, with just enough spice and just enough sweetness. “So, first, I am going to apologize again. I was freaked out, all in my head, and my words came out wrong. I made it seem like I had jumped into this casually, not understanding the full weight of this situation. I did not. I know it hasn’t been too long our relationship, but

I tried to take it slow. To be mindful of your feelings and of the boys'. I just was freaking out a bit because the full reality of this," he moved his hand between the two of us, "Really hit me in the face. If, for some reason, this doesn't work, those boys have to lose someone else. And I really don't want that."

"I don't want that either."

Zander nodded. "I wanted to ask you that night how you felt about what Kingston said and what he called me, but I got scared. I was afraid you'd be mad."

"Mad? What would I have to be mad about?"

He ran a hand through his dark hair, which had little drops of rain in it. But misty rain, which was one of my least favorite kinds. "I don't know. I didn't want, don't want you to think I'm trying to replace Jack in any way."

I held out my free hand to him and he took it. I pulled him closer to me, putting my hand on his waist, now having to look up to meet his eyes. "I know you're not trying to replace Jack. You can't replace him because you're not him. You're you, and that's why we adore you. The boys will always love their dad, but I'm happy that they love you, too. You've been so good to us, so good for us."

Zander's hand brushed against my neck before his fingers moved across my collarbone. I rested my head back against the beam of the porch and relished in the soft touch. "I want to do right by you, by the boys, and by Jack. That's all I want to do."

"You are," I said, opening my eyes. Zander leaned down, kissing me softly on the lips, and I pressed my body into his. He'd left on his trip right after we'd been together for the first time, and then all of this. My body missed his.

Zander smiled and kissed me again. It was soft, almost chaste, which was good because Christian said, “Ew, stop that!”

We didn’t pull away from each other as much as press the side of our faces together to see Christian standing in the doorway pretending to throw up. Zander kissed my cheek, “I will not,” he said in a playful tone and then kept kissing me. Roughly pressing his lips all over my face, everywhere but my lips. Christian laughed, like a belly laugh, and it made my heart so happy to hear him so happy. Zander met my eyes before turning to Christian. “Now it’s your turn!”

Christian squealed and ran into the house with Zander on his heels. I sat there for a moment and took another drink of my chai. I looked out at the rainy street and felt something lock into place inside me.

It was going to be okay.

### Best Friend

I lay beside Christian and tried to remember when he got so big. His body was all long limbs, and it had to have been just the other day that he was a tiny baby. He held his Daddy stuffed animal to his chest, and his chest rose and fell steadily. He was asleep, I hoped. I'd been lying here for the past fifteen minutes. Zander had spent the day with us, giving in to every whim that the boys came up with.

First, they insisted that he play football with them. Then, we stomped through the house as dinosaurs and went down to the beach. We'd been to the beach every day for the last few days, and I was sure there was a few pounds of sand in my car. Zander had sold the boys on the idea of a dinosaur movie night with popcorn, and there was no changing their mind. Kingston had gone to bed without any complaints; we'd tired him out.

I began to move out of Christian's bed, the wood squeaking underneath me. "Mommy," his little voice whispered.

"Yes, baby?" I stopped moving, my eyes on his face. He looked so much like Jack.

He kept his eyes closed. "Do you still love Daddy?"

My heart leaped at the question, and I wasn't sure I'd ever get a handle on this. "I will always love Daddy. He was my best friend."

"Like I'm your best friend?"

I smiled, placing my hand on top of his, “Yes, just like you’re my best friend.”

A moment passed before he said, “Is Zander your best friend, too?”

It was something impossible to explain to your six-year-old. Someday, we’d be able to talk about it and share with him how hard it has been. “He might be, yeah. He’s a really good friend.” It was true. Zander made me feel taken care of. He made me feel wanted, and like I was more than just a mom. He made me laugh again.

“I like him. He’s good at football.” I loved the way a child’s mind worked. They didn’t see things with so many qualifications as adults. They didn’t go down every avenue of what could go wrong. Christian just knew that Zander was good at football and that he liked him. “Why does Kingston call him Daddy Z now? ”

Another hard one. “Well, your brother never met Daddy. We talk about him all the time, but Daddy died before Kingston was born. So, I think Zander is his best friend and he sort of thinks of him like a dad. Does it bother you?”

Christian kind of grunted and then rolled over. “Should I call him Daddy Zander now, too?”

“That’s up to you, babes. Whatever you want to do is fine with me. But you don’t have to just because Kingston does.” He rolled back over, and I scooted off Christian’s bed before pressing a kiss to his forehead. “I love you. Daddy loves you. I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

I left the room, closing his door quietly and slowly. Zander sat up against the wall, his phone in his hand. He looked up at me and I narrowed my eyes at him. “Eavesdropping?”

“Didn’t mean to,” Zander chuckled and twirled his phone around.



I extended him a hand, and he stood, intertwining his fingers with mine. We walked down the stairs and into the living room. The TV was still on, and the kids' cartoon dinosaur movie was playing. I turned the volume down and sat on the couch. Zander sat next to me, pulling my legs over his. "You know that you have an out, you know? I don't want you to take it, but we haven't really talked about what you're going to do yet."

His hand stiffened on my leg, and he eyed me seriously, "An out?"

I regretted saying it. It was stupid after the conversation we had a few days ago. "You're moving..." I let the words drift off.

"Right," he nodded.

"Right?" I asked.

Zander let his head fall back onto the top of the couch, his finger slowly making circles around my knee, where the bare skin showed through the hole in my jeans. "I said I was going to, yeah. But that was before..."

"Before I messed up your plans?" I tried to have the words come out playful, but I didn't know if I hit the tone right.

His eyes flickered up to mine. "I don't even really know what my plan was. I've just kind of been floundering since Dee left for school. So much of my purpose is gone, and now I just can do whatever I want. But it doesn't feel as free as it probably should." The movement of his fingers felt like fire on my skin.

"What makes you happy?" He glowered at me like he knew where I was going with my question. "I'm serious. You don't have to ever work again, I'm assuming. But if you had to do something, would you want it to center around football? Start a

foundation and run camps for kids around the country. There, problem solved. Or host that show with your friends. Boom.”

Zander laid his palm over my knee, and my insides missed the light touch of his fingers. “Those aren’t bad ideas.”

“I don’t have any bad ideas,” I joked, feeling the tone of our conversation lighten .

“I don’t want to overstep though. This was your big move, your fresh start with the boys. I want to be here, though. I mean, I really like my house, but I’m still willing to let you guys have it. So long as I’m welcome. I’m all in, Iz.” Zander’s words came out rushed, his eyes stuck on mine. I felt like I didn’t have any breath to answer. He wanted me. He wanted my kids, too. I’m not sure there was anything that could have made me want him more in that moment. I swung my leg over him, straddling his lap, and his hands found their place on my hips. “This feels familiar.”

“I want to be here with you, too. I really do,” I answered, and he leaned forward, pressing his lips into mine.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:39 am*

### Overstep

“I want robots, no. Creatures! Wait, let me tink .” Kingston was trying to decide on his birthday cake. He was turning three, which seemed like such a small number to me. He was full of life and made me laugh more than most adults did. I was trying to keep out of it and let Izzy do her mom things. I wanted to be there for her for the boys, but I didn’t want to overstep.

Luke didn’t seem to mind butting in. “Okay, here’s this one that the baker did for another kid. It has a dinosaur, a shark, and a snake on it.” Kingston jumped up and stepped over to Luke, peering down at his phone.

We were all lounging around the living room while a kid's movie played on the TV in the background. “That one.”

Izzy sat up. “Let me see.”

Luke turned his phone away from her. “The men are deciding on the cake, thank you very much.”

She rolled her eyes, and I ran my hands up and down her legs. She was lying on the couch, sprawled over me. Christian was ignoring all of us, curled up next to me on the other side, actually watching the movie.

We hadn’t been back to the conversation we’d started the other night. I needed to man up and just ask her if we might live together. I liked this town; it was smaller than I was used to, but I loved being familiar with most people here. Nobody treated

me like an ex-football player. I was just . And the thought of moving across the country now was unbearable. Even just moving somewhere other than Breakaway Shores.

“Okay, but can the baker have it done in time? His party is in a week.”

“Yes, he’s magic. Promise. It will be done with time to spare.” Luke was typing furiously on his phone.

“Are you having the party here?” I asked.

Izzy’s eyes flashed to me. She’d just decided on a party that morning, in fact. Kingston had asked her if he was having one, and she went full throttle into planning one. “I guess so. I’m not inviting that many people, just us, the few friends he’s made here and Jack’s parents. It’s last minute, so I don’t think they’ll be able to make it, but we’ll see.”

Christian twisted around. “You told Grandma and Grandpa?” Izzy nodded, and he turned back to the TV. His shoulders drooped down a little bit.

“I’ll call Dee, too. See if she can make the trip.” Izzy smiled, and I tapped her leg. “What are we doing for dinner? I’m starved.” I wasn’t starved, but I was ready to get out of the house.

“Pizza!” Kingston shouted, jumping up in the air.

Christian covered his ears, annoyed by the sound. I reached out and pulled Kingston closer, looking at him with a serious face. “Pizza? With frog legs on it?”

His entire face soured, but I could still see the glint of a laugh in his eyes. “Ew, frog legs are gross.”

Luke tickled him from the side, and his giggle warmed my chest. Dee used to giggle like that. When do kids stop doing that? Luke stood, grabbed Kingston around the waist, and pulled him toward the stairs. “Let’s get ready, boys. We’re going bowling.”

“But I want pizza!” Kingston yelled, and Christian groaned again, crawling after Luke.

Izzy sat up, and I leaned toward her. “Do you want to have the party at my house? I mean, it’ll be your house soon anyway.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I wanted her to say something, to not dance around the subject. She shrugged. “Sure, the boys love it there.”

And then she got up, walking toward the little closet where she kept her keys and coat. I tried to shake it off. It was okay. I was reading into it.

She was here .

She wanted to be here with me, too. I just hoped she wanted to be with me when summer was over.

