



The Last Trip

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Category: Horror

Description: One last trip before the baby gets here...

That's all the getaway is meant to be.

Then the guests arrive.

When Calvin and Sadie decide to spend their babymoon in a remote cabin in the snowy mountains before their first child is due, it's supposed to be a chance for them to connect, relax, and celebrate their future.

Before the vacation even gets started, shocking news leaves the couple reeling. To make matters worse, their arrival at the rental is marked by strange behavior from the homeowners, and Sadie can't shake the paranoia that she's being watched.

When another revelation comes to light that's so distressing it cracks the stable foundation Calvin and Sadie once stood on, everything changes.

Suddenly unable to decide whom to trust and how to move forward, the getaway takes a terrifying turn. Just how safe are they up in the mountains all alone? Someone knows their location, and if the couple can't discover the truth before it's too late, their last trip before the baby arrives might just be their last trip...ever.

The secrets, lies, and betrayals hidden in this sinister domestic thriller from million-copy bestselling author Kiersten Modglin will chill you to your core.

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CHAPTER ONE

HER

I should've known something would go wrong when I broke the mirror this morning. I've been nervous all day—Friday the 13th, and all—but I've been cautious. I kept the salt away from me, so I didn't spill it when I made my omelet for breakfast, I made sure the ladder was tucked safely in the closet, and then...the mirror.

This day makes me jumpy every year, but earlier, when my phone rang from across the room and startled me, sending the curling wand in my hand flying straight into the mirror, the dread that filled my stomach was unlike anything I've ever experienced.

It's just after noon when Calvin walks in the door, and if I didn't already suspect it, the look on his face tells me my problems are just beginning.

He drops his briefcase down on the table with a deep breath and runs a hand over his thinning, dark blond hair. He looks tired and worn down, a reminder of how badly we both need this trip.

“Hey, honey,” I call from the bedroom, studying him down the direct path to the kitchen. I fold the shirt in my hands, place it in the open suitcase on the bed, and make my way across the room, through the living room, and toward him. “What's wrong?”

He scrubs a hand over the back of his neck, looking away. “I, um, I think we might need to cancel the trip.”

My throat is tight as I stare at him. “What? Why?” The trip is our babymoon—a vacation he’s been promising me for months, to make up for the fact that the baby will be here when we should be celebrating our honeymoon.

His emerald eyes find mine, weary and filled with a sadness I don’t understand. “Something’s...come up.”

Story of our lives lately. “What do you mean? Work? You promised me you’d take the extra days off.” My hands move instinctively toward my growing belly. “It’ll be our last chance before the baby’s here.”

“I know.” He licks his lips, looking away. “I know. I just...it’s not work.”

“Then what is it? You’re scaring me.”

His eyes find mine again, and he nods, like he’s confirming something within himself. “I need to tell you something.”

CHAPTER TWO

HIM — BEFORE

The moment she walks into the lecture hall, every part of my body seems to sense her. There is something different about her demure smile, the way she carries herself. She's confident in a way that draws me to her like a magnet. She takes a seat near the back, opens up her laptop, and crosses one leg over the other, so I can see just a bit more leg under her plaid skirt. I suspect she's doing it on purpose. That she wants me to look, to climb her skin with my gaze like a child on a jungle gym.

A boy sits next to her, and I realize I don't recognize either of them. Granted, I don't recognize many students in this class since I've just stepped in to pass a message to Professor Hazelwood, but if I had seen her anywhere around campus, I'm certain I would remember it.

"Is something the matter?" Professor Hazelwood asks, drawing my attention back to her. She's a squat old woman with gray hair that she always piles on top of her head. Today, there's a coffee stain on her white blouse and maroon lipstick applied as if she were riding a donkey when she did it. She's tenured, so I suppose she's my superior, but in every way that matters, she is useless.

"Sorry, no. That was all." I move around to the front of the desk, lingering near it while Professor Hazelwood goes back to sorting a stack of papers. As she does, I study the girl, waiting for her eyes to lock on mine. She's traditionally beautiful, with delicate features and a perfect build. My eyes trace the line of her gold necklace, a single pearl resting on her chest, touching her heartbeat.

How many times has she walked past me in the halls or across the campus? How many times have I overlooked her in such an ordinary place? It feels impossible, and yet it has to be the case. The university isn't enormous. We're one of the smaller ones in the city. Chances are we've stood next to each other in line at the coffee cart or passed side by side in the library.

When it finally happens, when her eyes finally find mine, there's a jolt of electricity that hits me everywhere. Suddenly, she's shy. Her eyes land on mine for just a moment, then dart away as if she's been caught doing something naughty.

Then...they're back. As is her confidence from moments ago.

This time, she straightens a little in her seat, ignoring the boy next to her as he says something.

I tilt my head down just slightly, giving an air of authority with a hint of friendliness. The kind of look that says I'm one of the cool professors. I could be your friend.

And I am. I could. It's not a lie. The students here think of me as one of them. I'm not that much older than most of them anyway—midthirties. It's nothing. A blip.

Her perfect cupid's bow lips upturn with a small smile, and finally, painfully, I drag my eyes away. Behind me, Professor Hazelwood clears her throat as the door slams and the final student makes his way to his seat.

"Welcome, everyone. Let's all get settled down." Her voice is pointed directly at me, warning me to leave, that I've overstepped.

With a nod and a quick glance back her way, something meant to look like an apology, I leave the class. I take the long way, though. Up the stairs, past the girl.

I don't look at her—not much at least. But I don't need to. I have the memory of her face, those eyes, that body, seared into my mind.

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CHAPTER THREE

HER — PRESENT DAY

The air kicks on in the small kitchen, filling the silence with the sound of white noise. Though I hear it, I don't move, don't look over. Instead, my gaze is locked entirely on Calvin and the devastation etched there in his features.

“Okay.” My voice sounds shaky and unfamiliar. No positive conversation has ever started with I need to tell you something and certainly not on Friday the thirteenth. “What is it?”

He rubs his lips together aggressively and takes hold of my arm, nudging me backward. “Let's sit.”

“Let's not,” I snap. I'm tired. My back hurts. My feet hurt. My hips hurt. This baby is pressing on my lungs and bladder in equal measure, and if he's about to take the one thing I've been looking forward to away from me, I'm not going to accept it with a smile. “Tell me right here.”

His thumbs smooth over the skin of my arms, and I grip on to the wooden kitchen chair to my right for support.

“Why can't we go?”

Slowly, with a look that reeks of regret, he drops his hand and pulls out his phone. “I got an email today.”

“From the dean or something? We’ve had this trip planned for over a month now. You said it was already approved.”

Scratching his temple, he looks down at the screen, swiping through it before he looks back at me. “It was...” His eyes search mine, seeking answers I can’t provide. A reassurance I can’t muster in my gut. “Look, I had no idea, okay? When I got to work, I had an email from someone who claims...” Another sigh. A puff of air that feels charged with pain. “She says she’s my daughter.”

Ice water splashes across my skin as I stare at him, processing the impossibility of his words. “Your daughter.” It’s all I can bring myself to utter.

He nods. “I guess she found me through the university. I had no idea...” He trails off, and I’m not sure how he was planning to finish that sentence.

“You had no idea she existed or no idea she’d contact you?” I glare at him. If I was talking to my mother, she’d say this is the sort of thing you get when you jump into a relationship with someone you hardly know, but I do know Cal. I know who he is. I know how he loves me.

A year ago, I met him in class, and there was an instant connection. Getting pregnant so quickly wasn’t exactly in the plan, but I wouldn’t change it now. At least if you’d asked me seven minutes ago, that’s what I would’ve said.

Now, I don’t know what to think. Everything feels different. Wrong. Ruined, somehow.

“I had no idea she existed.” He smooths a hand across my back. “I swear to you.”

“But you believe her? You think she’s telling the truth?”

He looks down, running his tongue over his bottom lip. When he looks back up, his nod is subtle. “Her story lines up, yes. There was a girl I dated back in high school, but we lost touch after graduation. I left for college, and she stayed in our hometown. She...” He runs a hand through his hair. “She tried to call me a few times, but once I was in school, I thought the best thing to do was have a clean break. I knew I was never going back there, and I didn’t want to make her think there was a chance for us.”

Reminiscing on his past relationship is about as comfortable as washing my face with sandpaper, but I push forward with the questions anyway. “And where is she now? Have you spoken to her? Confirmed that this girl’s story is even true?” Briefly, an image flashes through my mind—a snapshot in time of our future wedding, his ex sitting in the front row, next to a daughter neither of us knew anything about. How can this be possible? “The woman? Did you try to reach out to her? The girl’s...mother.” My hand goes to my stomach again as I feel our daughter kick. Suddenly, what once seemed so intimate and special about our relationship has been wiped away as quickly as chalk on a chalkboard. A distant memory. Moments ago, I had the unique privilege of carrying his child. Now it’s possible someone else had that privilege first.

With a long breath, he reveals, “No, she, um, she died. But before she passed, she showed the girl pictures of me, told her about me, I guess. And, now that she’s older, she decided to find me. She’s living in Nashville now, too, actually. She said she wants to get to know her father.”

I suck in a sharp breath, processing everything he’s told me in such a short time. “She died.”

He nods, his lips drawn into a tight line. “Yeah. Several years ago, apparently. When the girl was young. I hadn’t heard, but I looked up her obituary after the girl—um, Janelle —after Janelle told me. It’s true, from what I can tell.”

“Janelle is...the daughter? Your daughter?”

His nod, the truth in it, shatters my heart. “I’m so sorry.”

I know sitting with your feelings and being open about everything is all trendy and hip now, but honestly, I’m not that person. I hate being sad. I hate crying. I hate dealing with my feelings in any way if I can avoid it. It’s not totally healthy, I get that, but it’s always served me well until this pregnancy, which seems to have taken the reins on my emotions, forcing me to be vulnerable in a way I never have. Still, I force away the sadness bubbling in my gut like a shaken can of Sprite.

Really, what does he have to be sorry for? It’s not like he lied. This isn’t an affair. He didn’t know any more than I did, but still, I feel betrayed. When his hand reaches forward for my arm, I jerk away on instinct. “What are you going to do?”

“I...” He pauses, rebounding from the retraction. “I don’t know, I guess. I wanted to talk to you before I did anything.”

“But you don’t want to go on vacation anymore, so clearly you’ve made that decision on your own.”

His face wrinkles as he leans toward me, struggling to understand. “I assumed you wouldn’t want to.”

“This is the last trip before the baby comes. And once the baby’s here, we won’t have time for a trip for just the two of us for a long time. No honeymoon. Nothing. I don’t know what the rest of this will mean. I need time to process, but if we’re going to do it, I want to go on the trip that we planned. We can’t let this derail everything. We both said we need this vacation.”

The wrinkles on his face smooth out as he processes what I’ve said. “You still want

to go? Together?”

I don't know. The truth is I don't know anything, but I refuse to let her win like this. I refuse to hand him over just because this daughter has come out of nowhere to disrupt our lives.

Our daughter deserves his attention, as do I. “Yeah. I do.”

He leans forward to kiss my lips, and I let him, though it's unenthusiastic.

“And I want to meet her,” I tell him. “Before the baby, but after the trip.”

“Whatever you want.”

It's funny, though. I don't want any of this.

CHAPTER FOUR

HIM — BEFORE

The coffee shop is buzzing with students milling about, chatting over their laptops and mugs of fancy drinks. On average days, I avoid this place like the plague. My spot is across town. They play normal music, offer sizes in plain English, with flavors and varieties that sound like words you might've heard before, and have lights that actually work and aren't strangely dim for inexplicable reasons.

Today, I'm here. For her.

She's here because why the hell wouldn't she be? It's where the cool kids go, where they hang or chill or whatever they do these days. It doesn't take long for me to scan the crowd and find her sitting at a table with two other girls her age.

I cross the coffee shop slowly, the plan still coming together in my head. When I reach the table where she's sitting, my hip bumps it. The move is gentle enough it could be an honest accident.

If I were an honest man.

So I stop, like any gentleman would do. "Oh. Oops. Sorry about that." I smile at the girls as they grab their drinks, careful they don't spill on their laptops. I place my hands on the table, steadying it. "Everyone okay?"

They nod in unison, uttering various versions of niceties to let me know there's no

lasting damage. I take my time studying each of them. They're lovely, truly. In that way that screams youth.

I'm not exactly decrepit, okay? Just a decade-ish older than they are, but there is something vast that separates us. A lifetime of lived experiences. They still think they have all the time in the world, but I know I no longer do.

I smile at the three women—each one pretty, but not as pretty as the one. My eyes find her last, landing on her lazily as if I'm not really paying attention and can't be bothered to care about her.

When I do, she's staring at me. Hard.

As if she's just been waiting for me to find her. As if she's been waiting for this exact moment, where our paths would cross again outside of the classroom. Outside of the university.

As if...

As if she doesn't recognize me at all, but she wants to.

"Hi," she says, breathless. Has she been thinking about me as much as I've been thinking about her? Or is it possible she doesn't realize who I am? It's hard to be offended when the opportunities this provides just became so clear.

"Hi." I hold out my hand toward her. "I don't think we've met, but I'm sorry for the spill. May I buy you a new drink?"

She takes my hand slowly, and I wait for her to correct me, to ruin everything by telling me she knows exactly who I am, but she doesn't. Instead, her perfect lips press together with a grin just before she says, "Actually..." She glances at the tiny spill on

the table—not nearly enough to warrant a new drink—and returns her gaze to mine.
“That sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER FIVE

HER — PRESENT DAY

The car ride to the cabin is mostly quiet. I turn my music on shuffle, but even when my favorite songs come on, I can't bring myself to sing along. Everything feels scrambled, as if the puzzle we've just finally finished working on, meticulously putting together piece by piece, has been smashed by a pair of fists in a split second. As if the beautiful picture I had for our life now lies with corners here and edges there.

This trip was supposed to be special. Beautiful. Romantic. Instead, it's forever tainted. I don't know that there is any way to recover from this, but what does that mean for the child growing in my stomach right now? Will this family be broken before she's brought into it? Will she never get to see the beautiful puzzle I crafted for her?

I meant what I said earlier—I understand this isn't Calvin's fault. Or, rather, there's no one to blame. I understand that he hasn't done anything wrong, but it hurts all the same. I feel as if something priceless has been stolen from me, and it's impossible it will ever be returned.

Is it selfish to wish the daughter had never come forward? That we'd been allowed to live in blissful ignorance for the rest of our lives? Foolish, perhaps, but preferable.

What is she hoping for anyway? She's grown. Twenty-five or so, from what Cal has said. Is she actually looking for a father figure? Why? We have no money, no

resources to share. We're strangers to her. We could be awful people.

At the same time, some smaller part of me wants to see things from her point of view. As someone who grew up without a father, I would've given anything to know him, even if I were to only be given the chance as an adult. It's not her fault she didn't get this opportunity until now. The rational part of my brain knows that we never stop wanting our parents, needing to understand where and whom we come from. But I'm not feeling so rational right now. I'm just feeling hurt and alone.

I fight against the tears stinging my eyes, feeling angry and exhausted and devastated and selfish all at once. I hate what this revelation has done to my stability, both in my life and in my head. I feel as if I'm standing on steadily cracking ground, as if everything I knew this morning when I woke up has been torn away from me, crumbled as easily as a piece of toast.

I don't want to be this woman. You always think you'd be better. Stronger. That you'd react better than the woman you're watching go through it. That you'd say he should have a relationship with his surprise daughter, that he absolutely should do whatever he feels is right, and you'll be here no matter what. The rock. The stable ground.

But believing it and doing it are two different things, and right now I'm incapable of maintaining a shred of dignity. I only want to curl up and cry, to let my mother console me as she so often did when I was a child.

That's one of the most painful parts of all of this. Doing the pregnancy without her has been hard enough, and that's not to mention the upcoming wedding and the birth of her grandchild. Now I long for another conversation. At least one that's not one-sided.

I can talk and talk as much as I like, but it's been nearly a year since my mother

recognized me. Most days she thinks I'm her sister, Wendy, who passed away before her sixteenth birthday. Some days she thinks I'm a nurse in her care home.

It doesn't get easier. Some small part of me always hopes she'll recover—that she'll defy the odds and come back from this. That one day I'll walk into her room at the nursing home, and she'll smile up at me and say my name, apologize for being gone for so long, and swear to me she'll never leave again. I dream that she'll hold her first grandchild, that she'll walk me down the aisle like we've always talked about her doing, that she'll be here for the important moments that remain.

But it's just a pipe dream. An impossibility as realistic as Calvin telling me this whole thing with his long-lost daughter is a joke.

As if she can sense my sadness, our daughter kicks me, and I can see the ripple of movement under my skin through my shirt. It's as if she wants to remind me that I'm not alone. That we're in this together. Us against the world.

I glance over at Cal, the man who was supposed to be different, who was supposed to show me the perfect example of a father for our daughter when I never had one to look up to. Suddenly, the sheen that once radiated off of him has dimmed.

Suddenly, he's looking less like my perfect fiancé and more human than ever before.

The dark roads are blanketed in a thin layer of white snow, the dark lines our tires carve into the white being covered just as fast as they appear. I knew from watching the weather there would be light snow in Tennessee today, nothing really to worry about, but that doesn't make the ascent up the mountain any less terrifying.

Seeming to sense my fear, Cal reaches across to my seat and takes my hand. I'm too nervous to even try to pull away from him.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you. It’s just snow,” he says, with that charming smile on his lips like I’m being foolish. “It’s not slick.”

“I told you we should’ve come yesterday, before the snow set in.” I’ve been watching the weather all week, worrying about the storm coming in despite Cal’s insistence we would be fine.

“We couldn’t get the cabin early. I never heard back from the owners. Besides, I had class.”

“I know.” I huff a breath. “I know. I just...you know I hate driving in the snow.”

He squeezes my hand, his voice so calm and soothing it almost works to ease my fears. “We’re nearly there. Just close your eyes. Trust me.”

Trust. That word hits me as if he’s torn open a newly scabbing wound with his bare hands. It stings in a way it never has before.

I can’t do that. I can’t trust him, and I can’t trust this stupid mountain. I certainly can’t close my eyes. Somehow, that is so much worse. Instead, I grip the door handle with one hand, my feet firmly on the floor, and brace myself as we top the hill we were just climbing and round the curve.

“There she is.” His voice is soft and whimsical as the cabin comes into view. The home is quaint. A single floor with tall ceilings visible through the large windows that cover the entire front of the place. The rest is as you’d expect—amber logs and an oversized porch with a hot tub. It’s nestled in among the trees, with no other cabins in sight, delivering on the promise the owners made of total privacy.

I have to admit as we pull up, I seem to have forgotten all about the snowy roads and treacherous drive. All of my worries seem to be flickering out, replaced by a new

sense of excitement. How long did we plan for this trip? How long did we study listings, obsessing over every detail until we found the right one?

I won't let any of the rest of it worry me, simple as that. We're here to enjoy ourselves, and that's exactly what we're going to do.

Even as I say the words to myself, the promise feels flat and lifeless. It feels like a lie.

CHAPTER SIX

HIM — BEFORE

The first time is easy. I walk away from her table after replacing her drink, leaving enough of an impression to be unforgettable without being desperate.

The next day, I'm back. This time I don't need to bump into her table or try any other trick to catch her attention. This time I have it right away.

The second I walk in the door, I find her. To my pleasant surprise, she's already watching me. I smile and wave. Casual. Cool. Unaffected.

Without lifting her elbow from the table, she waves back. Just her fingers. Her lips curve upward with a small smile.

I cross the coffee shop, zigzagging through the long line on my way to her. "Fancy seeing you here," I tease.

"I'm here every day."

"Is that so?"

She tilts her cup toward me. "We work here, so we get everything for half off." Her eyes narrow at me, crinkling near the corners endearingly. "Funny thing is, I don't know that I've ever seen you in here until yesterday. You don't exactly fit the vibe." She gestures around.

I grin. “Yeah, I just happened to be in the neighborhood yesterday. Lucky me.”

Her dark brow quirks. “Lucky, hmm?”

“That I’ve made a new friend who can give me discounted coffee.”

It takes her a second to process what I’ve said, but once she has, she purses her lips with a quick shake of her head. “You’re going to be trouble, aren’t you?”

“Only if I’m lucky.” I place my hand on the table, waiting to see if she’ll send me away. “Where are your friends, by the way?”

She points across the room, toward the counter. “Mei is working, and Ava had an early class.”

“Class? Oh, you’re students?” I ask, feigning surprise.

She nods slowly. “Yeah. Are...you? I feel like I’ve seen you somewhere.” I can’t tell if she’s testing me to see if I’ll lie, but I will. I have to. It’s not time yet.

“No, no. Not a student.”

Not technically a lie. I’m proud of myself.

“Can I ask you something?”

She smiles, glancing down. “You just did.”

“Can I ask you something else?”

One shoulder rises with a shrug. “I don’t see why not.”

“Would you like to go out with me? Tonight?”

Her eyes dance between mine as I hold my breath, trying to read the rejection or acceptance before it comes. “Well, look at that. Guess you’re lucky after all.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

Cautious of the snow and possible ice, Calvin helps me up the stairs of the cabin, across the front porch, and inside before he returns to the car for our bags.

I slip my coat off, hanging it on the back of one of the dining room chairs as I look around. The place has clearly been cared for, despite being a vacation rental for those of us who need an escape from the city.

It reminds me vaguely of my home as a child. The furniture doesn't match, and the decor is homey and simple, with wooden plaques of painted reminders to 'Enjoy the little moments' and that 'Together is the best place to be.' There's a concrete statue of a cocker spaniel next to the fireplace in the living room, and the recliner and two sofas look worn but clean.

It's the kind of home I always imagined raising my children in, though our home now feels more polished and less warm than this one. Calvin cares about keeping up appearances, and to be fair, the apartment is very neat and tidy, even if it feels a bit cold. A baby will change all of that. Soon, our white counters will be decorated with brightly-colored bottle racks and burp cloths, and our perfectly matching furniture will be mixed in with bouncers and rockers and playpens. Everything will change, and then it will feel right.

The door shuts behind me as Cal pushes the suitcases forward on their wheels and shivers dramatically. "Well, what do you think?" He pulls off his coat and hangs it on

the chair next to mine before slipping a cautious arm around me. He doesn't know if we're okay yet, but the truth is, I don't either. Soon, I hope we'll be able to talk about it, but I don't think I'm ready yet.

I just wish he'd say something. Something to reassure me that we're still going to be okay, that we're in this together, and he's not going to lose focus on our family to explore this new, unexpected one.

If I ask for that, though, I worry he'd give it to me unauthentically to place a bandage over the wound. I'll always question whether he actually means it unless he brings it up himself.

"It's really nice. Just like the pictures." I lean my head against his shoulder—a truce.

"Perfect." I feel his lips press against the top of my head before he releases me, crossing the room slowly to take it all in. He runs a hand over the top of the couch before his hands go into his pockets, and he moves to stand in front of the window. With a deep sigh, he glances back at me. "At least we have a good view for the next few days, hmm?"

Before I can answer, I hear a sound coming from one of the bedrooms. My stomach tenses as he looks back at me, eyes full of concern.

"What was that?"

"I don't know." The baby kicks, seeming to sense the panic currently coursing through my veins. Is someone else in the house?

Cautiously, with a look of warning that tells me to stay still, Calvin moves toward one of the doors to his left. "Is someone there?" he calls, his voice steady but an octave higher than usual. He reaches the door and holds out a hand for the doorknob,

turning it slowly. Once it's turned, he shoves the door open and peers inside.

He looks back at me, and I realize I've been holding my breath. "Anything?"

He shakes his head, then his eyes lock on something over my shoulder, and I spin around just as the sound comes again, this time from behind me.

Through the glass window of the door, I spot an older couple smiling at me. My heart skitters at the same time I realize what's happening. The sound earlier didn't come from the bedroom, it came from the driveway. Someone shut a car door. This couple shut their car door.

"Oh." I'm still standing frozen staring at the couple when Calvin zips past me. They look to be in their sixties or seventies. She's thin with long, wild silver hair and bright blue eyes. Her face is gaunt, with papery skin. Next to her, he feels hardened, his face a deep tan, with long, gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. Underneath his brown canvas coat, he's wearing a button snap shirt.

Cal pulls open the door, but not enough that they could enter. "Can I help you?"

We're supposed to be alone up here on this mountain. Why would they be here? Who are they in the first place? Why are they bothering us?

The woman smiles, her dry lips parting to reveal gray teeth. From inside the house, I realize she looks vaguely familiar. Do I know her from somewhere? Perhaps I saw her photo on the listing for this place, but I don't think so. "Well, hello there. We were hoping to get here before you arrived and drop this off." She gestures toward the man next to her, toward something I can't see in his hands. "Better late than never, I suppose."

"Oh, wow." Cal releases the door and leans forward, and I hear something

crinkling—like Christmas wrapping—as I step forward. As he steps back, I spot the oversized gift basket in his arms. His eyes flick to meet mine, then return to the couple. “What is this?”

“It’s just a little something to welcome you. Some local jams and candies, a bottle of wine.” Her eyes land on me with a chuckle, and I’m still studying her, trying to decide why I know her face. “Though I can see that won’t be of much use to you.”

“This is very kind of you,” Cal says, still awkwardly holding the basket in his arms. “You’re the owners, I’m assuming?”

“I’m Norma, and this is my husband, George.” Her eyes travel over us slowly, clearly waiting for us to introduce ourselves.

“Um, right.” Cal steps back and places the basket on the table, before turning toward me. “I’m Calvin, and this is my lovely fiancée, Sadie.”

“Fiancée, hmm?” The woman’s eyes bounce to my stomach with obvious judgment. “When’s the wedding?”

I’m not totally convinced this isn’t all a nightmare, that I haven’t fallen asleep in the car on the way here. Why won’t they just leave? Why do they both keep staring at me so intently? Every hair on my neck stands at attention, and I can feel their gazes crawling across my skin like spiders.

“Uh, well, we’re still deciding.” He crosses the kitchen and puts an arm around me, sensing my discomfort. “But we just arrived, and we’re getting all settled in, so thank you for letting us stay in your beautiful home and, if you don’t mind...”

“Oh. Of course,” the woman says, though she makes no effort to leave or even to spare a glance toward the door. “Where did you say y’all are from, anyway? Was it a

long drive?”

“Nashville,” Cal says, his voice as pleasant as ever, as if they aren’t completely disregarding our request that they leave. This place was supposed to support self-check-in. There’s no reason for them to be here in the first place. “So not too far at all.”

“Oh, we love Nashville.” She grins at her husband, who nods sternly. “Don’t we, George?”

“Used to, anyway.” His response is gruff.

“Well, that’s true, I suppose. The city isn’t what it used to be. We actually have a home just outside of there, but with a few cabins here, we stay on the mountain more often lately.” The woman’s smile goes stiff. “Now, are you sure there isn’t anything we can get you? Have you checked to make sure there are enough blankets in the closets? This place can get a bit drafty.”

“Yep.” Cal claps his hands together. “There were plenty of blankets. Thanks.”

“And the fridge? What about food? You know, I just had the best idea. What if you two came to our place for dinner? I’m sure you won’t want to cook after the drive here, and we’re happy to have you, aren’t we, George? We just never get guests anymore. It wouldn’t be any trouble at all.”

“Oh, that’s okay. We brought plenty of food with us,” Cal says. “Lots of easy, quick stuff to get us by just in case, but I actually like cooking, so I’m sure we’ll manage something.” He rubs his hands together, growing visibly impatient. “I think we’re all set.”

She moves over to the stove, dusting her hand across the top of it, then gestures

toward the microwave. “Do you know how to work the microwave? It’s not as simple as it looks, not like the new ones.” She twists a knob on the front as the numbers on the screen bounce up by thirty seconds at a time.

“We’ll figure it out, I’m sure.” Now, Cal’s voice is a bit more strained. He doesn’t like being made to feel dumb.

The woman clears off the time she’s added and turns back around. “Well, I guess that’s all you need from us, then. If anything comes up, and I mean anything at all, you just call or come and get us, okay? We’re the only cabin nearby for quite a ways. We don’t sleep well, so we’re always awake, and our number’s right there on the refrigerator.” She points to the fridge where a list of all of the local numbers is located. “Or just come on by. Like I said, we love visitors. We’re just around a mile down the mountain, straight that way.” She points toward the window on her left, down the driveway. “You can’t miss it. If you call, and we don’t answer, we might be out on the porch or something. So, you just come right on down, okay?”

“Yes. Yes. Thank you. That’s all very kind, but I’m sure we’ll be okay.”

She sighs. “Okay. If you’re sure. Is there anything else you think you might need? We put some salt for the driveway on the porch for the snow and ice. Those steps get slick, let me tell you. But you just sprinkle it around. Melts it right up.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Honestly, though, I don’t think we’ll leave the house. We have everything we need right here. Sadie’s a planner. She has it all under control, I promise,” Cal teases, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and squeezing. He’s lying—I’m not the planner, he is—but I guess it’s a better trait for a woman to have in his eyes, so I don’t argue.

Norma looks at her husband, who nods and says, “We should get home.”

“Well, if you do need anything...” She’s staring at me as she says this, studying my stomach, almost as if she’s in a trance. “If you need anything at all, you just let us know, okay?”

“Great. Will do.” Cal drops his arm away from me and moves to open the door. “You guys get home safe now, okay?”

Slowly, the couple comes together. She slips her hand in his, and with one final look my way, they’re out the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HIM — BEFORE

We've been seeing each other for three weeks when everything goes wrong. Four dates, plus phone conversations, and I think our fifth will finally get her in my bed. I'm right there—so close I can taste her already—when it happens.

We're at an Italian place for dinner across town. Far enough away from the university I'm not worried about being seen.

That's the problem, though—not worrying. It always seems to be what gets me into trouble. If I don't plan, I don't think everything through, and things fall apart.

“I don't see how anyone could think it's a bad show,” she says playfully. “It's one of my favorites.”

“Some people just have bad taste.” I wink at her, and she kicks me under the table, her jaw slack with obvious delight in her eyes.

“I can't believe you just said that.” She laughs.

I shrug one shoulder, taking a bite of my baked ziti. The pasta is getting cold now from all the talking, but it's worth it. In this dimly lit restaurant, she's especially alluring.

“Besides.” She twirls her fork through her spaghetti slowly, eyes locked on mine. She

knows exactly what she's doing. "What does that say about you if I have bad taste?"