### Storm

I was rehearsing the speech in my head. I'd start by saying how lucky I felt to have met him, how instant our connection was, and then tell him that I wanted him to stay here with us. The summer was winding down. I knew that the rest of it was going to fly by. I'd chickened out every time there was a chance for us to talk. We ended up having sex, which was wonderful and incredible, but part of me wondered if it was getting in the way of us figuring out what our next steps could be.

There was a knock at the door, and I glanced behind me to Zander. Luke had been busy all day, showing houses down in Harbor City. He had a frosting-covered knife in his hand but handed it off to Christian, "I'll get it."

I nodded and turned back to the mixer. Kingston stuck his finger inside, grabbing a smear of blue frosting. "Yummy," he said before sticking his finger inside his mouth.

I rolled my eyes and added two more drops of food coloring before starting the mixer back up again. I'd forgotten about the door until I heard the shrill tone of my mother's voice saying, "My babies!"

My entire body tensed, and I turned around. Zander was standing beside her with his eyes wide. She dropped her suitcase on the ground and came over to me, her hands outstretched. I wanted to swat them away, but I let her wrap me up in a hug. She kissed my cheek, "It's good to see you. Although I had to find out about your move from your brother."

I was speechless. I hadn't told her about the party. If Luke had known she was

coming and hadn't told me, I was going to be even more pissed than I was at that moment. She gave each boy a kiss, and they smiled, saying hello, but didn't seem too excited to see her. I'd hear about that later. It would be my fault and not the fact that she hardly ever came around.

My mother turned to Zander next, "And who are you?"

"That's Zander. He's Mommy's best friend," Christian said while fully concentrating on decorating Kingston's cupcakes, and it made my heart swell.

Zander's eyes were on Christian, and everything about him had softened. He cleared his throat and held out a hand to my mother, "Nice to meet you..." and he drifted off. I'd never told him her name. We really didn't talk about her often. Part of me felt guilty for that, and the other part of me shoved that aside.

She shook his hand, "Patricia. Nice to meet you. I've heard nothing about you." The annoyed tone of her voice made my head hurt.

"Where are you staying, Mom?"

She turned around. Her hair was cut shorter than I'd last seen it hanging around her chin. It was dark brown, and her dedication to hiding her gray hair was still strong. She wore a straight blue dress with some tights underneath. "I was going to see your brother next, but I figured I could stay with one of you guys. It would be nice to be here with you and the boys."

It definitely wouldn't be nice. But I wanted my kids to have some time with her, even if I struggled with her. She was okay for a short period of time. "You can sleep in Christian's room, and they can share for a couple of nights."

"Perfect. Could you change the sheets for me first?" Patricia asked as she sat by the

fireplace.

Zander put his hand on my back, and the pressure held me steady. “I’ll do the sheets,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

I watched him walk to the stairs, pleading with my eyes for him to rescue me. He winked, and I immediately missed his presence. I walked back into the kitchen and started to scoop the green frosting into a bag. Kingston moved his stool over to the cupcakes and watched me as I made grass frosting on each remaining cupcake. He had the tiny sports balls in his hand and placed a football on the first cupcake. “What’s all this for?” Patricia asked.

“Kingston’s birthday is tomorrow!” Christian half yelled, licking his frosting spatula.

The cupcakes were perfect. Green and white frosting with little balls stuck into the top. “Babes, the cupcakes look great. Are you all done?” Luke said they were overkill, but after he’d purchased the creature cake, Kingston became obsessed with having a sports cake. We compromised and made two dozen cupcakes instead. It was going to be a sugar overload.

Christian nodded. “Can I watch a show before bed?”

I glanced at the time; it was seven-thirty. “Sure,” I told him, trying to ignore my mother as I went back to the cupcakes.

Kingston had placed a soccer ball and a basketball on the two other frosted cupcakes. “Are you guys having a party? Did you forget my invite?”

“Just a little get-together with Luke and some of the friends we’ve made here. Nothing big.” I tried to keep my voice even.



I heard her scoff. “Who’s the boy toy? You finally got over Jack?”

My heart practically stopped, and I turned, my face on fire. “Are you serious right now?” I put the frosting down and put my hand on Kingston’s head. “Wait for me, okay?” He didn’t look at me but nodded, lining up the little cupcake toppers.

I turned and walked into the living room. Patricia followed me, “What did I say now?” she asked, her tone annoyed.

“You do not get to talk about Jack like that. You don’t get to make any comments about me.” I turned around, anger boiling inside my chest, “You do not get to make comments about my life and what I’ve gone through because you have no idea what it’s like. My husband died, which is not something you just one day wake up and get over. It will always be with me, and you will not speak about the father of my children like that, especially with them in the same room.”

She narrowed her eyes at me and let out a heavy breath. “You need to grow up, . Not everything is about you.” Red flooded my vision. I wanted to yell and scream at her, but instead, I walked slowly toward the front door.

I opened it and held out a hand, “You should go and stay at Luke’s. Call him and see when he’ll be home.”

“Stop being so dramatic. So I said something you didn’t like. You need to thicken up that skin. You’ve always been sensitive.” Patricia crossed her arms over her chest.

“Mother, please—”

Zander stood at the top of the stairs, his face hardened into a glare. He had likely heard everything she’d said and was hopefully realizing that I had under sold how difficult she could be. “I cannot have you here tonight. You can come to Kingston’s

party tomorrow if you'll behave."

She threw her hands up in the air, "Whatever. Should have known better." Patricia grabbed her suitcase, dragged it behind her, and threw a glance at Zander, "You've picked a special one. Hope you know that. We'll see how long you last."

"She is very special," Zander said, his voice deeper than normal. He stood beside me, throwing an arm over my shoulder. "Which is saying something if this is how you've treated her throughout her life." Patricia's face went beet red, and she stomped out the door. Zander pushed it closed and then wrapped me up in a hug. "Well, she sucks."

I laughed, the release making my body relax, even just a little bit. I held him close to me, savoring the feeling of being protected in his arms. "She really does. I feel like she's only gotten worse since Jack died."

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, "Did I really hear her call me a boy toy?"

"Yeah, yeah, you did."

We separated just enough to meet eyes, and he smiled, his features soft and relaxed now. "Let's get the birthday party prep finished, and then we can reset the rest of the night with a little movie. That sound okay?"

I nodded, pressing up on the tips of my toes to kiss him. I loved kissing him. I loved how protective he had been at that moment. "Yes, let's. Will you help Kingston with the cupcakes really quick while I call Luke? Should probably let him know about the storm headed his way."

Zander kissed me again in answer and went into the kitchen. "Birthday boy, let's finish this up," he said, his voice changed from how serious it had been before.

I turned away, watching him frost my son's birthday cupcakes while Christian sat at the table with my iPad, watching a show. Zander fit in right here, with us. My heart swelled like it was growing to make room for him because I would always love Jack, but I was pretty sure I loved Zander, too.

I don't know why I'd agreed to this. Luke had told me it would be a good idea to get her off my back. He had a way of making things sound easy, like they wouldn't even faze me. That's how I ended up agreeing to have breakfast with my mother before Kingston's party. We'd scheduled the party for after his nap to give him enough rest to hopefully not be cranky. Zander leaned over, putting his arm behind my back on the chair, and something about it felt so possessive to me. Everyone around us in the jam-packed restaurant would know that I was with him. I didn't hate it. Not one bit. "Remember, I'm your buffer."

Yes, we'd agreed on that. He was to be my buffer, to distract my mother if needed. I didn't know if he knew what he was signing up for, but I was not going to turn down any help. Patricia sat across from us, Christian next to her and Luke on the other side. He tapped his spoon on the table, which rattled the rest of his silverware. Kingston was on my right, and Zander was on my left. But it meant I had to look right at her.

"I think I'm gonna play football. It starts in a couple of weeks. Right, Mom?" Christian asked me, and I nodded.

"Yup. I got you signed up yesterday." I was so excited to see him running around like crazy, trying to grab other people's flags. It was exactly the kind of thing he loved. Zander had laid next to me while I signed him up, talking about his practices, and how he'd watch the coaches and would help out. He was talking like he'd stay here, and I didn't want to ruin the moment. I didn't want to ruin the moment by talking about how I didn't want him to go.

I chickened out again.

“They have sports in a little rinky dinky town like this?” Patricia said with an eye roll, and I had to bite my tongue.

Luke chuckled and nudged her shoulder with his. “This is not a rinky dinky town, Mom. You should see the price tags on the homes I sell. This is a destination. People are chomping at the bit to live here and to own property here.”

“Spoken like a real estate agent,” Zander joked.

“So why are you selling your house then, Zander?” Patricia asked him, her eyes narrowed on him.

Zander leaned in closer to me, his fingers running softly over my upper arm. “I own a handful of different properties, and sometimes it makes sense to sell them.” She opened her mouth to ask another question, but he cut her off. “Where do you live again?”

“Right now, I’m in Texas. I like warm weather. Did you not tell him anything about me?” She turned her attention to me.

Luke laughed, but it was a couple of octaves too high. “You’re flying back in a couple days, right? I’ll have to take you on that whale-watching tour while you’re here.”

She narrowed her gaze on my brother and nodded. “Yes, I would like that.” Patricia took a sip of her water and then cleared her throat. “You’re moving into his house? Like together? How long have you even known each other?”

I wanted to list out the array of boyfriends that she had and moved in with after being together for a month or two. “We met at the beginning of the summer. And no, we aren’t moving in together.”

“Why doesn’t Zander move in with us? We see him every day,” Christian said so nonchalantly that it made my heart feel kind of strangled. He was coloring on the paper menu that the waitress had given him.

Luke chuckled. “You’d like the house, Mom. What’s your favorite part of your new house, Kings?”

He tapped a crayon against his lip. “The backyard!” Kingston was happy today, blissfully unaware of the familial tension around him.

“Will I get to see this house while I’m here?” Patricia asked, annoyance dripping off each word.

“The party is there,” I said simply.

Zander’s fingers moved slowly, carefully across the top of my shoulder. The touch helped center me, and I placed my hand on his thigh. I didn’t know why I still let her bother me.

Her opinion didn’t matter, but she was still my mother. She wasn’t supposed to be like this. Luke began asking her a question, and Christian looked up at me and Zander. “Is he going to move in, Mom?”

I peeked over my shoulder at Zander and raised my eyebrows. “It sounds like Christian wants to share a room with you.”

Zander chuckled, and Christian huffed. “No, Mom. He’d live in your room. Like Dad used to.” A pang of sharp emotion rang through my heart. It wasn’t quite guilt or sadness alone. It was something all jumbled up.

“Your mom and I will talk about it, okay?” Zander said softly, with a firm squeeze on

my shoulder.

Moving in at the end of the summer felt like we would be rushing it. But I loved the idea of waking up next to him each morning. Watching food shows with him late at night after long days together. I leaned into him and whispered, “Later?”

His dark eyes met mine, and he nodded.

Later, it was. I wasn’t going to chicken out this time.

### Happy Birthday

I was a bundle of nerves as I set the cake down in the center of the table. We were having the party at Zander's, which was great because it was nice outside, and Kingston had wanted the sprinkler going. Zander was putting out the new sprinkler he'd purchased just for them. It was a splash pad and allowed the water to puddle inside the bottom.

I hadn't seen Jack's parents in about a year, and I couldn't remember the last time they'd called us. But they had told me they were coming. The boys would be so excited to see them, and that made me happy. But my mother and them had never gotten along. She didn't really get along with most people. Luke put his arm around my shoulders, "It's gonna be fun. "

"Where is she?" I whispered, not sure if my mother was nearby.

"Inside, standing over a bowl of chips." Luke squeezed me. "I'm sorry."

I leaned into him. "Not your fault. You should be able to talk about your life with her and also not be blindsided with surprise visits."

Zander came up the stairs, Christian and Kingston jumped into the sprinkler. The side gate to the yard was open, and some of the neighbor's kids walked in. Christian squealed with joy as more kids slid in the water. It was going to be fun. It was about Kingston being three and nothing else. Luke clapped Zander's shoulder and went down into the yard, greeting the guests. He knew everyone, and I only knew some of them. Not their names but by what they looked like. I wrapped my arm around

Zander's back and rested my head against his chest. He kissed the top of my head. "Oh, well, look at you two," Patricia said with a hint of sarcasm.

I ignored her as Zander turned to her. "Can I get you anything, Patricia?"

She scoffed and walked down into the yard, heading for one of the chairs that we'd set up along the edge. I spotted Jack's mother coming through the side gate, clutching a very large birthday present wrapped in colorful paper. "That's Jack's mom." I squeezed Zander's hand before walking toward them. "Marcia," I called out, and she spun her head to me.

Her face softened, and I looked behind her, not seeing Jack's dad. She waved and handed me the present. "This is a nice place."

"It is." I pointed to Kingston and Christian. "The boys are in the sprinkler."

Marcia nodded and glanced around. "Is this where you moved to?"

"We will be moving here, yes. But my friend lives here right now." Something about her was off, more held back than she normally was. I should have reached out to them more kept trying even though they'd stopped picking up my calls. "Where is Grandpa?" I asked.

She pursed her lips. "He is on the phone with Jason, but he'll be in." Jason was Jack's younger brother, who they'd moved to be close to.

"Okay, well, there are snacks up on the patio." I motioned over there. "Feel free to roam and say hi to the boys."

I didn't know what else to say. She and I had been close once, and I really had loved our relationship. It felt like having a real mom. She was supportive and helpful. But



then Jack died, and it changed. I'd lost my husband, and they'd lost a son. I think it was too much for them to get over. To move past. I just hated that my boys suffered for it. I placed the large present bag on the floor because I hadn't set up a gift table. I'd specifically said no gifts. The boys had so much stuff and Luke had already given Kingston two presents today.

Zander's hand grabbed mine, and I smiled at him. "How'd it go? "

"It was awkward. Like she didn't really want to be here. I don't know." I was rambling. "I should have just not had a party."

He put his hand on my face, tilting it up to him, and his thumb ran over my skin. "Stop. It's going to be fine. You're just nervous."

"And who is this?" Justin's voice was like ice. Zander turned around, and my chest got tight. Jack was the spitting image of his dad, Justin. But Jack would never look like this version of him, aged with gray hairs. No, he'd forever be twenty-six.

"Zander, nice to meet you." His voice was strong as he held out his hand.

Justin shook it, his eyes darting between the two of us. Worry filled me, but then Justin smiled. "Nice to meet you, too. You taking good care of this one?"

"I am, sir," Zander said, and I let my shoulders relax.

Justin held open his arms, and I hugged him. He pressed a kiss to the side of my head and then held me back from him. "You look happy, which would make my Jack happy."

He smiled, and I really felt it. The words he spoke made me tear up. "I'm glad you guys came. It's been too long."

“It has. I’m sorry,” Justin said, glancing out at the grass. “The boys are big. Can we take them out while we’re here?”

“Of course, they’d love it,” I told him, and I really meant it. They would love it.

He nodded at Zander and squeezed my shoulder before heading toward the boys. I watched him wave to Christian, getting his attention. He kneeled and both boys gave him a very wet hug. “He seems nice,” Zander said from beside me.

“He is, just like Jack,” and it was true. “But losing Jack really changed Marcia. I always felt like she just couldn’t stand to be reminded of him.”

“At least she came.”

“Yeah.” Zander was right. At least she was there.

It was a half-hour past Kingston’s bedtime, but it was his birthday. We were letting him stay up late and planning on sleeping over at Zander’s. He’d asked Zander about it. Not me. This might have made me irritated two months ago, but now I sort of loved that I shared a bit of the focus.

It was kind of a big moment. He viewed Zander as someone who was in charge, who made the rules, like a parent. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Zander was very involved when he was around. He didn’t sit idly by, even though I know he tried to.

“It should be on the counter,” Zander told me from the other room where he sat squished in between Christian and Kingston. He wanted his phone to show them videos from the party. I moved into his dining room and found it right away. Next to it was a big yellow envelope, the top of whatever was inside peeking out the top. It looked familiar, similar to the closing papers that I had sitting on my counter in the rental.

He must be working on them, too. I pulled them out a little further, the boys giggling in the other room. My eyes stopped on the address, which was not in Oregon but in North Carolina. I skimmed the front page. Zander had bought a house in North Carolina. He'd told me at the beginning of the summer that he was thinking about moving there to be close to his mom. But he'd told me he wasn't going anywhere. He'd said that several times. Maybe these were old, or he'd never signed them. My heart was racing in my chest as I pulled them out, flipping to the last pages where I knew he'd have to sign. There it was, his signature scrawled in black ink and the date he signed them, which was yesterday.

He'd lied to me.

I felt a tiny wall start to stack up around my heart, but I couldn't talk to him about it now. Not with the boys here. Maybe there was a simple explanation, something I wasn't seeing.

I put the papers back and grabbed his phone, walking toward the family room. My heart ached as Kingston and Christian cuddled against either side of him. He was so handsome, even more handsome when he was with them. His dark hair was a bit unruly from wrestling with them, and the sleeves of his shirt were pushed up, his strong biceps on display.

But he was leaving.

Even though we'd made plans. Plans to watch Christian play football. Plans to talk about living together. I gave him his phone and sat down, my mind whirling.

My heartfelt on the edge of cracking open, but then I thought of my boys. They'd had a good day, and I wanted it to stay good.

I took the boys home and insisted that I wasn't feeling well. I think that Zander knew

I was full of crap, but I just needed to calm down. I'd always had a hard time expressing what I really wanted to say when my emotions were running too high. Confrontation gave me anxiety in an instant. Maybe that came from listening to my parents scream at each other when I was a kid. I mean, most definitely, it came from that.

But I knew it now. And I tried to be smart about it. I needed to make some bullet points. To let myself calm down.

Jack always knew when I was preparing to have a talk, and there was one time that I was frustrated with his constant desire to start up new hobbies that had big startup costs. I'd been making a list of my thoughts on my desk, and I came back to it to find his notes written beside mine.

It was hysterical in that moment. We had our conversation separately on that paper, but I loved that he knew that about me. He wasn't mad or upset. He wasn't annoyed.

I missed him.

Zander texted me first thing in the morning and I got the feeling he knew something was amiss.

I didn't respond right away. My stomach just a mess of nerves. The boys woke up and were excited to get ready for their day with Jack's parents. They were picking them up at eight-thirty, which was something I'd always loved about them. They knew that kids woke up at the crack of dawn and loved to be busy all day with them.

They were good grandparents.

It was just different now.

I kissed the boys and watched them rush out to Justin and Marcia's rental car. They waved to me and said they'd have them back around dinner. I had the day to myself.

Well, I could have it to myself.

But I needed to talk to Zander.

I figured that over the phone would be a good place to start the conversation. I reminded myself that as I pressed Zander's name. He answered after one ring. "Hey!"

"Hey, what are you doing?" I asked, fiddling with the tuft on one of my couch pillows.

Zander's voice was warm. "I was just about to go run and get some caffeine, actually. Can I bring you some?"

Chai sounded good. There wasn't ever a time when chai didn't sound good. "Uh, sure. Thanks."

"Okay." There was an awkward pause, and I flopped down on my couch. "Did the boys—"

I cut him off. "Why did you tell me you weren't going anywhere and then buy a house in North Carolina? Were you just going to leave at the end of the summer?" My words came out rushed, but the relief of saying them was immediate.

Zander cleared his throat. "I thought you might have seen the closing docs. Um, I can explain, but I didn't buy that house for me to live in. Can I get you a chai and bring it over? We can talk." He sounded so earnest, so honest. Like he normally did.

"Okay. I'll be here," I said and hung up the phone.

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### The Coast is Clear

“So, tell me about this bench?” I asked Izzy, sitting on the other end. I didn’t want to press my luck. I’d messed up. She’d been quiet when I’d arrived at the house, and I’d wanted to drop to my knees and explain it all, but instead, she asked to go for a walk on the beach. We’d each walked side by side, in silence, through the brush, and then she stopped at this bench.