"Are you saying you chose me?"

It's her turn to shrug. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Fair enough. And let me tell you, I?—"

"Professor?" a husky voice asks from behind me. I freeze, every muscle in my body going tight.

No.

No.

No.

If I ignore them, pretend I didn't hear a thing, will they go away? Is there a chance they'll think they have it wrong and disappear?

Across from me, she seems to sense something is wrong, and I have no idea what I was planning to say or what we were even talking about. Slowly, to my right, I see the person creeping around the side of our table.

Even without looking directly at him, I know who he is. Tyler Edmonson, a student taking my class this semester. My eyes flick up to meet his slowly, regrettably, and his face alights like a firework.

"I thought that was you! Hey, I had a question about the assignment from Tuesday. I emailed you, not sure if you got it?—"

I hold up a hand, cutting him off. "I'll get back with you during office hours. As you can see, I'm on my personal time right now."

Tyler's eyes go wide, then dart from me to her and back. "Oh, shoot. Right. Sorry. Okay." He holds his hands up, retreating and nearly running into a waiter. "Sorry about that."

Once he's gone, I turn my attention back to her slowly, waiting to see how she'll react.

She leans back in her chair, studying me. "Who was that?"

I swallow. "A student."

"Your student?"

I blink, not responding. Trying to decide how to respond.

"You lied to me."

"No, I didn't. You asked if I was a student, and I said I'm not, which is the truth. I'm not a student."

"You should've told me you were a professor. You know I'm a student. I'm on a scholarship. If we get into trouble, I could lose everything." She gathers her napkin, wadding it up and moving to stand.

"Wait! Wait!" I stand too, holding up my hands to stop her from leaving. "Please."

When she hesitates, I go all in. "I would never let that happen, okay? I swear to you, I wouldn't. I wasn't trying to trick you. Will you just hear me out?"

She's quiet for a long while, staring around, refusing to look me in the eye.

“You're a student, but you aren't my student. It's not against the rules, and even if it were, no one will find out if that's how you want it to be. I can take care of you, take care of this. I just need you to trust me.”

She looks back at me with the single longest pause I've ever been forced to wait through. Entire conversations must be happening inside her head, conversations I'm not privy to, though I wish I was. If she'd let me in, I could help her understand. Finally, she rolls her eyes, looking away. If I'm reading her correctly, I don't think she's angry anymore. “Couldn't you lose your job?”

Relief floods me as I suck in a deep breath, a smile playing on my lips. “It's possible. What if I said you're worth the risk?”

CHAPTER NINE

HER — PRESENT DAY

“So, my love, what are you craving for dinner?” Cal asks, sneaking up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist to touch my stomach as we finish putting away the groceries. He’s always doing that—holding us both. His hands cradle my bump as he nuzzles into my neck.

“Hmm, I was thinking something easy tonight. We can just snack if you want.”

He turns me around to face him. “Absolutely not. I’m going to cook whatever your heart desires.”

I chuckle. “Oh, is that right?”

He nods, easing me toward him with that sly smile I love so much. “You asked for a vacation, and that’s what you’re going to get.”

“But it’s your vacation, too,” I remind him, pulling his hand to my lips and kissing his fingers. They’re long, lean, and soft as they brush my cheek. “You deserve to rest.”

His hand goes to my stomach again. “I will have plenty of time to rest once you and baby girl have been fed.” After pressing a kiss to my nose, he tugs on my hands, pulling me toward the couch. “Now, why don’t you sit down, get off your feet, and let me handle the rest of the evening?” He lifts my feet, placing them on the coffee

table carefully.

“We still have to unpack,” I remind him, though I’m in no hurry to move, if I’m being honest. Now that I’m still, I’m more in tune with the dull throbbing in my lower back and the aching of my feet. Maybe Cal’s right. I have a tendency to overdo things and not listen to my body, though this pregnancy has tried to force me to change that.

“We can unpack later.” He holds my foot, running his thumb over the spot that aches the most, as if he can sense it. “Right now, all I want you to think about is relaxing.”

I close my eyes on command and drop my head back against the couch, thinking of nothing except the way his hands feel. A smile creeps onto my lips, and I hear him sigh as he moves to sit on the coffee table, switching from one foot to the other.

I’ve nearly been lulled to sleep when he slows down, then stops. Carefully, he places my feet back on the table and stands, kissing my forehead and whispering, “Now then, I’ll get you some warm tea and dinner, and we’ll get this vacation started, hmm?”

I hum in agreement, eyes still closed. “We could order pizza.”

“Pizza?” His voice is low and husky, as if I’ve suggested something for the bedroom, not the kitchen.

I nod.

“Pizza it is, then.” He kisses my head again before I hear him moving into the kitchen. He’s opening cabinets and moving things around as he says, “I brought canned sauce, so it might not be as good as I make at home.”

“Cal,” I chide, “just order pizza. You’re on vacation, too.”

He clicks his tongue. “Taking care of you relaxes me.”

I smile to myself. He’s a good man. He’ll be a good husband and a good father. I’m one of the lucky ones here, and everything that has happened today almost made me forget it.

When I open my eyes, the world around the cabin has begun to get dark, making it so I can just make out the shadow of the tree line up ahead. From here, it’s as if nothing else exists in the world. Just us. Our family. I look back over the couch to see Cal pulling the premade dough out of the package. At home, he makes everything from scratch when possible, so I know even this concession is a bit of a vacation for him.

Still, I could relax more if I knew he was relaxed.

I stand slowly, and Cal looks up to protest, but I stop him. “I’m okay. I just want to take in the view.”

One corner of his mouth upturns as he stares at me. “Best one in the world.”

I drop my head, shyness suddenly overtaking me. I’ve never felt like the most beautiful person in any given room, or the most desirable, but Cal changed all of that. He makes me feel seen and wanted and loved in a way no one ever has.

Turning away from him, I cross the room to look out the oversized windows into the dark woods surrounding us. It’s quiet here, the snow blanketing the trees and the ground. On the porch, I spot the hot tub covered in snow. There are footprints across the porch, both human and cat from the looks of it. I hope the cat has made it somewhere warm by now.

I can't help wondering if we'll be the type of family who has a pet someday. Though I have no experience with them, I think I'd like a cat. A puppy feels like too much work with a baby, but perhaps...

A sigh rushes out of my lungs. If I'm being honest with myself, I can't imagine Cal ever agreeing to a pet. He likes cleanliness and order too much.

Then again, maybe this baby will change him. The smile is back, and I feel it radiating from deep inside of me. This little girl is going to have her daddy wrapped around her finger.

This pregnancy wasn't planned, and in the beginning, it wasn't necessarily wanted, but now I'm so grateful to Cal. He's going to be everything a father should be, and our daughter will have the sort of childhood I dreamed about when I was growing up alone in my room while my mother worked all hours of the day and night. When babysitters came and went through what felt like a revolving door. I longed for permanence, for someone who knew my favorite foods, what I liked to play, how I needed to be comforted when I was sad or sick or tired.

My mom tried, but it wasn't the same. She was just one person, one parent, and most kids I knew had two.

You will have two, I promise my daughter. No matter how this happened, I've given you that.

A sudden flicker of movement catches my attention near the edge of the house, ripping me from my thoughts. At first, I wonder if it's an animal—a deer, most likely—but then I see their faces.

The couple from earlier. The homeowners.

My heart skips a beat, my mind trying desperately to make sense of this. Why would they be standing outside the house? What are they doing out in the snow? To get to where they are, they'd have to walk around the house and through the woods to reach the small area of yard space.

I suck in a shaky breath, and almost as if they'd heard me, their heads slowly turn. Before, they were looking at each other, their heads slightly covered by the hoods of their coats, but now they're looking directly at me.

For several seconds we just stare at each other, frozen in a moment of fear on my part. I have no idea what they want or what they will do. I blink, trying to find my voice. "Cal."

He doesn't hear me, though, humming to himself as he works in the kitchen chopping something. I open my mouth, speaking louder and not breaking eye contact with them. "Cal."

Behind me, his humming stops. "Did you say something?"

"Come here."

The man looks at the woman, then back at me. Can they read my lips? Did they understand what I said?

"Babe?" Cal calls, still no closer to me.

"They're outside. Watching us." Chills line my skin as the reality sinks in. How long have they been there? Why are they there? What do they want?

Finally, I hear his footsteps moving toward me, and I glance over my shoulder at him.

“What did you say?” he asks, brows drawn down.

“The homeowners. They’re—” When I turn back, the couple has disappeared. My heart sinks. It’s as if they were never there. I peer at the space in the snow where their footprints are located, but it’s covered in tracks from both people and animals and offers no actual proof of anything. “Gone.” I swallow as Cal’s hands come to grip my shoulders.

“What’s the matter?”

“They were standing out here,” I tell him again. “We made eye contact.”

He leans closer to me as if he still might not have heard. “What do you mean? They were just standing out in the yard?”

“Yes. Over there by the edge of the house.” I point toward the spot. “When I walked up, I noticed them. I’m not sure how long they’d been there. When they realized I’d seen them, they walked away.”

“Maybe they were checking something.” He stares out into the yard. “Like, I don’t know, a bird feeder or a spigot cover or something.”

I move past him without a plan, hurrying toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

I slip on my shoes and whip open the door to step outside, but as I do, my foot hits a patch of ice on the porch. I didn’t even realize Cal was behind me until I feel his arms catch me. My weight slams into his chest, knocking the wind from my lungs. “Careful,” he warns, helping me to steady myself. “Are you okay?” He looks me over, but I’m not looking at him. I’m looking for them.

Where did they go?

I don't dare take another step forward.

"Sadie," he says, frustrated.

Finally, my attention falls back to him. "Sorry. What?"

"Are you okay?" His hands are on my arms. "You scared me. You could've fallen."

"I'm...I'm okay." I blink away the fog from my eyes, focusing on him as he pulls me inside with a worried look on his face. "I just, I could've sworn..."

He shuts the door behind us, cutting off my fears. "Let's get you inside before you get hurt. I'll sprinkle some salt on the porch after dinner, okay? Lucky thing I was there."

I swallow. "What were they doing, though, Cal?"

He shrugs, hardly looking back at me. "If we see them again, we'll ask. I'm sure there's an explanation. You said they were in the yard, not on the porch. If they'd been trying to watch us, they wouldn't have seen much from out there."

A shiver runs over me. "They give me the creeps. I can't explain it. I just feel like they're not good people."

His hand smooths over my arm as he eases me back down onto the couch. "Mother's intuition, maybe? You're feeling extra protective right now, as you should be. But let me worry about them, okay? I'm sure it was an innocent misunderstanding."

I glance back over the couch. "And if it wasn't?"

His lips form a worried line as he looks me over before deciding on an answer. “Then you know I won’t let anything happen to you. Either of you. You’re safe with me.” His eyes flick down to my stomach, and he squeezes my hand.

I smile at him, knowing he’s trying to reassure me, though it’s doing no real good. He walks away long enough to throw the bell peppers on the pizza and pop it into the oven, and when he returns, he pulls my legs onto his lap, massaging my calves. When his eyes meet mine, there’s a sort of weight to his gaze that wasn’t there before. “You know we’re in all of this together, right? You and me.”

I nod, closing my eyes. My heart seems to be slowing to a normal rate, but I still can’t shake the feeling of something crawling across my skin. Or erase the memories of their eyes burning into mine, like they wanted me to see them. Like they wanted me to know they were watching.

Once we’ve eaten dinner, we move to the bedroom to sort through our things. I don’t care if I’m only staying somewhere for a single night, I’m unpacking and moving in. When we first got together, Cal was the opposite. Once, when we went on a vacation for an entire week, he kept everything in his bag, neatly organized. Slowly, I’m convincing him my way is far superior.

With food in my belly, I’m feeling better than before. The worry has almost completely subsided. Cal was right most likely. There was probably a legitimate reason for them to be in the yard, and they were embarrassed thinking I’d worry they were watching us, exactly like I did.

Pregnancy has taken a toll on not only my body, but my emotions. Everything is heightened now. Fear, worry, anxiety. Love. My eyes find Calvin at the thought.

He never judges me for any of it, not my changing body or the many other ways I’ve transformed into someone almost unrecognizable to myself. He just jumped in

headfirst and didn't look back. I never imagined I'd find someone like him. Someone who puts himself firmly in my corner and loves me so easily.

When he catches me staring at him, a smile on my lips as he folds his shirt into the drawer, his face goes blank. "What?"

My smile grows bigger. "You're cute, you know that?"

His lips twitch as he closes the drawer and walks toward me, looping his arms around my waist and tugging me toward him. "I love you, do you know that?"

I cock my head to the side, pretending to think. "Hmm...I could use some convincing."

He chuckles from somewhere deep in his throat, pressing his lips to mine with a lingering kiss. "I'm always happy to prove that I'm a man of my word."

His mouth trails down my cheek, across my jawbone, and down my neck as I giggle and shrink away from him. "Oh, yeah? How would you do that?"

Carefully, we ease onto the bed, a hunger in his eyes that fills me with warmth. "I can think of a few ways."

Later, we're lying in bed, still undressed and wrapped in blankets. If I have my way, we'll spend the entire vacation right here. With a few breaks for snacks, that is.

My hands go to my stomach at the thought, rubbing over my bump in slow, methodic circles.

Following my lead, Cal places his hand on the top of my belly, smoothing his thumb across my skin. "Is she kicking?"

“Not at the moment, no,” I say, smiling over at him. “I think she’s sleeping.”

He speaks through his yawn, “That doesn’t sound so bad right about now.”

I turn my head to face him, studying his features. He’s handsome—and knows it—with rugged features you don’t expect from a college professor. Once my college professor. His face is tan and worn, with a light scar that runs across one cheek. You can’t see it from far away, which makes it extra special that I could easily draw it from memory. Proof of the hours I’ve spent this close to him, memorizing every detail of his features. He has long, unfairly gorgeous dark lashes, and blond hair that is starting to show just the earliest signs of thinning. He’s perfect, and I love him, and in this moment, I’m sad I nearly let something so simple tear us apart.

“I love you, you know?” I whisper, reaching out to brush his nose with my finger.

His eyes connect with mine, lingering there as he releases a breath like a sigh. His green eyes dart between mine as he struggles to find what he’s trying to say. “I’m so sorry.”

I prop up on my elbow. “You have no reason to be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Tears spring to his eyes, and he runs a hand over his face. “I’ve done...so much wrong. This girl...she...she grew up without a father. Without me. And did she ever wonder if it was because I didn’t want her? Did she question her mother’s story and wonder if I’d chosen to walk away?” His expression wrinkles with pain, as if he’s crumpling in on himself. He reaches across and touches my stomach again. “All I can think about is...what if it was her? Our baby girl. What if she didn’t have anyone? What if she didn’t have me?”

I put my hand on his, squeezing his palm against my stomach. At the sudden light

pressure, our daughter kicks, making us both giggle. I cup his cheek, forcing him to look at me. “But she does. She does have you. She does, and she will. And, as far as I’m concerned, both of these girls are lucky to have you.”

He squeezes his eyes shut. “You have every right to be angry with me. To want more answers. To want to talk about it or, or to want to not talk about it. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d do or what I’d want if the situation were reversed...”

“You told me as soon as you knew.” I run my hand along his cheek again, drawing his attention back to me. “That’s what matters. That’s what counts.”

“You really forgive me? You aren’t going to leave?”

“Of course I’m not. There’s nothing to forgive.” In my heart, I almost believe it.

He kisses my lips, his hand cupping the back of my head. When he pulls away, he says, “I don’t want to do this alone. I want you to meet her. To get to know her. I want you to be a part of all of this.”

“I want that, too,” I admit, and surprisingly, I’m not sure it’s a lie. This baby, our daughter, will have such a small family as it is. The fact that she could have an older sister is nothing short of a miracle. Perhaps I could force myself to look at it like that, rather than the tragedy it currently feels like.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, in fact, what if you asked her to come here tomorrow? I mean, obviously it’s at least an hour’s drive, so maybe she won’t want to, but if she did, the three of us could have lunch together and be able to really talk and get to know each other without the pressures of being home and balancing work and everything.” And we don’t have to invite a stranger into our home. “If you think it’s a terrible idea, we can

just meet her at a restaurant back home instead. It was just a thought.”

Now it’s his turn to prop up on his elbow, staring at me as if I’ve sprouted a new head. “Are you serious?”

“Why not? It would be good to meet her, and it’s rare the two of us have time off together. And once the baby gets here, I’ll want time to settle into that. It’s better to have met her before, don’t you think?”

He looks hesitant.

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to, but I think it could be nice to sit down with her for a quiet lunch, figure things out. Decide what our next steps will be.” I lower my voice, trying to sound like him as I tease, “Make a plan.”

“You know I love plans.” His lips twist in thought as he looks away from me before finally nodding. “If you’re sure about this, I think it could be really good, actually.”

“I’m positive.” I kiss his lips, a feeling of dread in my stomach surprising me. At least, a second ago I thought I was positive.

CHAPTER TEN

HIM — BEFORE

I'm at my desk when I hear a knock at the door. Assuming it's a student, I hardly look up from the essay I'm grading as I wave the person inside. "Come in."

Slowly, the door opens and closes, and when I hear a man clear his throat, I finally look up. Squinting at the man standing at the far end of the classroom, I close my laptop. "Conroy. What can I do for you?" I fold my hands together under my chin, grinning at Conroy Langdon, my colleague. Friend would be too nice. A lie. Acquaintance is a bit too formal. Colleague fits. I see him around campus, and we've worked together at a few functions, but he's not someone I talk to regularly.

He takes his time descending the stairs toward me, his sweater vest and glasses making him appear as if he's a movie version of a professor compared to my button-down and jeans. He's not quite as cool as I am, and the students know that.

Pushing his glasses up on his nose, he calls, "I thought I'd stop by and see how things are going."

We both know it's anything but that. He isn't exactly the stop by type, and the tone of his voice alone tells me there's more to it, but I'll play the game. "Things are going well. How are things with you?"

Finally, he reaches my desk, crossing his arms as he stares down at me like a disappointed parent. Lord knows I've had enough of looks like that in my day. I stand

so he has to look at me directly. He's no better than I am. "Oh, they're all right." His eyes drill into me, clearly waiting for something, though I can't for the life of me decide what it might be.

"Can I...help you with something?" I ask, cocking my head to the side. "Or were you just planning to continue to stare?" My tone is playful, casual, though I'm feeling quite the opposite. Where does he get off coming into my space, my kingdom, like he owns the place?

His lips press together, as if he's physically concealing whatever might leak out, then he finally says, "The professor you replaced, Professor Lee, did you ever meet him?"

The question comes from so far out of left field, it may as well pop me in the head. "Um...no, why?"

There's a shrug, a look of nonchalance, but none of it does anything to make me think there isn't a point to this line of questioning. Sweat gathers at the back of my neck as my heartbeat picks up in my chest. Where is he going with this?

"He was a good guy. Great professor. The kids loved him." He pauses, but it's clearly pregnant with secrets ready to burst. "He loved the kids, too. Maybe a little too much."

I quirk my brow. "What are you talking about?"

"He had a thing with a student, probably more than one, honestly, but he was caught. The girl's parents were furious, caused a big stink with the dean, and Professor Lee was let go the same day it all came out." He shakes his head, clicking his tongue. "He was a good guy, you know? She was nineteen. Legal, for all intents and purposes. Didn't matter. It was against the rules, and they fired him for it."

I let out a soft hum as if this isn't interesting to me in the slightest. "Riveting bit of history, but that's more your department, isn't it? Why are you telling me this?" I press, folding my arms across my chest.

"I just..." He looks away, rubbing his lips together. "I wanted you to know what happened. No one here is above the rules."

"Your point?" A muscle in my jaw twitches as I stare at him.

He takes a step back, shaking his head. "Friend to friend, okay? I'm just letting you know."

A deep chuckle escapes my throat. "Why would I need to know that?"

His expression says it all. He knows something or thinks he knows something, but what? And how? Did Tyler tell him?

"I just thought you might find it interesting, I guess." With that, and before I can ask any further questions, he jogs back up the stairs toward the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

The next morning, Cal's plan is in motion. He's confirmed that his daughter will arrive here at noon, made sure she doesn't have any allergies or food preferences, and is now preparing a big pot of chili. I'm hoping the meal will warm me. I've felt entirely too cold inside and out from the moment Cal made the call.

I have no right to be upset about it. It was my idea in the first place, but my emotions are waffling all over the place. One minute, I'm fine. The next, I feel completely alone. Part of me worries I'm about to lose the only family I have left. That Cal is going to want to spend more time with her and less with me. After all, the hard part with that one is done. He'll get the fun years without any of the struggle—the potty training and late nights. Here she is, arriving at our doorstep, as if she were a mail-order child, parenting not required.

Bitter, and angry with myself for being bitter, I fill the freestanding tub with water that is warm—but not too hot, per the doctor's and Cal's orders—and bubble bath from my bag. As I slip into the bath, my stomach rolls with the baby's movement. She seems to like water as much as I do.

I sink down in the warmth, easing myself back against the wall of the tub with a sigh. It's been so long since I was able to relax like this. To just sit quietly and let my body rest. Lately, just rolling over is a full workout. As the tub fills, my round stomach becomes an island, the only part of me still visible among the bubbles. I wonder if I'll miss this, the joys and pains of pregnancy. Everyone says you do, and as magical as

parts of it have been, I imagine I will, but I also know how ready I am to have her here with me. To see her wrap her little fingers around mine, to kiss her head, to feel her snuggle against my chest and hear her tiny, soft breaths. I want all of that, despite how this started. The surprise of it all, the out-of-order way we're going about this whole baby and marriage thing. Our family was just meant to be, and I'm okay with that. I've never been one for tradition anyway.

I never had much in life, not in terms of money or opportunities or even family. My mother tried, but it was just the two of us, and we struggled. I always dreamed of a life that felt easier, safer. And now I have it. I have Cal and our daughter, and potentially a new stepdaughter—is that what we'll call her?—to fill the holidays and the silence. The emptiness. In the blink of an eye, I have everything I've ever dreamed of. So why don't I feel happy about it?

Later, when I'm dressed, with my hair fixed and a bit of makeup on, I join Cal in the kitchen where he's stirring the chili, wafting the scent up to his nose every few seconds.

I'm at the table, reading a book with my feet propped up on the seat of the chair next to me when he turns back to me. "I'm making it less spicy than usual. I don't know if she likes spice the way you do."

"That's fine." It's nice to be known. I'm hit with the thought. It's nice to have someone who knows how you like each meal prepared, how you relax, and what your face looks like when you're stressed, even when you try to hide it. I love that Cal, even in our short time together, has learned these things about me. Just like I've learned so much about him.

He's nervous, I can tell. He wants to impress her.

I think about the type of father he will be someday, how he'll treat this baby, how

he'll love her. This woman, his daughter, is a lucky girl to have Cal in her life.

An hour later, his phone chimes loudly with a text letting us know she's arrived. He paces the kitchen, putting finishing touches on everything, hanging and straightening the towel on the handle of the stove, glancing out the window, pushing the trash can back a bit farther against the wall.

I stand and move toward him, smoothing my hands over his arms. "You're going to be fine," I promise him, kissing his nose.

To my relief, I see the stress almost melt away from his features. His lips curl up slightly, and he puffs out a breath. "Of course it is." He nods, kisses my head right back, and exits through the door, leaving it open in case I decide to follow.

For a moment, I consider it, but really, it doesn't feel right. They should get a chance to say hello, to have that time together free of outside intrusions, even if that intrusion is me. I'd hope he would give me the same if the situation were reversed.

Turns out, I've severely underestimated the amount of time they'll need, though, as I'm still waiting once twenty minutes have passed. When I finally hear their footsteps and soft voices outside, I sit back down in the chair with my book, adjusting my shirt and my hair.

I want her to think I'm beautiful, strangely enough. I care what she thinks of me, the woman her father chose. I want her to like me.

Cal appears first, pushing the door open for her, and when she enters the room, my heart stops as I take in the sight of her blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and the familiar curve of her cheeks.

It can't be her... It just can't.

And yet—it is.

What the hell?

CHAPTER TWELVE

HIM — BEFORE

She's as beautiful now as she's ever been, sitting on the floor of my apartment, eating chicken chow mein as she studies for her finals. I interrupt her studies with a question that's been looming in my mind for the last eight months.

“Hey, do you ever think about getting married?” I feel the heat in my cheeks as I try to gauge her reaction.

Slowly, she turns her face toward me, jaw slack. She blinks. “What did you say?”

“I just wondered...” I'm really trying to sound much more casual than I feel as I clear my throat and run a finger along the edge of the coffee table. “Would you want to marry me?”

She coughs—practically chokes on her food—a hand to her chest. She is looking at me as if I've lost my mind, and I really don't like it. “Are you?—”

I put a hand up, cutting her off. “I'm not proposing. I'm just wondering if I did, what would you say?” There shouldn't be a question, really. The answer should be obvious.

“Um, I think you have to ask. That's the whole point.” Her voice is softer now, though. Sort of sad.

“I know. You don’t have to say yes or no, I’m just asking if it’s something you’ve thought about. We’ve been seeing each other for nearly a year, and we’re heading into summer. I just wanted to see where your head is about things.”

“I...” she scoffs. “I mean, I guess I hadn’t really thought too much about it.” My face falls, and she immediately adds, “I mean, I really like you and we’re having fun, but I’m still young. I don’t think I want to get married anytime soon.” The laugh that escapes her throat is strangled as she studies me, her face wrinkled with obvious confusion and worry.

“Well, why not? What’s your plan, exactly? When will you want to get married?”

“I’m not sure, really. I guess when I’m ready.”

“When will that be?”

“I don’t know,” she says, brushing hair from her face. “I guess I’ll just...know.”

“But then how will I know?”

“I think the relationship will just naturally progress.” She rolls her eyes with a laugh. “Besides, I want to get to know you more. To know us more. This all feels really sudden. I know it’s been eight months since our first date, but that doesn’t feel long enough.”

What she means is, she doesn’t like me enough. She’s keeping me around until someone better comes along. “Right.”

She takes my cheek, kissing my lips. “I love you, though. You know I do. I just...I’m not ready yet. Let’s wait until I graduate.”

My smile is small and forced, but if she reads that, she doesn't say anything. "Okay."

"For now..." She hands me an egg roll and lifts one of her own, tapping them together. "For now, it's just us. Just this moment. I want to enjoy it."

I kiss her lips, but I'm no longer feeling it. The wind has been forcibly ripped from my sails. I have no idea what she could be waiting for. We both know we want each other. We love each other. What else is there to know?

Here's what I know: I'm not taking this rejection as her final answer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

It's impossible. It's...

“Hi, I'm Janelle.” She holds her hand out, cutting off my racing thoughts. Except, she isn't Janelle. At least, that's not the name I knew her by. Was she lying to me? Or him? What is she doing here?

I want to ask her all of this and more, but I can't move. I can't speak. I can't do anything except stare at this woman in complete disbelief.

“It's so nice to meet you,” she adds, her smile warm. It's as if she doesn't recognize me at all. She glances back up at Cal, a worried look on her face. “Thank you both again for having me. I hate that I'm interrupting your vacation.”

“You're not interrupting,” Cal is quick to tell her. “We're happy you could join us. I know you said chili was okay, but we have other things here too that I can whip up, if you don't like mine. I know everyone makes it a bit differently. I do bell peppers for extra crunch, and fewer beans, so it's not too heavy on the carbs.” He pats his stomach. “And...what else...” He looks around, running his hand through his hair.

Putting him out of his misery, Janelle chuckles and puts a hand up. “It smells delicious. I'm sure it will be lovely.” She shrugs out of her coat while I'm trying my best to decide how to handle this, how to bring up the newly discovered elephant in the room. Should I try to pull Calvin aside? Should I ask her to leave? Should I make

a scene? “Do you have somewhere I could hang this? I don’t want it to drip from the snow.”

“Oh, of course,” Cal says, taking the coat from her quickly. “Sorry. I should’ve taken that already. My head is...” He zips across the room and hangs it on the rack behind the door.

With his back to us, I return my focus to Janelle, trying to find the right way to ask her what is going on, to accuse her of everything I need to accuse her of without letting Cal know something is wrong. Without letting Cal know...anything.

Before I can say a word, she inhales deeply and steps toward the living room, peering out the oversized windows. “This place is really gorgeous.”

“Isn’t it?” Cal asks, and when I look back at him, he juts his chin forward, encouraging me to move toward her, to make conversation with this woman while he heads for the stove to prepare our bowls. “Like I told you, Sadie and I spent a lot of time looking through listings trying to find the right one, and this one seemed to have it all.”

She sighs again, and when I get near the window, I see that her eyes are closed with a smile on her lips. As if she knows I’m there, as if she knows the predicament she’s put me in and how my heart is now beating out of my rib cage as I stare at her, my chest like a balloon that’s been overfilled and can’t deflate. “So peaceful.”

Peace is the exact opposite of what I feel, and we both know it as she looks at me. Her lips form a hard line, and there’s something a bit forced about her tone as she asks, loudly, “So how did the two of you meet, Sadie? How long have you been married?”

“Oh.” My tongue feels like it weighs a hundred pounds hearing her say my name. It’s

so strange, the way she's looking at me completely normally when I'm not positive this isn't all a dream. What is she doing here? What kind of game is she playing?

“Well, we're not married yet,” Cal calls from the kitchen, and it's only because I know him so well that I catch the faint hint of irritation in his voice. I'm not playing my part well enough, but I can't help it. Everything is so messed up right now. “With the little one on the way”—he chuckles—“we wanted to wait until she was here, safe and sound. My mother is going to carry her down the aisle so she can be our flower girl.”

The woman—Janelle, or whatever the hell her name is—flicks her eyes down toward my stomach only briefly. “Oh, you're expecting! How exciting!” The look on her face doesn't match her voice, which tells me the feigned excitement is purely for Cal's benefit. “When are you due?”

“Three weeks,” I say, my voice hoarse and powerless, though I've at least finally found it.

“You must be so excited. What are you going to name her?”

“I, um, well, I-I like Amelia, for my mother,” I say, “but we've also?”

“We haven't decided yet.” Cal, standing next to the table with all three bowls of chili placed in our respective spots, cuts me off before I get the chance to finish my sentence. “We have a few options we're toying with, but I think we want it to be a surprise, right, darling? We feel as if we'll know in the moment. When we see her for the first time.”