Izzy didn’t look my way. Her eyes stayed forward. Her hands folded together on her lap. Her chai cup was empty now, sitting next to her. “There’s a little inscription on the back of the bench. It says, The coast is clear .” I leaned backward, and she was right. There was a small metal plaque containing those words and nothing else. “I don’t know what it means or who put this bench here. I tried to ask the locals back when I was a teenager. But I’ve created this whole world of stories around it in my head. And after Jack died, I thought of a couple. One dying but holding on, so they didn’t leave their spouse too soon. They were older and gray-haired, and the spouse who wasn’t dying told them to go. Told them it was okay. That the coast was clear, and I love that. I...” She drifted off. “I just wish I could have spoken to him before. That I’d had the chance to hold his hand or kiss him before he was really gone. I wish I’d had the chance to tell him that I’d be okay, that the boys would be okay.”

The waves crashed against the shore ahead of us, the wind rustling between the thin blades of glass. A thick layer of clouds covered the sun, but it wasn’t cold. The temperature was comforting. “Izzy, about the house—”

“You don’t have to explain it, . I honestly don’t even know if I want to hear it. I knew you were moving. We both did. We just...” The anguish in her voice crushed my

chest, and I scooted closer to her.

“No, I want to explain. Yes, I bought a house in North Carolina. My mom worked so hard for me after my dad died. And then, when I went to the league, I wanted to buy her something big. I wanted to do what people do when they make it and say thanks to the people who helped them get there, but she flat-out refused. She didn’t want some big lavish house, especially when she was helping me with Dee.” I could still hear her lecturing me about money and how I needed to save everything I could. “I bought her one, finally. She was looking at houses with me when I was there, and she adored this cute little cottage. It’s modest, nothing extravagant, but at least she won’t have to worry about her mortgage now.”

Izzy turned her head, her eyes so beautifully brown in the cloudy light. “You bought it for your mom?” Her tone was almost annoyed.

“I wasn’t trying to hide it from you. I’d just signed it all, but we hadn’t had a moment alone.” She turned away from me again, and I wanted to reach out to her, but I couldn’t. I could just see the look on Natalie’s face turned to the side as we fought the last time, and this felt too much like that. But I didn’t want it to be the last time we fought. I wanted to fight with her a thousand more times if it meant it was her I was fighting with. “Izzy.” I moved closer to her, putting my hand over top of hers. “I’m not going anywhere. I know we’ve been skirting around what we are really going to do at the end of summer, but I will do whatever you want to. I’ll rent a house here, and you can still move into the house. Or we could move in together. I don’t want to go anywhere else.”

The words left my mouth, my heart beating in my chest, and I could tell by the way Izzy pulled her hands out of mine that I said something wrong. I just didn’t know what.

“, I didn’t expect this.” Her voice shook, and she avoided my eyes.

“Expect what?”

“You. ”

I let a beat sit in between us, a gust of wind rustling around us. “Me?”

Izzy shook her head a little bit and let out a deep breath. "I think that I sort of expected to never have to be in this position again. I did this already, the big love story, you know? I had it, the so-called happily-ever-after, but it wasn't. I just never expected to fall in love again. I don't know if I can do it."

I sat back, my shoulder just barely brushing against hers. She'd fallen in love with me. I had known that because I'd been falling in love with her, too. But we hadn't really said it yet. "I fell in love with you, too, Izzy."

“But I know what happens at the end of the story. You think they live happily ever after, but then someone dies. Something terrible happens, and everything you know is ripped away from you. I just don't know if I could survive it twice.” Her cheeks were wet with tears.

I got off the bench, twisting around so I was kneeling in front of her. My hands found her knees, and her misty eyes met mine. “I'm not going anywhere. This is exactly where I want to be. I know I can't make promises because I'm sure Jack made the same promises about nothing ever happening to him. And then he died in a car crash. But I'm here. I love you, Izzy. I want to be with you, to be your partner, and to help with Christian and Kingston. I want this life with you because even though we don't know how it'll end, it'll be the best damn life I could ever imagine.”

“You love me? ”

“Yes, silly,” I chuckled and pulled her closer to me, our faces at the same level. “I



love you.”

“And you’re not moving to North Carolina?”

I brushed her hair behind her ears. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Izzy placed her hand on my neck, and the softness of her fingers made me tingle. “I love you, too.” We took each other in for a moment, and then I kissed her. A kiss that was the perfect amount of passion and love. I wanted it to never stop, but I also wanted to take her back to the house and show her how much I loved her in every way I could.

I didn’t really know what I wanted to do with my job or my career. But I sure as hell knew what I’d be doing with the rest of my life.

The rest of the day had been bliss. Izzy and I had made love a couple of times before taking a nap. We managed to wake up with enough time to shower and look presentable before the boys got back with Jack’s parents.

They were kind and friendly as we talked to them. They were leaving that night, driving back to Portland, and flying out. But it was great of them to come. The boys had been happy.

We were just lounging now. Christian was putting a puzzle together while Izzy had gone to the corner store. She’d needed some fresh air. Kingston had insisted that I watch this dinosaur show with him. It was full of dinosaurs with neon colors painted all over them, which didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me, but he seemed enthralled. My phone rang, buzzing against the wood of the side table, and Kingston jumped off my lap. “Someone’s call you.”

I patted his shoulder, wondering if I should correct his grammar or not because it was

honestly just too adorable to hear him talk that way. I grabbed the phone, and he put his head back down on my leg. It was my agent, Rachel. Weird, we hadn't spoken in months because I wasn't really looking for any opportunities. "Hello?"

"Zand, how are ya?" Her bright voice buzzed in my ear.

"Doing great. It's been a while," I tried to keep my voice on the quieter side, not wanting to distract Kingston from his show.

"It has, but something just came across my desk that is specifically for you." She had her salesy voice on, and something inside me bristled.

I wanted to say no right there. I'd just told Izzy that I wasn't going anywhere. I'd meant it. But I didn't. "What was it?"

"They want you to join the Thursday announcers. They've got an opening coming up due to some PR issues, and your name is the top pick for replacements."

It was even worse than I thought it would be. And by worse, I meant amazing. Tempting. Something that I'd been waiting for. Something that would be just for me. Not for Dee, for my mom, or for anyone else who needed me to take care of them. I could just talk football and get paid to do it. It sounded incredible, but it couldn't work. "So, traveling to each game once a week for the season?"

"Exactly, starting with Thursday next week. But it's close by. Rebels at Victors." When Rachel got salesy, she got short. Not angry but just concise with her words. She wasn't trying to influence me too much. She hated that.

"Can I think on it?"

Someone murmured on the other end. "I can get you twenty-four hours before they

need to move on.”

“Okay, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She hung up without saying goodbye, another thing she did, and I felt anxiety spread through me. I was going to tell Izzy as soon as she got back, just inform her. That’s what people do in relationships, right?

Grown

The boys were in bed, and I was ready to get in the shower with Zander. I walked into my room and stopped in the doorway. I could tell by the way he was sitting on the edge of the bed, picking at his nails, that something was different. Off. I leaned against the frame of the door. “What is it?”

His head flicked up quickly. “I got a call from my agent. They’re offering me a commentator gig for Thursday night.”

“That’s a big night for football,” I said simply. I could see it written all over his face. We hadn’t known each other for long, but we’d spent almost every day together. “So, you want to do it?”

Zander scoffed and rubbed his palms on his pants. “No. I was just telling you.”

“Okay. But that sounds like something you’d enjoy doing. It’s like the podcast your friend has but better, and you’d be right there at the games.” I closed the door behind me and walked toward the bathroom. “Don’t not do it just because of me.”

I didn’t wait for him, hoping that he’d follow me inside like he had after we’d woken up from our nap. My stomach twisted as I turned on the shower, the water steaming up the mirror. Zander was still in the bedroom. I poked my head past the door frame. He was still in the same spot, his eyes down on his hands again. “You coming?”

Zander didn’t look up. “No, but I’ll be here when you get out.”

Warning bells rang out in my head, the feeling so shrill throughout my body. How was this the same day? Just this morning, we'd said I love you for the first time, and now, I could see the wheels turning in his head. He didn't feel like he could pursue his dreams and now do what he wanted to do. Even if I told him, I wanted him to do it.

I got in the shower, and I let the water pelt my scalp, closing my eyes. I'd wanted it to be a long shower where we'd talk and stand together with the water, keeping both of us warm. But I worked quickly, cleaning my hair and washing off my body. I turned off the water and heard the murmur of the TV coming from my bedroom. I got ready quickly, trying to stop myself from thinking. I didn't want to think about it or overthink any of it.

Zander was a grown man. He could make this decision for himself, right?

I plastered a smile on my face, my wet hair brushed back and went out into the room. The lamps were turned off, and Zander was lying in the bed, his arms behind his head. He glanced over at me as I crawled in, and the look on his face almost made me freeze. It was half love but almost anguish. He was upset. And I didn't know what to do to fix it.

I slid under the covers, moved over to him, and placed my head on his chest. He brought a hand down to grab mine, but I didn't say anything.

He'd put on the cooking show, the only one that I liked watching, and we watched as the four chefs were given disgusting canned seafood ingredients to use. "Canned squid? That just doesn't seem fair at all," Zander grumbled, his chest vibrating underneath me.

"I bet it takes like metal." The beat of my heart quickened. I pushed out a breath. "Zander, I feel like you want to do the commentator job. You seem almost upset

about it.”

Zander squeezed my fingers. “I don’t want to do it. I was just telling you, being open with what’s going on. I’m not going anywhere.” His tone was hard, and it had an end-of-story vibe. And I wanted to keep going, to make him admit that he was not being completely honest with me .

But I didn’t press the issue. We lay together and watched the cooking show until his breathing deepened, and he started to snore. I pulled away, resting on my own pillow, and watched him sleep.

When Jack died, I knew that dating again would be incredibly challenging. I knew that it would be a huge ask to find a man who wanted to be with a widow, to step into a parenting role to two kids that weren’t his, and overhaul his life to fit all of that. It’s why I pushed dating to the side for so long.

But with Zander, it had been easy.

We fit together, and the boys liked him. It didn’t feel like I was forcing him to be with us. But now, reality was starting to settle in. He still had things he wanted to do. He wanted to accomplish things in life, just like I did. I didn’t want to feel like a burden to him.

I didn’t want my boys to feel like a burden, either.

I rolled to the side and tried to fight the sound of the tiny wall that I’d knocked aside for Zander. The sound of it being repaired built back up because I didn’t want to risk being left on purpose.

The little cabin wasn’t really that little. There was an upstairs loft, where the bunk beds for the boys were, and two rooms were downstairs. It was a great weekend to

faux-camp, and the boys were so excited. The KOA had everything within walking distance, and it felt like freedom for the boys. Our cabin was right near the kids' section, and Zander had walked them over there so they could jump on the big bounce pillow.

Zander had been quiet this morning, and I was trying to act as normally as possible. But something felt just a bit different like there was more distance between us than normal.

"That's the last of the food," Luke said as he dropped another bag in the little kitchen. The counter space was nonexistent, and there was just a two-burner countertop stove with a small fridge. It was rustic, but it would work. The boys were banking on roasting marshmallows and hotdogs for dinner anyway. I grabbed the bag from my brother and began to put the few perishables away. "Is everything okay with you and Zand?"

"Yup." My answer was too quick. "Why would something be wrong?"

Luke eyed me carefully as I turned around. "He seems quiet. Like more broody than normal."

I shrugged. "He got a job opportunity, but he's not taking it. I think he's upset he can't, but he won't tell me that. I'm trying not to press the issue, but I just....Yeah." I wasn't going to unload on my brother about his friend. I wasn't going to tell him that I felt like I was already weighing Zander down, and we were only dating.

"Do you want me to talk to him?" Luke asked, and I immediately shook my head.

"No, it'll be fine."

But it wasn't really proving to be that way. The boys came back, all covered in sand

from the volleyball pit. They were laughing and giggling, wanting to then go for a swim. We got ready to go in the pool, but Zander decided to stay behind. I had fun splashing the boys, carrying Kingston most of the time, and watching Christian jump off the edge to Luke. But I felt Zander's absence.

When we got back to the cabin, I heard muffled voices coming from the room that we were sharing. I went up to the door as Luke helped the boys look through their backpacks for new clothes. It was hard to make anything out, but I thought I heard the word Thursday and hand-picked. A pit formed in my stomach. I wouldn't be able to handle knowing that he gave up an opportunity to be with me. Christian called my name and I tried to push it to the back of my mind. I was going to enjoy this night. We were only here one night.

The boys were antsy, not caring that it wasn't dark yet and demanding a fire be built. I handed Luke the lighter and the two bundles of firewood that we bought at the KOA store. Building fires wasn't really his thing, but the boys enjoyed blowing on the sparks and helping him until the flames were strong.

Luke handed them each a roasting stick and a hot dog. I sat down in one of the camping chairs we brought and glanced behind us at the cabin. Zander was still inside. "How was your day with Mom?" I asked him. Kingston hyper-focused on his hot dog while Christian tried to set a perfect amount of weight on his stick so he didn't have to hold it anymore.

"It was, well, a day with Mom." Luke chuckled. "I know she's a lot, and I agree with you that she is. But I feel obligated, I guess, to at least try to have a relationship with her. Even if it is surface level."

"She always liked you better."

"Yeah, I don't know why," Luke said, poking another hot dog onto the metal stick.



He handed it to me, and his eyes flickered to the cabin. “Hey, buddy. You’re just in time for some grub.”

“Great.” Zander’s voice was gruff, and my appetite disappeared. I wanted to rush over to him, to wrap my arms around him, but I stayed put. I held my hot dog over the fire as he came around to the other side of the fire pit, sitting in between the two boys.

I avoided his gaze, not sure if I could handle seeing the truth in his eyes, and watched as the skin of my hot dog began to bubble.

Apart

The light had leached from the sky, and the boys had eaten their body weight in s'mores. Izzy held Kingston on her lap, his head leaning back against her shoulder. She'd been quiet today, but I'd been quiet too. I knew that I just needed to be honest with her, but I didn't want things to fall apart.

There was no real reason for them to fall apart. Nothing had changed. I loved her. She loved me. But this job, this job would be really great. We could make it work without Izzy feeling like I was going back on my word.

I was making everything worse by not talking to her. Kingston yawned as Christian licked his fingers. "I think it's shower time for you." Luke pointed to Christian. "And bedtime for you," he said to Kingston.

"Let's go get settled," Izzy whispered to her boy, wrapping her arms around him as she got out of the soft camping chair.

I didn't follow her. Even though my eyes did. Luke came over and kicked the leg of my chair. "Dude, what's your deal?"

"Straight to the point," I mumbled and leaned backward. Christian grabbed another marshmallow out of the bag, giving me a smile as he did. "I'm just in my head."

Luke scoffed. "Get out of your head. Go talk to her before she has the entire conversation in her head and decides that you're wrong." He turned, grabbing the marshmallow bag just as Christian was about to get another one. "Let's go, buddy."

Go get your shower bag.”

I sat there for a moment, my eyes on the fire. I wasn’t sure why this was hitting me so hard. I loved Izzy. I loved Christian and Kingston. I loved football, and this job wasn’t going to change any of those things. It all just felt like a lot.

My knees cracked as I stood, cleaning up the last bit of flames with the sand so the fire was out. I slipped inside the cabin, hearing Izzy’s calm voice from up in the loft. She was reading the story about the truck that Kingston loved. I sat down on the couch and closed my eyes, listening to his little voice interject every so often.

I heard the wooden stairs creak as Izzy came down and opened my eyes to watch her. She didn’t meet my gaze until she reached the bottom one. I got up and walked to her, wrapping my arms around her. Her hands touched my back lightly, her fingers running over the fabric of my jacket. I leaned my cheek on the top of her head and tightened my grip.

“Let’s go for a walk when Luke gets back?” she said into my chest, her words a whisper.

“Sure.” I followed her into our room, grabbed my warmer coat, and plugged my phone into the mismatched outlet in the middle of the wall.

We didn’t talk as she got ready, pulling on a sweatshirt. The front door squeaked as they opened it, and the two of us went back out into the main room. “We’re gonna go for a quick walk,” she told Luke.

He nodded at me and clapped me on the shoulder. Christian shushed him as they walked up the steps to the loft.

The sounds of others around us echoed through the air. Someone was playing music.

I could hear the chatter of voices and the pop of the fire from the next space over. I looked down, hoping to grab Izzy's hand, but it was stuffed in the pocket of her sweatshirt.

The gravel crackled under our footsteps. "I'm sorry that I've been so reserved today," I started, clearing my throat. "I do think that job would be really cool to do, but I also don't want you to think that I will be going back on what I said. If I were to do it, you know."

"What do you mean, what you said?" She glanced over at me, her face blank as she headed to the path that led to the special beach access.

"I mean, I said I wasn't going anywhere. And I'm not."

Izzy kept her eyes forward, the path ahead of us lit by tiny lights every few feet on the ground. "I think you should do it. Take the job."

My chest lurched and I stopped walking, watching her. "What?"

She stopped, turning toward me. "Take the job, . It's what you want to do, I can tell."

"I don't want to take the job, Izzy. I want to be here with you." Rain began to pitter-patter the leaves around us.

Izzy shook her head and pushed her hair behind her ears. "No, . I mean, I know you say that now, but this job is perfect for you. You deserve it."

I took a step toward her, and she took a step backward. I let out a breath and took in her face. She was panicking. And I'd let it happen all day, all last night when I should have just manned up and had the conversation.

Dammit.

### All is Lost

“You’re freaking out?” Zander asked, his tone sharp.

“No. I’m just thinking—I’ve been thinking about this, us, and I don’t want to be the one who holds you down. I don’t want my boys to be the ones that hold you down. It’s fun now, with them, because you can take a break whenever you want, but when you’re a parent, you can’t. You know that. There are no breaks, and it’s exhausting. They have to be the focus, the most important thing, and you still have so much you want to do. I know you want to do this podcast and this commentator job, and I can’t stand in the way of that.” Zander took a step toward me, but I held up my hand. “We’re moving into your house. That won’t be your house anymore in two weeks. I know you said you’d still be here, but that just seems so inconvenient. You were going to move. Get a new start. We’ve been ignoring the reality of our situation, and I think it’s best this way.”

My heart rebelled against me, tearing open at the broken way he looked at me. “, it doesn’t—”

“Yes, it does. It’s okay. I—” I wanted to tell him that I loved him. That I would miss him but none of it felt fair. None of it felt right at that moment. I wasn’t sure what cosmic joke was being played on me. That the first man I would love after my husband died on me would also end with my heart breaking. But I guess I was the one doing the breaking. I didn’t even really know why I was doing it. Why I was forcing it all to end. Trying to push him away, just to save myself any more hurt.

The rain was falling harder now, which just fit my mood perfectly. I moved down the

sandy path, needing to see the ocean. I didn't bring a raincoat. My mind had been busy rehearsing what I wanted to say, so the raindrops fell right into my scalp. The air was warm thick with moisture.

My thighs burned as I made my way up the final hill, tall grass on either side of me, and then I could hear the waves. I stopped for a moment and looked out at the angry sea. The clouds were dark, darker than normal, and I let my feet slide and slip as I moved down the sharp decline. I spotted someone to my right, farther down the beach, but saw no one else. This was where I could cry it out. Zander would take the job. He'd started the summer wanting to move, to start somewhere new, and I don't think that really changed. He was going to leave the small seaside town sometime. My boys needed stability. Someone who could be there reliably.

They needed that guy. I needed him, too.

I stopped in the sand, shoving my hands in the pocket of my sweatshirt, and watched the waves crash against the shore. My hair flew around my head, but I didn't do anything to stop it.

My chest felt terrible. Tight and achy, and I felt a twinge of nausea. But I was going to be okay. I'd felt like this before, even worse than this, when those two police officers had showed up at my door. If I could make it through that, I could make it through losing Zander.

A hand gripped my shoulder, and panic overwhelmed me. I twisted around, Zander's face filling my vision. His skin was slick from the rain, and it felt like a storm raged inside his green eyes. "We were not done talking."