This man has never called me darling in his entire life. Suddenly, the show he's putting on for his daughter that seemed charming and sweet moments ago is grating my nerves like they're swiss cheese. I've never felt so alone and completely helpless.

What is she going to say? What is her end goal here? Why can't he see what a phony she is?

Most importantly, what does she want from us? From me? How did she find us? Find him?

"Right," I mutter, crossing the room to take a seat.

Janelle and Cal join me, and we dig into the meal, eating in silence for a few moments before Cal speaks again. "So, Janelle, tell us about yourself. I know we spoke a little on the phone, but I don't think you ever mentioned what brought you to Nashville in the first place. I'm assuming you moved on your own. Your mom didn't end up leaving home, did she?"

She looks down, and it's only then I remember how young she is. Her midtwenties, Cal said. She'd have to be, for the timeline to make sense, but she always seemed older to me. Then again, I never tried to guess.

"Oh, um, well, no. Mom...she stayed in Columbia with my grandparents until..." She stops herself, clearing her throat. "She never left. And I wanted to be close to her, while also feeling a bit like I had my own life, you know? Nashville was the obvious choice. I could still go home and visit her most weekends, and I wasn't too far away when she needed me."

He stirs his chili slowly. "I'm so sorry to hear about your loss. She was really special."

Cal's words scrape over my skin, made worse only by the fact that he avoids eye contact with me as he says them.

"Yeah, she was." Janelle's voice cracks, and she clears her throat. "Are you close to

your mom?" She looks at me, and my heart ticks in my chest, because she knows the answer to that question, and I hate that I ever gave her access to that part of me.

I look down, taking another bite of my dinner, which suddenly tastes as bland as plain oatmeal. "I was. She's...in poor health. I don't get to see her often anymore."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." Without warning, she reaches across the table and touches my arm gently, and it's as if she's brandished my skin with a fiery-hot poker.

I pull back, but not quickly. Not fast enough to make it obvious something is wrong. "Thank you."

"I've always wanted a little sister," Janelle says playfully. "Maybe it seems silly, but the fact that you're pregnant is kind of a dream come true for me." She stirs her chili, my stomach churning at the eerie way her words land in my chest. Looking at Cal, she adds, "I used to beg Mom for a sister, but she said it was just going to be us. We were a team." Her tough smile turns sad. "I know she really cared about you."

Nervously, Cal's eyes shift toward me. "We were really young back then."

"Totally," she says, studying her bowl like she's preparing for a pop quiz. Then, "But, to tell you the truth, I don't think she ever got over you."

Except, as she says the words, it's not Cal she's looking at. It's me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HIM — BEFORE

I'm down on one knee. It's the moment I've waited most of my life for. The ring is in my hand. The woman of my dreams is standing in front of me. I've asked the question, so then...

Why isn't she smiling?

Why isn't she jumping up and down and screaming yes?

Why isn't she in my arms already, kissing me?

Why does this suddenly feel very, very wrong?

Still on the ground, I stare up at her, unable to understand the look on her beautiful face. "What's the matter?"

"Honey, you know. We talked about this. I told you I wasn't ready." Her face pinches brutally, and I realize she's trying not to cry.

Slowly, I snap the ring box shut and stand. "That was months ago. You said you wanted to wait until we'd talked about it more, and we have. We've talked about it nonstop for months."

"You kept bringing it up, yes, but my answers didn't change."

“I waited until you graduated, like you asked. I’m sick of hiding. I want the world to know that you’re mine.”

“Then we’ll put each other on our social media or something. We don’t have to get married. I know you’re older and ready, but I’m...”

“You’re what? Not? I’m not even that much older than you. Ten years. So what? We’re practically the same age. You’re ready.”

“Twelve years,” she corrects, and she knows I hate when she does that. “And regardless. I just graduated. I want to relax a little bit.”

“And being married to me wouldn’t be relaxing?”

“Planning a wedding wouldn’t be.”

“So we’ll just go to the courthouse. Who says we have to have a big wedding?”

She casts her arms to her sides, turning away from me. “I want a big wedding. I just don’t want one in six months.”

I scoff, stepping back. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “So you don’t even want to marry me in six months.” How long could she possibly be planning to wait? If she doesn’t have kids by the time she’s thirty, her egg quality will start to decline. We’re running out of time for a family and the life I’ve always dreamed of. Why can’t she see that?

“I don’t want to break up. I just...I need a year or two. I always imagined I’d be in my thirties when I got married.”

“That will be too late,” I cry, my hands balling into fists at my sides.

“Too late for what?” she demands, staring at me as if she doesn’t recognize me. When I don’t answer, she adds, “I just...I need more time. I’m sorry. I want, no, I need some time to get out and see the world.”

“Alone.”

She opens her mouth, struggling to find an answer. Because she doesn’t have one. She doesn’t have any sort of plan at all. She’s happy to live life as if it’s all a game and she’s thrown out the rule book. “You...you have your job.”

Bitter tears sting my eyes. “Right.”

“I don’t mean to hurt you. Honestly. You know that. I love you.” Now she’s crying, too, her voice unsteady. “Please don’t do this.”

“Don’t put this on me. I’m not doing anything.” I throw my hands up. “This is all you.” With that, and with my heart still firmly in her hands, I step away, turning my back on her like she just did on me. “I’m done.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

“You know, Sadie and I would love for you to come around after the baby is born. We obviously have a lot to catch up on, and I’m just...” Cal rubs his cheek, like he does when he’s overwhelmed. “I’m so glad you found me.”

Janelle looks down, pretending to be shy. “I’m so glad I did, too. When Mom finally told me who you were, she said she wasn’t sure if I should reach out to you. She said you might not be receptive to meeting me, but I just...” Her eyes flick to me. “I had to try, you know?”

“Of course.” He pats the table, where we’ve been sitting for the last hour, despite the empty bowls in front of us. “I just can’t for the life of me fathom why she wouldn’t have told me about you. We grew apart, but I wish I could’ve helped her. I wish I would’ve known. The idea of her doing this, raising you all on her own...” He shakes his head as if clearing away the thought.

“Mom was stubborn,” Janelle says with a soft, sad laugh. “She liked to do things her way. I don’t know the details about how you broke up or what happened back then, but I do know she never had a harsh word to say about you. She said you were kind to her. That if you hadn’t left home, things might’ve been different.” She goes quiet, running a finger along the grain of the table, then lets out a loud sigh. “Anyway, enough about the past. Clearly, it all worked out for you.” She gestures toward me, and I can’t help feeling like the stray puppy he just picked up on the side of the road. The afterthought, the second choice.

Cal nods thoughtfully, not looking at me, and I'm positive his mind is with this other woman. It's awful to admit, even to myself, but if she were still alive, jealousy and insecurity would be eating me alive right now.

"I think I'm going to step outside for some fresh air," I tell them, standing up abruptly. On the one hand, I don't want to leave them alone together for fear of what she might tell him, but on the other, if I don't get away from them right now, I'm afraid I might scream. I'm suffocating here under the weight of her reappearance and the secrets that could be uncovered with it.

"What? No. It's freezing out," Cal says, as if I've lost my mind. Perhaps I have. "You don't need to go outside."

"I—"

"Honey, there's ice out there. If you want to go, I'll have to go with you." Even as he says it, though, he doesn't move. Truthfully, the last thing I want to do right now is start an argument or push back in front of Janelle. I want Cal to choose me, and as much as it stings right now, disagreeing with him isn't the way to get that to happen.

Slowly, I sit back down, feeling defeated.

"Well," Janelle says, clearly trying to ease the tension, "I'm dying to hear how you two met. I'm an absolute sucker for love stories."

"Oh. Right." I put my head down, feeling embarrassment for the first time about our story and how it all started. I lean back in my chair, forcing a smile that hopefully doesn't scream to Cal that something is terribly wrong here. "Right. Um, well?—"

"We don't really need to tell that story," Cal says, cutting me off. For once, I'm grateful for it. I don't want to tell her about how I was sleeping with a professor.

Never before have I felt ashamed of our origin story, but now, I'm more aware than ever of how wrong it was.

"I'm sensing some type of scandal." Janelle laughs. "Do you two work together at the university?"

"No," I say quickly. "I work for a small marketing firm. Mostly from home, especially now with the baby coming. What about you? Cal didn't mention what you do."

Before she can answer, Cal's phone rings loudly on the table, and we all turn to look at it. Cal is one of the only people I know who still keeps his phone's ringer on. I've never once seen the man set it to vibrate. It's an obnoxious ring, too. Like an old telephone. It makes him feel sophisticated, I think, though he always just says it's because he doesn't want to miss anything. I can't count the number of times I've woken up from a dead sleep because his phone is ringing for this reason or that. He knows it drives me crazy, but it's one of the many things he's inflexible on. He glances down at the screen and shakes his head, silencing the phone. "Probably a scam call." He waves a hand for Janelle to go on. "Finish what you were saying."

"Well, I teach workout classes at a local gym," she says. "I actually want to open my own gym someday." She holds her hands in front of her face, pushing them together, then pulling them apart like she's displaying an invisible canvas. "That's, like, the long-term dream."

"That's amazing," Cal says, as if she's just announced she wants to be the first person to inhabit the moon. Still, at least this part of herself is real. At least this part is true.

At Cal's end of the table, his phone starts to ring again, and he looks down, appearing annoyed. "I guess I'm going to answer this."

“The same number?” I ask.

He nods, standing from the table and pressing the phone to his ear as he walks out of the room. “Hello?”

Left in silence, I stare at her. It takes several seconds for her eyes to find mine, but eventually, they do. In the blue, I see a challenge.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper, straight to the point.

“What do you mean?” she asks, eyes wide.

“What do you want, Janelle? Is that even your real name? Because the way I heard it, it’s Ellie.”

She’s quiet for a while, and I swear she’s about to deny knowing what I’m talking about, but eventually, she lowers her voice enough to say, “You can see where the nickname came from, though. Surely.”

“Why are you here?” I ask through gritted teeth. “What is this about? Are you really his daughter, or are you here because of me?”

She sucks in a breath through her teeth, eyes darting between mine, but before she can say anything, Cal is back in the room, and the wall she’d dropped just moments ago is back up.

Without looking at us, he stalks over to the sink and rips open the cabinet beneath it.

“Who was it?” I ask, watching as he kneels down and pokes his head into the small, dark space under the sink.

“The homeowners. They said the water department just called them and said there’s more water than normal being used here over the past few days. They’re worried there’s a leak. They’re coming to check it out.” He glances back at me, his face somber.

“Oh no!” Seeing my opportunity, I stand, “I’m so sorry, Janelle. You’d probably better leave in case this all gets messy.”

Her face falls. “But I just got here.” She looks at Cal to see if he’ll argue, but he’s too busy looking under the sink to notice.

“I know. It’s the worst timing. Maybe once we get back, we can have you around for dinner. I’m so sorry, but these people are kind of weird. If they find out we have someone else here that wasn’t on the reservation, I’m not sure what they’ll do.” I gesture toward the door, a perfectly pleasant smile on my face. I have no idea what game she’s playing at, but at least for the moment, I’ve taken control of the board.

She looks back at me, then nods, but her face is cold. She’s angry. “Okay. Um, sure. Fine.”

Cal stands up finally, realizing what’s happened. “Oh, right.” He looks at me, but there is no budging on my expression. Adjusting his belt, he puffs out a breath of air, looking back at Janelle. “Yeah, I guess she’s probably right. The rules do say we’re supposed to get guests approved.” He approaches her slowly, arms outstretched. As he hugs her, everything in me goes tight. “When we get back home, we’ll all go out to eat somewhere. Your choice.”

She releases him and steps back. “Thanks again for having me.”

As she leaves, she doesn’t spare me a single glance.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HIM — BEFORE

She wasn't supposed to say no. I should be pissed. I am pissed. But I'm also smart enough to know we're soulmates, that she's the one I'm supposed to marry, and walking away from all of this will only make it worse.

She waited two days to text me, to tell me that she's sorry, and she doesn't want to lose me. I wish I could say I understand, that I feel for her and get the predicament she's in, but I can't. It's me. The love of her life. We're perfect for each other, and the decision to let that dangle on a thread is one I don't understand.

She's coming over tonight, and things are going to get back to normal. I refuse to lose her and refuse to give up on the dream. All my life, I've had a plan. I knew I was going to meet the girl of my dreams young. I knew I was going to get married and have four or five kids and two dogs. It's always been the plan, but none of my relationships have worked out. None of the girls were ready for this level of commitment. For my intensity. None of them were as serious about us as I am, not until I met her. I know she says she isn't ready either, but we both know she's just scared. Her mother is sick; her father is gone. She doesn't have a family. She doesn't have a life outside of this relationship, and that worries her.

So I'll do what I have to do. I'll be the adult here and lead her into the relationship like she is a lamb, and I'm the border collie tasked with protecting her.

In the bedroom, I open my dresser drawer and pull out the box of condoms. I cross

the room to my nightstand and retrieve my sewing kit. Then, carefully, I use a needle to pierce each of the individual packages eleven times. When I'm done, I smooth my finger over the foil, erasing the evidence of what I've done unless you're looking too closely at the package, which she won't be. With any luck, she won't see it at all.

She says she's not ready, but I know she is. She just needs a little push.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

When Norma and George arrive, I'm still reeling over the fact that she's gone. That I saw her again in the first place. Since we cut off contact, I blocked her number and haven't heard from her a single time.

Now I have to wonder if she's been stalking me all this time, and if she decided getting close to Calvin and selling him this false narrative about who she is was what would help it all.

What have I done?

A bundled-up Norma stands next to George as he checks under each sink in the house for a leak, tinkering around, feeling this and that. He's dressed warmly, with thick, canvas overalls, a winter coat, and heavy boots that are tracking mud across the floor everywhere he goes.

Cal and I follow them from room to room with Cal making small talk, though I'm mostly too out of it to be paying attention. My mind is too focused on her and what her plan might be.

When all of the pipes seem to be in order with no obvious leaks, George says he's going to check under the house, leaving Norma inside with us in awkward silence.

I still can't describe the unease she gives me. The way she's watching me, her eyes

lingering on my stomach. Perhaps it's just that she looks so familiar still. Maybe she looks similar to someone I've seen on TV. Either way, I wish they would just go home. Though I'm glad they gave me a reason to send Ellie—er, Janelle —away, I wish they'd leave, too.

I want to ask her about seeing them outside the window in the snow yesterday, but I can't decide how to approach the subject without seeming as if I'm accusing them of something, which might lead to a confrontation I'm not ready for. All I have to do is let them check everything out, and then they should go away.

I force a shaky breath through my lips, glancing at Cal, wondering if he's feeling just as uncomfortable as I am or if I'm alone in this.

Norma paces the kitchen, staring out the small window over the sink and then the large one beside the door. Finally, she turns to face us, resting her back against the wall. Inhaling deeply, she says, "Sure smells nice in here. You must've been cooking something."

"We had chili for lunch," Cal says.

"That's what I thought." She smiles. "Perfect day for it. Nice and chilly." I'm not sure if she was aiming for a pun, but as if to prove her point, her arms go around herself and she shivers. "My mom used to make cinnamon rolls with our chili. It's the perfect little treat."

"Yeah, I've heard of people doing that," Cal says, moving to the door to peer out. "We try to watch our carbs, so we couldn't, but I'm sure it was delicious."