It took all my effort to not touch him, to not throw my arms around him and be held by him. "I don't know what else to say," I said, my voice quiet against the roar of the waves.

“You are not holding me down. The boys are not holding me down, and you seem to be conveniently forgetting that I was a parent to my niece. I know what it’s like to always put someone else before myself. Which is something you’re really good at, almost too good. Because this whole speech, this decision you’ve made for the both of us, is you putting whatever you think I need first.” I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up a hand. “We don’t need to break up. I don’t want that. I just want you.”

I couldn’t tell if I was crying or not, the rain falling down my cheeks. Zander’s hand was still on my shoulder, and I wanted badly to let him pull me closer. “I just can’t let my boys get hurt again.”

Zander let out a breath, his gaze moving out to the horizon. “And why am I going to hurt them?”

He dropped his hand, and I wanted it back. “You’re leaving, moving out, and we’re moving in. You’ve got these awesome jobs coming up. How do we fit in with that?”

Zander met my eyes, and I knew we should have had this conversation before. “It would be one overnight a week during the regular season. It’s not that much time.”

I nodded, fully aware that I was crying now. “And that’s okay. But what happens when you rock, and they want you for this show and that game? It’ll be more than just one night, and I can’t let the boys be strung along. If it was just me, I’d let you string me along for as long as you’d like. But I can’t with them.”

“So, you think the answer is to break up?” he asked, his voice so heartbreakingly sad.

A sob broke through my chest, and Zander stepped closer to me, wrapping his arms around me. I sank into him, relishing in his warmth. I never wanted to forget how it felt to be held by him. The strength of his arms. The hardness of his chest and the



way he nuzzled his face against my head. I'd remember this. The raindrops started to lighten up, and I pushed myself away from him just enough to look up at him. His eyes were glassy, and his hand ran across my cheek. I leaned close, standing on my toes, and pressed my lips as lightly as I could to his. We kissed on the beach for the first time. Why not for the last time?

The thought broke my heart, and I let him hold me. I rested my head on his chest, my hands tightly wound behind his back until the rain had stopped, and all I could hear was the sound of his heart and the crashing of the waves.

### Crash Into Me

The road was dark, and my eyes were heavy. Today had been a blast, even with the conversation Zander and I had last night. He'd slept on the couch, and when we woke up, he was sweet and kind. I felt terrible. But he'd given me a hug and kissed my forehead before telling me we would have a good day.

I wanted to take it all back, but I also wanted to protect my boys. They would get over Zander moving away. They'd miss him, sure, but eventually, it would just become a part of our first summer here. It would be a different story if he moved in with us, became a part of our family, and then left.

We'd played in the river and eaten squeaky cheese. It had felt almost like everything was okay, normal. Even if it wasn't. We were about ten miles from town. I'd insisted on driving, needing to be focused on something. Zander's eyes were closed in the passenger seat, and I glanced in the rear-view mirror, unable to make out anything in the back two rows. Luke was snoring in the very back. I slapped my cheek and turned up the music just a little bit.

We were moving in two weeks. Two weeks, and we'd finally be in our forever home. A house where the boys could call back to memories and always feel like they had a place to come back to.

I glanced over at Zander again. The shadows danced over his face.

There was a moment, well, longer than a moment, when Jack and I were engaged that I thought it wasn't going to work out. He had been offered an incredible internship

opportunity out of the country, and he really wanted to take it. I wanted him to take it. I didn't want to hold him back and I thought we could make it work long distance. He turned it down, but sometimes, he'd bring it up when we were stressed or upset. I always felt like he regretted it. Even though I know he loved me, our life, and the time we had together. A part of him always wondered what if.

I hated that.

But I did that still. What if Jack had left the house five minutes later? What if the other car had been slowed down by something else? What if he'd still gotten in the crash but survived? My mind was a series of what-ifs.

I didn't want it to be that way. Which is why I leaped headfirst into a relationship with Zander. Granted, it took me three years to have the courage to take that step with anybody at all. But I did it. Did I regret it? No, because he was beautiful, and he made me remember that I could be more than just a mom. He made me feel desired, loved, and sexy.

My eyes darted over to Zander for another look, and I saw it too late. Two bright lights coming toward the car. Too fast. Too close.

And then, everything stopped, and all I could hear was the crunch of metal.

### Flashing Lights

Something dripped, and the incessant sound aggravated the pounding in my head. A child's cry, Kingston's, shook me out of whatever daze I was in. "Mommy!" He was screaming and Izzy's head was limp against the steering wheel.

What the hell happened? The passenger side door was illuminated so brightly, and I glanced behind me to see a car shoved into the side of the van. Christian's little head was hanging off to the side, and I panicked. I clicked my seatbelt, turned around, and grabbed his hand. "Christian? Christian?"

He moved his head a tiny bit, groaning. "Is he died?" Kingston asked me, and I saw his terrified eyes.

"No, no." I reached over and grabbed his knee, giving it a squeeze. "He's alive. He's okay."

"What happened?" Kingston sniffled.

"I think we got in a car crash," I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

Without any pause, he said, "Daddy died in a car crash."

"I know."

I turned around and brushed a piece of Izzy's hair out of her face. I didn't know the right thing to do. I reached for my phone in my pocket and dialed 911. Kingston was

whimpering in the seat behind me, and I reached my hand back to him. His tiny fingers held onto mine, gripping me so tightly as I spoke to the female voice who answered the call. I couldn't tell her where we were. I'd been asleep. But she used my cell phone to find us. Now, we just needed to wait.

"I'm going to get out of the car, Kings. But I'm coming over to you, okay?" He was terrified, and I didn't blame him.

The door handle stuck, and I had to shove my shoulder into the door to get it to pop open. My legs were a little bit like jelly when I stepped out. We were in the middle of the road, and it wasn't a curved spot. Thank goodness. The truck that hit us looked older, and it was hard to see the little dirt road it had come out of. Why hadn't the driver seen our van? I walked over to the passenger window and saw a man hunched over the steering wheel. Help was coming, and I needed to get to Kingston. Everything else around us was dark, the headlights illuminating the gravel in front of the van. The driver's side of the van wasn't affected, and Kingston's door slid open with ease. He was wiggling in his seat, stretching his hands out to me with panic on his face. ", hold me, please."

My hands shook as I unbuckled him, his tiny arms flailing in the air. "I'm here, buddy." As soon as I got him free, he locked his arms around my neck, his legs wrapping around my sides. It was at that moment that I saw Luke. His head was resting against the glass of the passenger side window, but it was the blood covering half of his face that made me sick with worry.

No. No. No.

Okay, it was going to be okay. The paramedics were coming. Christian stirred in his seat, and his head popped up. "Mommy!" his voice calling out the same way Kingston had. But Izzy didn't move. It took everything in me to remain calm for these boys, to not shake Izzy with both of my hands until she opened her eyes. I

didn't want to hurt her anymore if she was already hurt. I didn't want to make this any worse. This nightmare.

"Buddy, I'm right here," I said, leaning into the van.

His eyes landed on mine, and tears dripped down his cheeks. "Where's my mommy?"

"She's right here, buddy. It's okay. She's right here, and she's gonna be okay." My voice shook, and I held Kingston tighter, his face pressed into my neck.

"Does anything hurt, Christian?"

"What happened? "

"We got in a car crash, like Daddy!" Kingston cried, lifting his head up just enough to speak.

Christian's face changed immediately, his lip trembling. "It's okay. We're all okay." I reassured him.

The sirens echoed in the distance, and relief rushed through me. They were coming. They would help us so that these boys didn't have to lose anyone else. Christian laid his head back in his seat and began to cry. Not sobbing, not screaming, just a tiny cry that broke my heart all the same.

"I'm going to go stand behind the van, so that I'm not in the road when the ambulance gets here. I'm not leaving, okay?" Christian's eyes were closed as I spoke, but they popped open when I said the word leaving .

"No, don't leave me. Don't leave me, please."

The lights of the fire truck were visible now, shining on the darkness around us. “Okay, I’m right here.”

I leaned into the van as much as I could but kept my eyes on the lights. Everything moved fast once the truck skidded to a stop at the rear of the van. A handful of firefighters rushed over to me, “Can you check out the two in here first? His mother and his uncle are both unconscious.” I tried to speak quietly so as not to alert Kingston.

She nodded and went to the driver’s side. Christian cried, and I leaned into the van, stepping one foot into it so I could reach him better. “It’s okay, buddy. It’s okay.”

Another firefighter came around the back of the van, and I stepped out of the way. “He’s unconscious, in the back seat. But could you check on Christian, too? He seems okay.”

One of them spoke softly to Christian, flashing a light in his eyes and trying to make jokes. My stomach sank at the sight of the firefighter attending to Izzy calling out for help. I waited for the firefighter to clear Christian, and he carried him out of the van. I grabbed onto him, holding him close as the world seemed to close in around us. This couldn’t be happening. This wasn’t happening.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, guys,” I kept saying it over and over as the two boys clung to me. The two boys who were in my life because of Izzy. Izzy who came into my life without any warning and turned everything right side up. Who opened her heart and her boys’ life to me. She’d panicked on our trip, but I wasn’t planning on giving up that easily. I wasn’t going to leave her.

I needed the chance to show her that.

It had to be okay.

Beep

Jack held my hand as we walked on the shoreline. The sun was shining, and the warmth was radiating through my shoulders.

“What are you going to do now?” Jack asked, but something about him was a little different. He was wearing my favorite shirt, this gray Henley that I’d bought him for Christmas last year. I couldn’t remember, but it made his shoulders look so strong.

“What do you mean?” I couldn’t remember what he was talking about, what we’d been talking about just a moment ago.

Jack scrunched up his eyebrows at me and then brought our hands to his mouth, kissing the back of mine with his lips. “I remember the first time I saw you. Do you remember?” I did. He was all lanky limbs and braces. I nodded. “You were such a breath of fresh air that summer. You guys showed up halfway through and man, freshman year had been hell. I was so glad to not be a freshman anymore and I had had my first girlfriend that year. Noelle Thomas, and then I’d found her making out with some loser under the bleachers. I was heartbroken. But I forgot all about her when you came down that hill and onto the beach. You were with your friend; I don’t remember her at all, but your hair was long. Braided so I could see how perfect your face was. And you had on such a cool outfit. Like you looked like you didn’t care what anyone else thought and I loved that about you. I still do.”

Jack’s eyes were glistening with tears, and we had stopped walking; I was just watching him talk. “Why are you crying?” I asked, wiping a tear from his cheek.



He smiled at me and shook his head, “And then I remember seeing you come down that same hill wearing Christian in that gray baby carrier so many years later. Man, I really got lucky. I don’t know how I convinced you to love me. But it was truly the greatest honor of my life.”

“Was?” I was confused.

“You’ve got to go back, Iz.” He put a hand on my face and brushed his thumb against my skin. It sent sparks through my body, and then I heard something beep.

I glanced around us, but nothing was there. Nobody was there. It was just us, alone, on the beach. Beep. “Do you hear that? ”

Jack let go of my hand and stood to face me, placing both of his hands on my shoulders instead. “You’ve got to go back.”

“Back where?” Beep.

He tilted his head to the side, and my eyes took in his face like I hadn’t seen it in ages. Years. The little spot in his left eyebrow where there wasn’t any hair because he’d been cut there as a teenager. The bare spots in his beard that he complained about endlessly, but I loved. It made it just so very him. The way his hair lay to the side at the very front and how soft it was under my fingers. “To the boys. Go.” Jack shook my shoulders, his hands digging into my skin, and the beach went away.

Beep.

The sunny sky was replaced with a blank white ceiling. To my left was a wall with a giant whiteboard and my name in the top right-hand corner. I tried to sit up, my shoulders aching as I moved. “?” Zander’s voice made a shiver rush over my skin, and there he was. Sitting in a little plastic chair to the right of my hospital bed.

The hospital.

The crash.

It came back to me in an instant. I hadn't really been with Jack on the beach but dreaming about him. Dreaming about my sweet husband who was gone. "Are the boys okay?" My next thought was how I needed to see them. That if anything happened to them, I would... I couldn't even finish the thought .

Zander looked tired, his hair a mess, and there were dark circles under his eyes. "They're okay. More than okay. My mom is with them."

"Your mom?" I asked, confused because I hadn't known she was coming.

He nodded and stood, coming to the side of the bed. I reached out for his hand, needing to make sure this was real somehow, and he grabbed onto mine without hesitation. "It was a surprise visit and very well timed since Luke..." He drifted off, and the panic came back.

I pushed myself up on an elbow, my head dizzy. "What about Luke?"

Zander cleared his throat and there was something about his face, his eyes. He was about to cry. "Luke hasn't woken up yet. They think he's going to be okay, though."

I gripped his fingers tighter and closed my eyes. I couldn't lose my brother. "Can I see him? Can your mom bring the boys? How long has it been?" There were so many questions in my head.

Zander leaned over, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "Okay, question for a question. I'm sure they'll let you see him after they check you out. Nothing was broken or severely injured, but you were just in and out of it. A concussion is what

they said. I will call her right after this and have her bring them. They've been enjoying being with her, just so you know. Kingston has been calling her Granny. The crash happened not last night but the night before, so it was about a day and a half." He brushed my hair back on my head, and I never wanted him to stop. I sat up further and patted the bed, needing him to be closer. It was then that I remembered how much I'd pushed him away. I'd been so ridiculous, trying to end things with him.

He sat next to me, wrapping an arm around me, and I nestled my head into his chest. His usual smell was kind of muted like he hadn't sprayed his cologne on for a while, which meant he'd probably been here with me the entire time. He didn't leave. "Do you remember what happened?" Zander's voice was soft.

"I was just driving. Then I looked over at you, and I saw the lights. I don't remember anything after that. Do they know what happened? Is the other car okay?"

Zander ran his hand up and down my back, leaving tingles on my skin. "He was heading out from his house, which is deep in the woods from this little non-descript road. He was searching for something in his glove compartment and didn't look up. Turns out his blood alcohol was over the limit. He is banged up, but the doctors say he isn't too badly hurt."

We sat like that for a moment, and I didn't want to move. I just wanted him to hold me. "Were the boys scared?" I hated that I wasn't able to comfort them because I'm sure they were terrified.

Terrified that the same thing that took their dad from them had happened.

More

She was awake. Thank goodness. I'd spent the last thirty-six hours terrified of what life would look like if she didn't.

But she was up and talking and currently resting against my chest. I held her tight to me and let out a breath before answering her question. The fear in the boys' eyes was something I'd never forget. "They were. Very scared. But I didn't leave them; I held them the entire time and made sure that they didn't see you or Luke get put into the ambulance."

Izzy sniffled and wiped at her cheeks. "Thank you. They love you." Her words warmed my heart, and I knew that it was true. I knew that I loved them so much. They were the best little buddies I could ever dream of having in my life. "I'm sorry," Izzy whispered into my skin.

I squeezed my arm around her back, placing my other hand on the side of her face. "You freaked out, it's okay."

Izzy moved away from me, pulling her head up. "I was freaking out. I felt like I could see you starting this life with us, moving in together, and then getting bored. I just knew that it would be even more heart-wrenching for the boys and for me if you left then." Tears slid down her cheeks.

I wiped away a new tear and smiled at her. "I know. I understand the fear. But I'm not going anywhere. We will make these decisions together about everything, okay?" I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I love you.”

“I love you more,” I said, and she tensed up.

Izzy’s eyes were wide. “What did you just say?”

“I love you more.” I wasn’t sure what was going on. Why she was responding that way.

She wiped at her eyes. “Jack always said that to me.” My heart stilled for a moment, and the air in the room changed. It never felt strange or uncomfortable to have her bring him up. And this, this moment, felt like the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up straight. But not because I was scared but because it almost felt like Jack was here. “He would always say that. Did you know?”

“How would I have known that?” I said, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

We melted into each other and stayed like that for a few moments. It felt so good to hold her, to tell her I loved her again. Knowing that she’d be okay. The door squeaked open, and the nurse who had been here all morning came in, stopping in the doorway when she saw us. “You’re awake,” she said with a pleasant tone, and then she said, “You should have told us the moment it happened.”

I smiled at her, feeling like I was being scolded, probably because I was. “Sorry.”

Izzy let out a deep breath and leaned back in her bed. “Can I see my brother now?”

The nurse tapped on the computer in the corner of the room and flashed Izzy a smile. “After the doctor looks you over.”

I laid another kiss on Izzy’s head before saying, “I’m going to call my mom, okay?”

Her eyes widened, and I knew that's what she needed. To see her boys.

Izzy was glowing. Christian and Kingston were sitting around her, one of them on either side. Kingston had his arms around her neck, and Christian was twisting her hair in his hands. "Mommy, can we see Uncle Luke now?"

They had been ecstatic to see her. While they'd been distracted enough by my mom, they were weepy last night when I put them to bed. Everything felt better now, I mean, not everything. The doctor told us that Luke was being checked on and that they would bring Izzy to him. "I'm going to go check in with my mom, okay? She was on the phone when she brought the boys in."

Izzy smiled and gave me a nod. I stepped out of the room and moved through the hallway, taking two quick turns before pressing the release button on the big double doors. My mom sat in the waiting room, chatting with the young woman she was sitting next to. Typical mom. She found a friend or made a new one wherever she was.

I sat down in the open seat across from her, and she smiled. "Oh dear, this is my son. , this is Claire. She is here waiting on her dad."

"Nice to meet you," I nodded, and the woman said her goodbyes.

My mother picked up her black purse, which she's had for at least a decade, and came to sit next to me. "How is your girl?"

"She's good. Happy to see the boys." I let out a breath of relief, the stress of the last day and a half hitting me hard.

"Those are two sweet boys." She smiled, putting her hand on my forearm. "Well, let me head back to the house and clean up. Or do you want me to just wait for them, to

take them back?”

I put my hand on top of hers. “I can bring them back. I’m sure she’ll want them here for a bit.” I angled my body toward her. “Thank you so much for helping. I know you said it was just a random trip, and mostly to see Dee, but it was seriously perfectly timed.”

“Something told me to come check in on my boy. I wasn’t going to ignore that,” Mom said with a smile, and she pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Call me, okay?”

“I will.” I watched her leave the waiting room, heading down the hallway that would lead her to the parking garage. I took a moment, put my head in my hands, and let the tension roll off my shoulders.

“?” The nurse’s familiar voice broke me out of my moment of solitude, and I looked up, forcing a smile on my face.

“Yeah?”

She put her hands in the square pockets on her dark blue scrub top. “The doctor was going to take Izzy over to see her brother. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to come or not.”

I stood, “I’m coming.” I followed her back toward Izzy’s room, knowing that I was always going to be where Izzy was.

### Brother

His face was basically one big bruise, and that was just one part of what made me sick to look at him. The nurse had stayed behind in my room with the boys, claiming to have something special for them to play with. I didn't think our visit to Luke would be very long, and I didn't think too much could be harmful to them with a nurse around. Zander had told me she'd been with us the entire time.

But Luke looked terrible. His face was bruised, a big angry cut at his hairline was stitched together, and there were tubes coming out from all around him. His arm had them, and there was a big white tube coming out of his mouth. Apparently, he hadn't been breathing well when the ambulance had brought him in.

I held his hand, reaching up from my wheelchair that they'd insisted I use. Zander was behind me, his eyes on the ground. The doctor was standing outside after giving me a very balanced speech about Luke. Balanced in the fact that it was equally grim and encouraging. He had swelling in his brain and stress to his lungs, but he was improving. They thought the swelling was going down, and he guessed that within the week, he'd wake up.

But he didn't know for sure.

My big brother was lying so helpless in front of me. And I couldn't stop myself from picturing Jack in his place. Jack had never made it to the hospital, though. He'd died almost instantly. That's what they told me. But he had probably been banged up, bruised, broken.



It hurt my heart to see my brother lying here just like that. “I should have noticed the truck,” I whispered, almost to myself.