The woman scowls at him. "Oh, she doesn't need to be watching her carbs." She crosses the room, touching my stomach without permission. "She's growing a little angel in there. She needs whatever her tummy tells her she needs." Chills line my

skin when she smiles up at me, and it takes everything in my power not to shrink away from her. “Isn’t that right, pumpkin?”

Cal hums. “Women only need to gain about twenty-five pounds during their pregnancy, and Sadie’s already gained more than that.” My eyes cut to him, shocked and hurt by his words, but I know he didn’t mean them to be harsh. Cal is direct, even with the most sensitive topics. I’ve learned to get used to it. “She only needs about four hundred extra calories now that she’s in the third trimester, and a cinnamon roll would be all of that.” His face is still. He’s not looking at either of us, but peering out the window instead, as if he’s not even aware he’s talking but rather thinking out loud to himself in response to her. “So do you think we should talk about heading home? Will you have to shut off the water?”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” She waves away his concern, stepping back from me finally with a wary look. I get it. Cal can be a lot sometimes, but on the other hand, there are plenty of fathers out there who can’t be bothered to go to a single doctor’s appointment or make an effort to do any of the research involved in pregnancy. Most days I’m convinced Cal knows more than I do about this whole thing. He’s constantly reading some new book, telling me some new tidbit of information about our growing baby. He hasn’t missed a doctor’s appointment and usually texts to remind me about them a few times on the day of. He’s studious and intense, but he loves our child, and he loves me, and I’m lucky to have what my mother didn’t.

Cal turns his head to look at her finally, his expression dubious. “How can you be sure? If we need to leave, we need to make those plans now. Before it gets dark.”

“You shouldn’t worry so much. You’ll get wrinkles.” Norma bursts out a loud laugh. “George will be able to fix it right up unless it’s something major. He’s handy.” She winks at me. “That’s why we keep ’em around, right?”

I laugh softly, thinking the only thing Cal knows how to fix is a cup of coffee, but

there's no use pointing that out.

"We saw you two had a visitor up here earlier." Her words catch me so off guard they're almost menacing. When I look at her, one wiry, gray eyebrow is quirked up higher than the other. The smile that was on her face moments ago has disappeared.

"A friend," Cal says, a twinge of frustration in his tone. "She came over for lunch and stayed for a quick visit."

"Well, that's nice," the woman says. "Where'd she run off to?"

"We had her leave when we thought there might be a leak."

The woman's wrinkled lips press together. "Well, now, there was no need to run off on our account. We'll get the leak all fixed up and be out of your hair in a jiffy."

Glancing back out the window again, Cal says, "Well, we know how home projects go. You start fixing one thing and find ten more that need to be addressed."

She stares at him like she wants to say something else, but she doesn't. Instead, she turns back to the window, and her face lights up. "Oh, look. There he is now."

Sure enough, George is walking up onto the porch. His arm is slicked with mud as he pushes open the door, but this time, he doesn't enter. "Eh, just a little hairline crack on one of the pipes." He pulls a cloth from his pocket and rubs it across his face. "Looks like it'd been leaking for a while, but I've got it all fixed up now. Shouldn't give you any more trouble, but we're just a phone call away if you need anything. You have my number." He nods toward the fridge before wiping his face again. "Come on, now, hun. Let's get home before it gets dark."

"Have a good night, you two," the woman says, shuffling across the room. "Don't

forget to lock the doors before you go to bed, and you should probably leave some warm water running in the sinks and tubs, just in case the pipes try to freeze.”

“Got it. We’ll be fine,” Cal says, shutting the door behind them with a wave. Once we’re alone, he locks the door and closes the blinds before turning back to me and shoving his hands into his pockets. “Well. Interesting day, hmm?” He laughs under his breath as he pulls me against his chest with a quick hug. Then he opens the fridge and takes out a beer and a naturally flavored seltzer water for me.

In the living room, he sits down on the couch, propping his feet up. When I sit down next to him, he asks, “Well, what did you think of her?”

“Her?” I ask, buying time more than anything.

“Janelle.”

“She...well, I don’t know. I didn’t get to know her that well, did I?”

“Just first impressions, then.” He takes a swig of his beer. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she? Do you think she looks anything like me?”

I think about it, replaying her features over and over in my head. “Not really,” I admit. “Actually, now that you mention it, have you thought about asking her for a paternity test?”

He lowers the beer bottle from his lips, his brows drawn down. “What? Why? You think she’s lying?”

“I think...she could be. It would be nice to know for sure.”

He scoffs, looking away. “What on earth would she do that for? We certainly don’t

have anything she could gain from this. An assistant professor of literature and a part-time publicist for struggling artists are hardly cash cows.”

I hate when he calls my clients struggling , but he’s not exactly wrong. Neither of us make more than average. We’re lower middle class at best. “I didn’t say she was trying to get money out of us, just that I don’t know if she’s being truthful. For all we know, she has the wrong person in the first place. I just think it wouldn’t hurt to be certain before you get too attached.”

“Is that what you’re hoping for? That she’s either wrong or lying?” His accusatory tone sets my nerves on edge.

“I...I have no opinion either way. Is this the most convenient thing to ever happen to us? No, but I’m trying to make it work?—”

“Trying?” he demands, standing up from the couch. His face is already flushed from the alcohol and anger. He rarely drinks for fear of liver damage and an increased cancer risk. “What the hell are you talking about—trying? What happened to the woman who set all this up in the first place? You were the one who suggested inviting her here, and now you’re acting like I’ve done something wrong.”

“I’m not saying you’ve done anything wrong. I’m just saying we should be cautious.”

“But where is this coming from? I don’t understand. Did she say something to you? Or...or did she do something that made you feel like she was lying?”

“No, I—” My voice catches in my throat because there’s absolutely no way I can tell him what I need to without everything becoming so much worse than it already is. “I don’t want to fight with you.” And then I do it—the thing I hate to think about, the thing I swore I wouldn’t do—I put my hand on my stomach and wrinkle my face at him. “Stress isn’t good for the baby.” It’s not a lie, but I’m also using our daughter in

this fight against him—to protect myself and my lie—and it’s not fair.

At once, though, it works. He crumples like an accordion, shoulders slumping, body folding inward as he lurches toward me with a look of pure regret. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m so sorry. I don’t want to fight with you either. I’m just...this is a lot.” He kisses my cheek, then my neck in the place where he knows I’m most ticklish, until I giggle.

He presses his lips in closer, tickling me until I scream for relief. “ Stop! Stop! Please! Cal! ” I laugh, jerking away. Still in his arms as I catch my breath, I pat his chest, studying him.

He kisses my nose. “Thank you for being here with me for this. I know it can’t be easy, and I appreciate you trying.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, smiling sadly. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he says, kissing my lips. “And now...” He scoops me up in his arms like a baby doll. I hadn’t realized he’d even put his drink down, but now, both of his hands are under me as we make our way into the bedroom. “Now, we can just forget about all the rest of it for a while and focus on the reason we’re here.” He drops me on the bed, kissing my forehead. “Rest and relaxation for Momma and baby.” Next, he drops down and kisses my stomach before standing up and retreating to the bathroom.

Alone, I slip out of my clothes and into pajamas before climbing back into bed. It isn’t until I hit the mattress that I realize how tired I am. Now my entire body feels made of liquid metal, like I’m melting and hardening into the mattress and will never move again.

I sink and melt and close my eyes, allowing the exhaustion to truly set in as he comes

out of the bathroom.

Sometimes I forget I'm this pregnant. I catch myself running into things more often, underestimating how much stomach I have when I approach counters or try to roll over in bed.

Calvin draws near to the bed with a chuckle. "Someone's sleepy."

"Mmm." I groan, too tired to make a human noise. I feel him lift the covers and slip into bed next to me, then his hand comes around my stomach, tugging us together.

"The question is...are you too sleepy?"

I try to open my eyes, I really do. To be here and present for this man I love, but I can't. I physically can't move.

He kisses my shoulder, dropping back on the bed with a sigh, then—a strangled gasp. "What the hell?"

I jerk my eyes open with a start, and my heart lodges in my throat.

In the doorway, Norma's and George's shadowy forms can just barely be made out.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Calvin demands again, jumping out of bed and crossing the room. He grips on to the door like he's prepared to shut it, but George holds his hand up.

"We knocked," Norma says. "You must've not heard us."

"It's the middle of the night. You can't just walk in here. We could call the police," Calvin says.

In the bed, I pull the covers tighter around me.

She looks at him as if it's the most ridiculous idea she's ever heard. "Honestly, I'm sorry. We had an alert that the door was standing open. We tried to call you but didn't get an answer. Then, on our way up, we thought we heard a scream. I wanted to make sure everything's okay."

Cal puffs out a breath. "What are you talking about? The door was shut. Whose phone did you call? Mine never went off. I would've heard it."

Lord knows he's not wrong about that. Still, he walks over and checks his phone anyway, as do I. There are no missed calls on my screen.

"We called both numbers you gave us. Service up here can be spotty at times, so maybe the calls didn't come through. Anyway, maybe you thought the door was closed, but I can say for sure it wasn't. It was standing open when we arrived."

"Surely one of the calls would've made it through, though," I point out.

Cal rubs a hand over his forehead. "What do you want? What are you doing here? This is completely inappropriate."

"As I said, we had an alert that our door was standing open. Obviously, we can't have that with the weather like it is. We called both of your phones and got no response, so we came to check that everything was okay. On our way, we thought we heard a scream. When we got here, we found the door open, so we walked inside. I called your name, but there wasn't a response. We were worried. We had just walked into the doorway when you saw us." She huffs, like she's the one who's been wronged here. "Now, if everything's okay, we'll just go. But please make sure to lock the door." She says it like a practiced schoolteacher chiding us for doing something wrong.

Cal follows her to the door, and from here, I listen as he locks it, then unlocks it, and locks it again.

“I don’t like that,” I whisper when he comes back to me. “What if they were trying to watch us or something? Maybe we should leave. Or call the police.”

“I’ve got you,” he promises, snuggling up against me. “They’re just a lonely old couple. The door is locked this time for sure.” He kisses the side of my head.

It doesn’t take long for him to start snoring, but as the hours pass, I’m aware of every sound the cabin makes—the roar of the heat, the tip-tap of the water dripping in the sinks like we were instructed to do to keep the old pipes from freezing, and the rustle of the wind outside.

Though there are no other sounds to warn me of anything being wrong, as I lie in bed, every once in a while, I’ll catch a hint of movement out of the corner of my eye. The door to our bedroom is shut and I know it’s probably just a shadow from the window, but sometimes, I swear I still see them standing there. Watching us.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

The next morning when I wake up, my entire body is stiff and sore. Since midway through the pregnancy, I haven't slept well anyway. If I'm not waking up to her kicking me in the ribs or myself gasping for air because I feel like I can't breathe, I'm waking up to pee for the thirteenth time that night or because I accidentally rolled onto my back and panicked because pregnant women are only supposed to sleep on their sides.

It's not easy remembering all the rules. In the beginning, Cal charted them for me. He left little reminders everywhere:

On the fridge,

No deli meat!

On my nightstand,

Don't forget your prenatal vitamin!

On the bathroom mirror,

Keep the temperature in the bath low!

On the coffee pot,

Doctor says just one cup per day!

Finally, I had to tell him his actions were causing me more stress than anything and that I felt like I was constantly being watched and chastised. It wasn't healthy. The next day, all of the signs were down, and I could tell he was making an effort to spend less time reminding me of all the warnings the doctor had given me.

I want our daughter to be healthy, of course I do, but no one warns you about how hard it will be. Pregnancy is a brutal battle every day to keep this precious life inside of you alive until the moment it's violently ripped from your body. We don't talk about that enough.

In the bathroom, I brush my teeth and change clothes as quickly as I possibly can. As I do, I can't stop the way my eyes scan the mirror, looking for a camera lens or some evidence that these people are not who they say they are. That they might be, as I suspect, monitoring us in some way. That they might mean to harm us.

From the moment we arrived they've given me the creeps, and coming into the house last night unannounced, watching us, was the final straw. I want to leave. I don't care that we aren't supposed to check out for another day. I want to get our things and get away from this house. My only mission for the day is to get Cal to agree.

When I return to the bedroom, Cal is already gone. I find him in the kitchen, a pot of coffee brewing as he leans back against the counter.

"Good morning, my love," he says, eyes still sleepy.

"Morning." I wrap the oversized cardigan I'm wearing around myself tighter, shivering from the cold, drafty house.

"Sleep well?" He pours himself a cup of coffee, then hands me a mug. For a moment,

I think it's coffee, and my heart surges, but quickly I spot the tea bag. Herbal tea is nice, but sometimes I miss the taste of coffee. In the beginning, it was allowed, but after my blood pressure started charting too high, it had to be cut out altogether.

"Not really," I admit, blowing on my tea as I make my way to the counter, preparing my argument. When I reach it, I set my mug down and sigh. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Okay."

"I think we should leave early."

He waits, like he's expecting me to say more, and maybe I should, but I really want to gauge his reaction to this. "Early?" he asks gently. "You mean early in the morning?"

"No." I rotate the mug back and forth for something to do. "I mean now. I want to leave today."

His face is solemn and still as he processes what I've said. Finally, his mouth opens. "You want to end the vacation early."

It's not a question, but I nod. "Yes. I do."

He places his mug down and crosses the space between us cautiously. "May I...ask why?"

I can't believe I have to spell it out for him. For a man so worried about protecting me, I can't understand why he doesn't already have the bags packed and us heading out the door. Truthfully, I don't understand why we didn't leave last night. If it were up to me, maybe we would have.

“I don’t feel safe here, Cal,” I admit, my heart picking up speed in my chest. I need him to agree with me, to see what I’m saying. I need him to understand. “Every time we turn around, these creepy neighbors are here, and last night was the final strike for me. Coming into the house unannounced while we were here. Who knows what they could’ve seen or overheard. Who knows if that was the only time they’ve even done it. What if they were here the first night, too? What if they were, like, watching us sleep or something?”

He smirks. “Watching us sleep? I think someone’s been reading too much Twilight .”

My expression is pinched as frustration wells in my gut. “I’m serious. I want to leave, okay? I find myself looking over my shoulders, not saying things because I worry someone’s listening.” I lower my voice. “For all we know, they have cameras in the house, and they’re watching us. I’m getting paranoid, and I can’t stay here any longer.”

He looks as though he might laugh. “Wait. Are you serious? You really want to go home? This trip was your idea. It was important to you.”

“Are you serious? You actually disagree? You think I’m wrong? It doesn’t matter how important it was before if we’re in danger now. Our safety is all that matters to me.”

All the laughter fades from his expression. “No, of course. It’s not that I think you’re wrong, I just...I mean, they seem harmless. Maybe a bit weird or lonely, but harmless. Maybe, somehow, we didn’t shut the door all the way last night, like she said, and the wind blew it open. If it was my house, and I got an alert that it had been standing open for some time, I’d come to check it out too. I think it was probably all an innocent misunderstanding. And I told them last night how inappropriate it was. They were obviously embarrassed. I can’t see them doing it again.”

I stare at him, completely dumbfounded. “You weren’t saying any of this last night. You seemed just as upset as I am.”