Zander’s hand found my neck, running his fingers over my skin. “Don’t blame yourself. It could have happened to me or Luke, too. It’s not your fault.”

I squeezed Luke’s fingers and then set them back down on top of his brown hospital blanket. “Let’s get back to the boys.”

We didn’t speak as he wheeled me back to my room. The doctor had told me that I had a concussion, and they weren’t sure why I had been unconscious for so long. But they weren’t too concerned. All their tests showed nothing abnormal. I was going to stay one more night and then be released tomorrow.

Zander brought me back to his house, telling me that in a week, it would be mine anyway. I didn’t complain, especially since the boys had been staying there with Zander’s mom.

She was out in the backyard when we came home. I was walking slowly, if only because I felt a bit weak after being in bed for a few days. “Hey, Mom, we’re here,” Zander called out through the open French doors.

She stood up out of the chair on the porch with a book in her hand. Her eyes matched his. Her hair was brown but with silvery shimmers. She had a soft smile on her face, and she stood. Zander wrapped her up in a hug. She stood almost a foot shorter than him.

“This is ,” Zander said as he pulled away, his face blank. It felt strange to be meeting her under this circumstance, with my hospital ID band still on my wrist when she’d been watching over my children for the last few days. “And , this is my mom, LeAnn.”

LeAnn's face lit up, and she held out both hands for me. I grabbed onto them, and she moved me over to the chair. "Come sit with me while Zander makes us something to eat." She threw a look at Zander, who shook his head with a laugh.

Christian and Kingston were playing in the dirt, which, by the looks of the big plastic mixing bowls they had next to them, was probably more mud than anything else. They hadn't noticed me yet, and that was okay. "You've got two great boys there."

"Thank you for watching over them," I told her, twisting so I could see her better.

She rested her hands on her stomach. "It was my pleasure. They're so busy, and it's such a fun age. I remember when Zander and his brother were that little. I thought I was going to drown, like I'd never have a free moment again. Now, I wish I could go back and be with them just for one more day when they were that small."

"I wish I could go back to when Kingston was small. I barely remember that first year. I would go back and just hold him, let him nap on me." My chest burned as I admitted that out loud. It was something that ran through my head regularly, but I hadn't told anyone.

LeAnn nodded. "Did Zander tell you that my husband died when he was a child?"

"He did."

"When my husband died, my whole world fell apart. Zander's older brother, William, was older. But he didn't handle it well. Zander was young enough that we were able to adjust and work together to move forward. But after a number of years, I met someone. He was kind and caring. He loved Zander like my husband would have wanted. But I remember being terrified. I'd lay in bed, and all these horrible scenarios would fill my mind. Him dying in every way and my world imploding all over again." I knew the feeling. I'd had the same anxious thoughts about Zander. The ones

that led to my freakout when we were camping. “I might be speaking out of turn, but it’s okay to be scared of losing him. You just have to decide if you want to push through the fear and enjoy whatever time you get or let it control you.”

I wiped away a tear that fell down my cheek. “He told you I tried to end things?” LeAnn nodded again.

“I don’t blame you. I remember doing something very similar with the first man I loved after my late husband.”

“I don’t know a lot of other widows.”

LeAnn smiled, “It’s quite the club to be a part of.”

Zander came out from the kitchen, and I couldn’t meet his eyes, wondering if he’d heard every word his mom said. He handed me a small blue bowl with some delicious-smelling soup inside.

I cleared my throat, “What brought you over to this coast, LeAnn?”

She smiled and blew over her hot soup, looking over at Zander, who was leaning on the railing of the deck. “Well, this one told me he bought me a house. And I knew that I needed to come say thank you in person. A little voice in my head told me to get on a plane that day, and I did. Here I am.”

“Thank goodness you were here,” I said, taking a small spoonful of my soup. It was delicious, with some warm spices inside.

Christian noticed me and threw his hands in the air. “Mommy! You’re back. ”

I waved at him and loved that he instantly sat back down, getting back to his game.

LeAnn stood. "I'm going to eat my soup inside. Give you two time together."

I smiled at her as she walked back into the house. Zander took her chair, and I couldn't help but take him in. Even with some dark bags under his eyes, he was ridiculously handsome.

I placed the bowl in my lap and cleared my throat. "I freaked out. All I could think about was how you were leaving at the end of the summer. Because we had made these plans, plans that would only happen if you stayed, but I just... We spent every day together, and the boys love you. I was terrified that you'd leave, sick of your fun fling with a widow, and then I'd be left trying to put together those pieces. But I think I made myself more scared about it to justify my choice. You're not that guy; you're not the guy who just leaves. I know that, and I'm sorry that I painted you that way. I love you, Zander, and I haven't felt like that for anyone since Jack. It's terrifying, but I want to try. I want to push past the fear and make this work. I don't care if you take that job and have to travel a couple nights for work. I want you to do what you love and be with us on the other days."

Zander watched me, not moving. I was frozen, afraid that I'd already ruined it. He leaned over the side of the chair and smiled, brushing my hair behind my ear. "I love you, too. And I love Christian, and I love Kingston. In a weird way, I even love Jack for everything he gave the three of you."

My heart swelled, and I pressed my lips to his. It was soft sweet, and it made everything inside me warm. "Look, they're kissing!" Kingston yelled from across the backyard.

It was all going to be okay.

### Moving Day

Everything was a mess. Boxes were everywhere. The boys' rooms were first on the list, and luckily, I didn't really need to worry about any new furniture. Zander came through the front door, Luke carrying a small bag of stuffed animals behind him. "I can carry more than this. This is just embarrassing."

I was going through the stack of boxes that had made their way onto the dining room table. Most of it was my books. I still wasn't sure where all of them were going to fit. "You aren't supposed to be doing anything strenuous or lifting anything heavier than ten pounds. Why don't you sit down on the couch? Or go help the boys organize those stuffed animals," I told my brother and got a nasty glare in return.

Luke had scared us all. But two days after I'd come home from the hospital, he'd woken up. Nothing delayed, nothing was broken, and not forgetting anything. It was a miracle, and he was annoyed from being babied. I understood it, but I really didn't care at this point. It was too much fun. "You're mean," he said but went up the stairs with the bag anyway.

"This is another box of books. How do you have so many?" Zander said, putting the box on the table.

I gave him a sheepish smile. "That question doesn't even make sense." He came over to me, wrapping his arms around my back, and I leaned up on my toes, pressing my lips to his. "Are you ready to have your house constantly busy?"

We were moving in together. Zander's furniture was now our furniture. This place

wasn't just his but ours now. "Very ready. It was too quiet in here anyway." He kissed me again, pulling my body flush with his. I leaned into him, closed my eyes, and let myself relish in the feeling of being held by him. He kissed me again, "Time to go get more of your books."

I watched Zander go and opened the box in front of me that I'd packed up at the house in Colorado. These boxes had sat in storage all summer. There was a crumpled-up piece of brown wrapping paper on top, and as I removed it, my breath caught in my throat.

Underneath it was a stack of books, ones that I instantly recognized. It was my first book, the one that had sold so well after Jack died. But that isn't what I couldn't tear my eyes away from. There was a picture frame on top. My favorite photo inside it. I was holding Christian in my arms, his legs hanging over either side of my pregnant belly. Jack hadn't been gone for a year, just about seven months, when this photo was taken. I had set up my phone at a park where we were having such a good day. I remember it feeling like the first good day we'd had since Jack died.

I wanted to capture it.

And shining behind us, the sun, leaking light all throughout the image. When I'd shown Christian the photo after taking it, he'd pointed to the screen and said, "Daddy!"

Every time I looked at it, I saw Jack. I saw his laughter, his love for us, and the light he brought into our lives.

Seeing that frame, that photo in the first box I opened, made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I closed my eyes and could almost feel him. I could feel all of him loving me from wherever he was and letting me know that he was still with me. That he was happy, I was happy.

I held the frame carefully with both hands as I moved over to the table in the entryway. Zander's frames were all around, but there was a spot in the front that was perfect for it. I set it down, and a tear escaped down my cheek.

How strange it is to be forever in love with someone and be lucky enough to fall in love again.

Thank you, Jack.

### Epilogue

The sun broke through the clouds just in time for Christian's game. He had been bouncing off the walls, ready for the first game of his second season of football. I'd spent all morning going over the plays for the team. Not that they really followed them.

Izzy reminded me again that it was just second-grade flag football, but I wanted them to do well. I wanted them to win.

Coaching Christian's team had become so fun, arguably just as much fun as playing football myself. The boys were so excited, and the one girl on their team was a killer runner. We were going to have a fun season.

Izzy waved at me from the other side of the field. Kingston and she were sitting in matching camping chairs, her hand on her rounded belly. Kingston had his baseball cap pulled down low; he'd forgotten his sunglasses and not been happy when the sun made an appearance.

I set down my clipboard and called the team to a huddle. I knelt in the damp grass and looked in their serious faces. We'd used a little bit of face paint to mark their cheeks, and it just made it even more fun. "Okay, team. We've got this. We know our positions and our plays. But remember, what is the most important thing?"

"To have fun!" they all yelled in somewhat unison.

"Hands in," I told them, placing my hand out in front.



Their tiny hands were stacked on top of each other, and I caught Christian's eye. He smiled at me. "Let's do this."

"Okay, offense. Let's get on the field."

Christian stepped beside me, grabbing onto my hand. "Hey, Zand."

"Yeah, buddy," I stayed where I was.

He threw his arms around me and whispered in my ear, "Thanks for being the best coach and Dad." My heart swelled, and the past year flew through my mind. We'd had our adjustment period to all living together, to the boys learning to respect my word like they did Izzy's. But we'd made progress, and things had become really wonderful.

They were incredibly excited to have another baby brother, and Kingston never called me anything but Dad. I wasn't taking the responsibility lightly, knowing that being there for them was the most important.

"I love you, Christian." I pressed a kiss onto the top of his head. "Let's go win this game."

He smiled and turned, running out onto the field. My eyes landed on Izzy as I followed them out to where they were huddled. She blew me a kiss, and I tried to think back to the beginning of last summer. I was so ready to start over, to escape from this small town, and I'm so glad that I didn't.