“Yeah, but I’ve had time to sleep on it now, and I think I was overreacting a little bit. It had been a long day and we were both tired. They were probably tired, too.” He pauses, running his hands over my arms. “Look, I get that it’s weird, but I really think it’s fine. I don’t think there was anything malicious about what they did. We’ll make sure we triple-check the doors, and we can even put a chair or something in front of it, so we know we’ll hear it if someone opens it. Would that make you feel better?”

“But shouldn’t we have heard it when they opened the door last night, unless they were being quiet on purpose? Wouldn’t she have called out?”

“Well, she did say she knocked, right? But I was in the bathroom, and you’d already fallen asleep. We just missed it.”

“I hadn’t fallen asleep,” I argue.

He sighs. “We only have another day left, and I really want today to be about us after we’ve had so much going on the past two days. I know how important this trip was to you.” Watching me carefully for any sign that I might agree or change my mind, his eyes move across my face. When I don’t budge, when I refuse to give in, he finally drops his hands from my arms, returning to his mug on the counter. “But...if you want to leave, if it’ll make you feel better, we can go. We’ll just check out a day early. It’ll be fine.”

I nod, no need to think about my answer. “Yes. That’s what I want to do. I want to leave today. Right now.” I’m paranoid and exhausted, and I’ve never wanted anything more than I want to get out of this cabin and back home where I’m safe.

“Okay.” I can tell he’s not happy about it, but at least he’s agreeing. He pulls out his

phone, but I stop him.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, I’m going to call George and let him know we’re leaving early.”

“ No, wait. ” The words escape my lips like a runner after the starting gun has sounded.

His eyes jerk up to find mine. “What’s wrong? I need to let them know we’re leaving so they can keep an eye on the place and get it ready for the next guests. We can’t just leave. It’s common courtesy.”

“Of course. I’m just asking you to wait until after we’ve left to tell them we’re gone,” I say firmly. “We’ll pack up and get going, and then you can let them know. Once we’re safely away from here.”

“What do you think they’re going to do? Attack us? Come lock us in here?” At first, he’s teasing, obviously unafraid of what they might be capable of, but it quickly turns to frustration and disbelief. “For heaven’s sake, they walked out of here last night and every other time completely fine. They’re not monsters, woman. They’re just weirdos.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Please just do what I’m asking.”

When I look at him again, his eyes flick to my stomach. He puffs a breath of air between his lips, but eventually he nods. “Yeah. All right. I guess I’ll...start packing our bags, then.”

“Thank you.”

Leaving his coffee on the counter, he moves past me and into the bedroom without another word. I know he's angry, and I can't say that I blame him, but I need to trust my gut here, even if it's probably wrong. They might not have done anything dangerous yet, but something about this couple makes me feel off. They're watching me, watching us too closely. And the total disregard for our privacy last night was unacceptable. I didn't expect to see the owners of the house even once during this trip, but we've already seen them three times. Actually, four if you count the time I saw them outside the window. And each time has somehow been progressively worse.

While he packs our bags, I set to work cleaning up the house. I put the remaining few dirty dishes in the dishwasher and wipe down the counter and microwave.

Suddenly, a worrying thought occurs to me. My eyes fall on the cabinet in front of the sink, and I bend down, opening the door slowly and peering around at the drain where George was looking last night. It's ridiculous, of course, but is it possible he put a camera there? I move my hand around in the dark, fingers carefully gliding over the underside of the sink and along the back of the drain, jumping whenever I hit a bump or uneven spot.

Nothing.

Of course there's nothing.

The theory was irrational. Even if they did know how to work the technology needed for hidden cameras, they wouldn't have installed it in front of us, surely. We'd know where to look then.

Feeling foolish, I head for the bedroom, where I find Cal putting the last of his toiletries into his suitcase before he zips it up and does a final check of the bathroom.

“I think that’s the last of it,” he says when he returns, wiping a hand along his forehead. “Oh, phone chargers.” He zips past me to grab my phone charger from where it’s plugged into the wall, then collects his from the other side before shoving them both into my suitcase. Then he places his hands into his pockets. “So. Are you still sure about this?”

“Positive,” I tell him. “I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Okay, then. Everything’s packed, so we still need to clean up and?—”

“I cleaned everything up, so we just need to get the food from the fridge, and we’ll be ready to go.”

“Right.” He pulls his suitcase from the bed and rolls it out of the room. I grab my clothes from mine and change quickly as I do a final sweep of the bedroom before hauling my bag off the bed and into the living room. Within an hour, our things have been cleared out of the house, and it’s as clean as when we arrived. We take out the trash and sweep the floors for good measure, though sweeping wasn’t listed on the required cleaning list stuck to the fridge.

Despite his obvious frustration with me, Cal refuses to let me carry my bag to the car. He leads me there first, holding on to my arm to keep me from slipping. Even when he’s annoyed with me, he wants to protect me. It’s probably the safest and most taken care of I’ve ever felt in a relationship. The kind of love where anger doesn’t surpass your overwhelming need to keep the other safe.

At my request, Cal waits until we’ve driven away from the house to send Norma and George a message about checking out early. Once the message has been sent, he wastes no time manually checking us out in the app.

Not even a minute has passed before his phone rings. My heart leaps into my throat at

the thought of talking to them again, of facing them in any way. I can't explain it other than to say I'm scared of them and what they might do, and they make me uncomfortable in the way they watch me so intently, like I'm something they've never seen before. As if I'm a celebrity or a UFO.

I could never explain that to Cal, though. As much as he'd try to understand, he just wouldn't. Maybe no man ever could. I know we have similar conversations about why I lock doors the second I enter them and why I'm never okay standing outside of cars having a chat when we could just as easily be inside the car in safety.

It's not paranoia if it's necessary.

Being a woman means constantly being aware of your vulnerable spots and your weaknesses in any situation. It's looking for the way out when you enter a room and scanning for safe faces among the crowd. It's sizing up the other women, wondering if they'd stand with the men should it come to that.

Sometimes I hate it, the fear and nagging worry that seems to plague me at all times, but my mother always called it a gift. It's years of our ancestors speaking through our gut and intuition, letting us know when something isn't right. It's every bit a superpower as far as she was concerned, and right now mine is firing in every direction.

Something is up with these people. We are not safe around them.

He puts the phone to his ear next to me. "Hello?" There's a pause and then, "Yeah, unfortunately." Pause. "Well, we cleaned everything up, and it's all ready for—no, no, of course, we don't expect any sort of discount for a change of plans on our end. It was a lovely st—" He pauses. "Um, okay, I'll have to see. Can I call you back in just a minute?" When he ends the call, he looks at me. "They want us to come back."

“What?” My stomach plummets.

“Apparently they got you some sort of gift for the baby that they were planning to give you before we left.”

Ice sluices through my veins. “Absolutely not. We’re not going back.”

His face wrinkles. “Are you sure? I could just run by and meet them at the door. You don’t have to get out. It was really nice of them to get you something.”

“No.” The word rips from my throat. “It was very nice, but no. I feel like it could be a trap.”

“A trap?” he repeats, clearly growing annoyed with my fear.

“Cal, please.”

To his credit, he finally gives in. “Okay. Sure. I’ll...I’ll handle it.”

“Do not give them our address,” I say firmly.

“Do you know these people or something? What am I missing here?”

“It’s just a feeling,” I admit.

“A feeling.” He releases a breath. “Got it.”

After he calls and lets them know our decision, the remainder of the car ride is made in silence. With exhaustion coursing through me, I doze in and out. When I’m awake, I can tell he’s angry with me—and the change to his well-crafted plans—but I can’t bring myself to care. Being out of that house has filled me with such a feeling of fresh

air, like I've stepped out of a dusty basement and onto a mountainside.

When we get home, he stops in the parking lot and goes for our bags without a word. This isn't new to me. Cal isn't the type of man to get angry and yell. He's raised his voice to me less than a handful of times in our relationship. Instead, he closes off. He gets quiet. He deals with the problem inside his head, works out the steps to resolve it, and then comes to me with a resolution. It's not ideal. I'd much rather talk it all out right here and now, even if it comes to screaming, but I'm trying to be more considerate of what he needs. If there's one thing I've learned about Cal, he has to do things his way, even if I don't understand it.

When we make it to the front door and inside, I freeze. Immediately, every hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

"What's wrong?" Cal asks, coming in behind me and setting our bags down on the ground, but I don't have to answer. He sees it, too.

The blankets he meticulously folded on the couch have been thrown on the floor. There's a photo of the two of us missing from the wall. Farther down, a lamp has been knocked off the side table.

I turn back to face him, my eyes wide. "Someone's been inside our apartment."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HER — PRESENT DAY

“We must’ve bumped the table and couches when we were leaving. We were in such a hurry, it would be easy enough to do,” Cal tells me again.

It’s the fifth time he’s made that argument, and I’m no closer to being convinced than I was last night. We secured the place, checked to make sure nothing else was missing, and I still don’t feel safe. If it were up to me, we wouldn’t have slept here last night. But if we don’t feel safe at the cabin, and we don’t feel safe here, where will we feel safe?

On top of that, I’m having strange pains in my stomach that make me worry about preterm labor. I know they’re probably Braxton Hicks contractions, but with all the stress lately, I’m going to the doctor this morning to ease my fears.

“Don’t you think we would’ve noticed that, though? And, even if we did, it still doesn’t explain the fact that our picture is literally missing,” I remind him. I’m sitting on the end of our bed, begging and pleading with him to step into the reality we’re currently in. “I just don’t think it would hurt to call the police and ask them to patrol our area.”

“Okay, and tell them what? Someone broke in and stole our picture? We have a doorbell camera that would’ve alerted me if someone was here, and it never went off. There’s no evidence anyone was at the door, let alone in the house.”

“Except the missing picture.”

He sighs, turning away from me to adjust his shirt in the mirror. “I can’t do this right now. I think you need to sleep, okay? Clearly, you’re not getting enough sleep.”

I glare at him. “You did not just say that to me.”

“I’m sorry.” He scratches his forehead. “I’m tired, too. I just...look, the picture could’ve been knocked off the wall at some other point, and we just didn’t notice it. Maybe I picked it up and put it somewhere else and forgot about it. No one has any reason to break in and steal a photo and nothing else.”

“Did you move it?” I demand. “Seems like something you’d remember.” Another pain hits my stomach, and I groan.

His gaze rakes over me, clocking my distress. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I’m not telling him about the pains yet. I don’t want him to have yet another thing to call me paranoid about. “If you’re going in to work this morning after all, I’m going to go out for a bit.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No. I’m okay,” I tell him. “I just need some air, I think.”

“Are you mad at me?” He sounds so broken it cracks a wall inside me.

“No,” I tell him, kissing his cheek. “Of course not. I just need to cool down from all the stress. Baby girl and I are going to go to the park for a walk.”

He studies me for several seconds, but eventually he nods. “You’ve got your pepper

spray?”

“Always.”

“And you won’t overdo it? No running. No uneven surfaces.”

“Yes, father ,” I groan, rolling my eyes.

“I just want you to be safe.” He places his palm on my stomach. “You’ve got precious cargo in there, you know?”

I smile, but it’s sad. I don’t feel connected to my expression at all. In fact, I’m starting to feel less and less connected to Cal, too. “So I’ve heard.”

At the doctor’s office, it comes as no surprise that my blood pressure is sky high. The doctor does a good job of pretending not to be too worried, but I can tell she is.

“I’m going to have you wait in another little waiting area for about half an hour,” she informs me, an uneasy smile on her face. “Then we can recheck it and hope it’s gone down some. Baby’s heartbeat sounds good, and we’ll take a look at the ultrasound too, but I want that blood pressure down, or we’re going to have to talk about bedrest or possible induction. I want to avoid that if we can. You’re far enough along that if you had to deliver, her chances are great, but each extra day we give her lungs is just better for her odds. So, we’ll weigh the risks and benefits depending on what we see from your blood pressure and the ultrasound. Any questions for me right now?”

I swallow, my throat dry, and shake my head. “I don’t think so.” I’m going to do everything in my power to lower my blood pressure for this baby girl. As we walk out of the room, I find myself grinning over a scene from a sitcom I love where a character tells another he can raise and lower his blood pressure at will. If only I had such luck.

She leads me to a small, empty waiting room and hands me a bottle of water with instructions to wait here for a nurse to get me. I pull a book out of my bag and try to focus on the story, breathing in and out steadily to slow my racing heart. As stressed as I am, this isn't good for the baby, and I have to think of her first.

I have to calm myself down.

Though I'm not calmed down. I'm still actively thinking about calming down when a middle-aged nurse comes to find me half an hour later. "Sadie?"

I stand abruptly, slipping my book back into my bag. It's only then I realize I didn't make it through a single page. I've never been good at drowning everything out. I worry and obsess and make the smallest things my biggest focus until they're resolved. It's never been more frustrating to me than when my daughter's health is at risk.

"I'm going to take you back to your room and get your blood pressure, and then I'll take you to the lab for an ultrasound," she says, her voice monotonous.

"Okay, great."

She leads me down the hall, and it's only as she's opening the door to the room that I realize this is all wrong. "Oh, this wasn't my room."

I turn to face her, prepared to leave, but she's blocking me in and staring at me as if I've lost my mind. She blinks. "Yes, it was."

I stare around at the room that's so different from the one I was in half an hour ago. This room has a window, that one did not. This one has chairs on the wall directly in front of me, that one had chairs to my right.

“Sorry, I don’t think it was. My room didn’t have a window, and the chairs were in a different spot. I think I might’ve been next door.”

Unmoving, she glares at me. “No, ma’am. This was your room.”

I huff a breath as sudden, frustrated tears fill my eyes. Then, overwhelmed by the frustration, they overflow. “Oh. I don’t think so.” I chew my lip. “I mean, it doesn’t matter. I just didn’t want to be in the wrong person’s room and have them come in here or something.”

“They won’t, because this is your room.” Her dark brows rise as she practically begs me to argue again. “Sit down, Ms. Hawthorne.”

I suck in a breath, grateful, at least, that she’s ignoring my tears so they will hopefully go away soon. Dutifully, I sit down on the edge of the chair, feeling uncomfortable with the way the white sheet on the table is clearly wrinkled. Someone has been sitting on the bed, and probably in this chair, too. This room hasn’t been cleaned, and if I think about that too much, it’ll make me sick.

She approaches me with the machine to test my blood pressure without a word, slips the cuff on my arm, and presses a button. Seconds later, she pulls the cuff off of my arm and walks back to the counter, facing away from me.

“Is it better?” I ask, my voice low.

Without looking my way, she says, “Your doctor will discuss everything with you when she sees you.”

I chomp on my bottom lip, frustration and exhaustion brimming over. I can’t open my mouth to speak for fear my voice will break.

She steps toward the door and pulls it open, walking out into the hall before looking back. “Come on.”

I stand, like a scolded child, and fall in line behind her on my way to make sure my daughter is okay, while feeling very much not okay myself.

Later, with the reassurance that the baby is fine, and I’m just experiencing mild Braxton Hicks contractions, the doctor sends me home with instructions to monitor my blood pressure at least twice a day and call her if it gets too high.

On my way home, I call Cal. I’m no longer in the mood to ignore him or keep him out of this. The nurse’s actions and disregard for my concerns about being in the wrong room, though it all seems small and insignificant in hindsight, really upset me. We should feel safe with our medical professionals, and her responses toward me made me feel the exact opposite. I just want someone to make me feel safe at this moment, and the person who can do that without fail is Cal.

He answers quickly. “Hey, honey. What’s up?”

“I, um, I just left the doctor’s office,” I tell him, my voice on the verge of cracking.

“What? What’s wrong? Did something happen with the baby? Did you get hurt at the park?” His usually calm voice is suddenly filled with fear and concern.

“No, baby’s fine. I’m fine. I was having some pains, so I went in to have everything checked out, but they’re just Braxton Hicks. Nothing to worry about.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to the doctor? I would’ve gone with you.”

Now I feel as if I’ve betrayed him in the worst way. What if something actually had been wrong? He deserved to be there, and I let my pride and frustration keep him

from that. “I know.” Now my voice does crack, and suddenly, the dam breaks. I’m sobbing as I say, “I’m sorry. I was just really stressed, and my blood pressure was up, and I was mad at you about the house, but none of that matters. Can you come home?” I just want to hug him, cuddle up on the couch, and forget about this whole stupid argument.

“Of course. I’m still at work, but I had coverage for today, so I don’t have a class. I can leave. Are you on your way home now? Do you want me to meet you somewhere? Are you okay to drive? Tell me what you need.”

I sniffle, wiping my nose and cheeks. “I’m okay. I’ll be okay. I just...I just need you to meet me at home, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll finish up here and meet you at home in the next hour or so...” He trails off on the word, sounding distracted.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, nothing. That Norma lady from the rental keeps calling, wanting us to come back and pick up your gift. She’s getting pretty persistent about it. I told her I can probably run up there and get it one day soon when I have a chance, but she wants you there specifically. I guess they want to see your reaction or something. I told her I’m not sure you’re up for the trip.”

“No, Cal. I’m not going, and I don’t want you to go either. I don’t trust them. Why are they being so pushy? Why would they have gotten me a gift in the first place? It just feels like they want us back out there for some reason, and now specifically me.”

“Some reason like what?” he asks, his tone less judgmental than before.

“Do you not think it’s strange?”

He sighs. “I think they’re a lonely old couple whose kids are probably grown and long gone, and they’re trying to be nice. But the point is, if you’re not comfortable, we won’t go. Plain and simple. I’ll block their number. They don’t have our address, so we’ll all just move on. You and our daughter are all that matter to me. You know that, right?”

I squeeze my eyes shut at a stoplight, drying my cheeks. “I know.”

“Now get home safe, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

We end the call, and I turn my blinker on, preparing to turn left to go home, but something clicks inside me. I don’t want to go home. Right now, I don’t feel safe at home. Not alone. I don’t want to wait in that apartment for him for even a second. I’ll go by the school and surprise him instead, sneak a kiss in the parking lot. It’s been ages since I did that. Not since graduation in the spring, I suppose.

The drive is relatively quick, just a short trip to the campus downtown. When I get there, I drive through the rows of cars, searching for his. The black Camry is hardly one of a kind in this lot, but I recognize his by the yellow ‘Baby on Board’ sticker stuck to his back windshield. He insisted he get it the day we found out I was pregnant.

As I slow to park next to him, my stomach lurches. It feels like a hallucination. A side effect of my erratic blood pressure. I swallow, gripping the steering wheel so tightly it hurts as I stare straight through the gap between the cars. Cal can’t see me from here—he isn’t looking—but if he did, he’d see how ghastly white my face has gone. I’m surprised he can’t hear the way my heart is pounding in my chest, even through the closed windows and space that separate us.

I swallow, trying to comprehend what I’m seeing.

I sent her away, and she still found him.

As I watch the scene play out, the two of them standing together, chatting and laughing as if everything is right in the world, I can't help thinking how impossible it is. And yet, it's real. There, just a few feet in front of me, is my husband, and right in front of him—a pretty smile on her perfect face—is Janelle.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HER — PRESENT DAY

It was probably stupid to drive away rather than stopping and just asking what's going on, but the moment I saw them together, I felt as if I was going to throw up.

I know they're going to be spending time together now, as they should if she really is his daughter. I encouraged it, even, before I considered that it might all be a lie. Before I realized who she was. I understand that, if her story is true, she's going to be part of his life, and this shouldn't be upsetting for me, but that doesn't make it any less so.

More than the worry over what she might tell him, today, it feels as if he lied. He was at work, sure, but he was also with Janelle, which he failed to mention. Why didn't he tell me she was there? Did she surprise him after we got off the phone? How could she have? How would she have known he was there?

And then, of course, there is the worry about what her motive might actually be. Is she lying about everything? What is she telling him? Without me there to protect him, she could tell him everything, and where would that leave me?

What does she want? It's the question that's haunting me above all else.

It's taken everything in me not to unblock her phone number and beg her for answers, but I haven't. I can't. It hurts too much.

When Cal gets home half an hour or so after I do, he finds me in the living room and pulls me into a hug. I smell her on him instantly. It's light and airy, just a hint of her tucked into the fabric of his shirt, and yet the scent is overwhelming and painful, a terrible reminder of everything that happened.

I breathe through my mouth and pull away, hoping the remnants of the scent I once loved don't collect on my clothing and skin.

He lowers himself to my belly, speaking directly to our daughter. "Hey there, nugget. You gave us a scare today." He cuddles against my stomach, pulling up the fabric of my shirt so he can see my skin. It's stretched thin with the oversized bump. My body is practically unrecognizable at this point. How could so much have changed in such a short amount of time?

When I was just ten and twelve weeks along, I remember so vividly longing for a bump. I stood in front of the mirror and poked my stomach out, wore shirts that made it look as if there was the slightest evidence of the baby growing in my womb. I wanted the world to know about her, but now I'm starting to see the changes it has caused to my body, and I wonder if it will ever feel like mine again. If it will always feel partly as if it belongs to her.

"You've got to hang out in there for just a little while longer, okay? Just until you're ready to hatch." He presses his lips to my stomach with a lingering kiss before standing up, a smile spread across his face.

"Now then, we should get you on the couch, feet up, healthy snack in hand. I'll cut up some fruit for you." He slaps his hands together. "Any requests? We have pretty much everything, but I think you finished off the pineapple last time we had dessert."

I hold my hand up, stopping him in his tracks. "Actually, before we do that, I wondered if we could talk?"

His face falls, but only for a moment. “Okay, sure. Everything okay?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

A hint of laughter fills his expression in a way that makes me almost believe him. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, he might be able to convince me this afternoon hadn’t happened. “Why wouldn’t it be okay?”

“I’m just asking. How was work?”

“Work was...fine.” His answer is hesitant, like he worries I might know something he doesn’t want me to. But he doesn’t seem angry with me, so there’s that.

“Anything else I need to know?”

There’s a hint of a laugh and then, “What are you talking about, crazy girl?” He rubs my head like he would a toddler, and I’m filled with unadulterated rage.

“Just asking,” I say through gritted teeth. “Just wanted to make sure there wasn’t anything you needed to tell me.”

He sucks his lips into his mouth. “Fraid not. It was a rather boring morning. I went in, checked on some lesson plans, and headed home.”

“Right.” I nod my head. He has no reason to lie to me right now, so the question then becomes, Why is he?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HER — PRESENT DAY

The next morning, Cal is flossing his teeth in front of the bathroom mirror when I make my way in. He grins at me with the floss in his mouth, distorting his cheek. “Morning.”

“How’d you sleep?” I ask with a yawn. Cal is a morning person, always has been. As in wake up in the morning singing before you’re out of bed and skipping across the hall within ten minutes of waking up kind of morning person.

I’m the type of night owl who would rather not be spoken to for an hour after opening my eyes. I could lie in bed for hours after waking up, just zoning out on social media or watching TV. It drives him crazy to be in bed for more than ten minutes after he’s awake. At ten minutes, I typically still have one eye closed.

“Like a baby,” he tells me, always his response. I stopped sleeping like a baby the moment a baby started growing inside me.

I smile, turning on the shower before starting to strip out of my pajamas.

“Oh, don’t forget. I’m heading out of town in a few hours for the conference tomorrow,” he says. The words are so out of the blue, I’m sure I misheard him.

“Sorry?”

“Remember the conference tomorrow? I told you about it, the one right after we were supposed to get back from our trip. It’s not far away, just in Lexington, so I can be back in a flash if you need me, and I only need to be there for the first day of it. I’ll be back on Thursday.”

“I don’t remember anything about this.” I try to rack my brain, searching for the conversation where we supposedly discussed this inconvenient trip. Am I just feeling out of sorts and suspicious because of everything else that seems to be going wrong? Or do I have a legitimate reason to worry?

He purses his lips, staring at me like a puppy who’s just attempted a trick learned in obedience school. “Baby brain.” He smiles. “It’s okay, honey. I don’t expect you to remember something so small.” Turning back to floss his teeth, he adds, “I just wanted to remind you. So, if you need me to pick anything up for you before I head out, let me know soon.”

I close my eyes, stepping into the shower without a word. I hate the way he’s talking to me lately, but even more than that, I hate that he might be right. For all I know, I did forget about the conference. It’s not like it’s unheard of for him to go to them. I should know—I accompanied him to several when we were still sneaking around, when I was playing the role of his doting wife among strangers. It was hot and exhilarating, and I miss those days.

The baby kicks, and I look down, feeling guilty for even having the thought. I shouldn’t miss those days, when those days didn’t involve her. She is going to bring the best days with her. I already know it. My emotions are so all over the place lately that I’m not surprised when tears hit my eyes, mixing with the water on my face.

Cal finishes up on his teeth, tossing the floss into the trash and walking out of the room, humming a song I don’t recognize. Once I’m alone, I finally allow the silent sobs to claw their way out of me.

I'm not even sure why I'm crying. Because I'm scared to be alone in this house; because if I tell Cal that, he will most certainly act like I'm insane; because I don't understand why Cal is lying to me or what Janelle wants; or probably, most likely, a combination of it all.

Later, as he's loading his bag into the car, he gives me a kiss in the parking lot of our apartment complex, then he kisses my belly and says, "I'll be home before you know it. You promise you'll stay off your feet and rest, right? I made all your meals, and they're labeled, so all you have to do is heat them up. I don't want you climbing or leaving the house or doing anything except relaxing the whole time I'm gone, okay?"

"I still have work to do," I say a bit defensively.

"And that work can be done from the couch while you rest, relax, and finish cooking our little one." He kisses my temple. "I told you, you need to go ahead and take the rest of the pregnancy off anyway. Maybe now's the time. We're almost at the end, and you're going to wish you'd taken the time for yourself when it's all said and done."

I press my lips together. He's right, most likely, but I happen to like my job. And we're a small company, which means when I'm not working, one of the four others are taking up my slack. I've already asked them to take over my work from our long weekend away. I just can't see how it's fair to ask them to take more of my workload until it's unavoidable. Still, I can't tell Cal this. He wouldn't understand. His job isn't the same, and his coworkers aren't people he ever thinks about like I do.

"You'll call me when you get there, right?" I ask, changing the subject.

"You know I will." He kisses me again, staring at me as if it's for the last time. "I miss you already, beautiful."

“I miss you too.” I bury my head in his chest, my eyes blurring with tears at the idea of him leaving me alone. Once, not so long ago, I was an independent woman who had no issues with being alone.

Then came Cal.

And this man has rearranged everything about my life, my mind, and my heart. The woman I was when we met a year ago is unrecognizable to me now.

He slips into the car, waving at me once as he backs out, before honking twice and then zipping away. I don't know why I'm crying as I make my way back into the apartment, except that I'm hit with how utterly alone I am without him. With Mom sick, I have no one left to talk to about anything.

I'd do anything to be able to call her right now, to have spent this pregnancy asking her advice, celebrating the milestones, and lamenting the struggles. I'd do anything to see her hold her grandchild for the first time or watch me walk down the aisle.

When I pictured my life, my future, it wasn't supposed to look like this. She was supposed to be here. I check my phone, half tempted again to unblock Janelle, though this time it's just to have someone to talk to. She was the closest thing I had to a friend in the longest time, and I screwed it all up.

But I can't. Cal is my world now. It's the two of us against the world.

Three of us , I correct myself quickly, hand to my stomach.

Then that voice that seems ever present in my mind lately comes creeping in. The one that says Cal is acting differently. That he's different from the man I knew, the man I agreed to marry. That something is different and wrong and changed. And that I need to get to the bottom of it before this baby comes.

Phone in hand, I dial his number and wait for him to answer.

“Well, hello there, stranger,” he teases.

“Hey, I was just wondering which hotel you’re staying at in Lexington.”

There’s a long pause before he says, “Um, I’m not sure. Why?”

“You don’t know which hotel you’re driving to right now?”

He clears his throat. “Well, I have it in an email, but no, I don’t know it off the top of my head. I have the GPS set to get me to a restaurant first since I’ll want to grab a bite to eat for dinner before I check in.”

I click my tongue. “Oh.”

“Why are you asking?” Does his laugh sound nervous, or is it just my anxiety talking?

“I was going to send you a little surprise,” I tell him, thinking quickly.

He chuckles again. “Honey, you’re sweet, but you don’t need to do that, okay? Just rest. Watch trashy reality TV or read a book, and I’ll call you when I get there.”

I swallow, my throat suddenly too tight. “Um, okay.”

“I’m going to go. I was just pulling in to get gas. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Before he ends the call, my keys are in my hand, and I’m out the door.

With just a five-minute head start, it's easy enough to catch up to the black Camry at the gas station down the road from our apartment complex. At least he wasn't lying about that. I park near the back, ducking down when I spot Cal walking out the door with a bottle of water and an apple in his hand. He scrubs the apple skin against his pants before taking a bite.

Water and an apple. Even without an audience, he still makes the healthiest choices. I swear, this man always appears to be auditioning for the world's most put together person.

Once he's in the car and pulling out, I ease out of the parking spot where I'm hiding in plain sight. I keep four cars between us on the highway, my eyes trained on his car, matching him as he switches lanes and makes turns. So far, it seems like his story might've been accurate after all. He turns onto the interstate that would take him toward Lexington, and my heart strangely deflates. I should be happy he's telling the truth, but somehow, it's just further confirmation that something is wrong with me instead. That my brain is playing tricks on me, making me worry over nothing. Maybe yesterday with the nurse wasn't so bad either. Maybe I'm overreacting about a lot of things lately, including the couple from the rental. Maybe I was rude to them when I didn't need to be.

I'm planning to pull off at the next exit, to turn around and make my way home, when Cal makes a move I didn't expect. He crosses two lanes quickly, and I follow. Then he gets off at an exit that definitely doesn't lead to Lexington. He's heading toward downtown.

The school, maybe? But why?

Keeping back a healthy distance, I follow him through the streets of downtown and toward a neighborhood called The Gulch, where I once took a makeup class on contouring with some friends. When he pulls into a parking garage for a building

with a gym and a smoothie place, I know my instincts were right all along. Something is up with Cal. My gut does a little flip as if it's glad I'm finally listening, followed by a sudden sinking feeling.

I can't follow him into the parking garage. I've been lucky thus far being able to stay back far enough that he wouldn't notice me, but there's no way I can pull that off in a parking garage this small. And even if I could, the entrance is marked for residents only, and I can't see what code Cal is typing in at the small terminal.

Thinking quickly, I drive farther down the block until I find a single street parking space. Normally I'd avoid parallel parking with every fiber of my being, circling the block until I gave up rather than attempt it, but right now, I don't have much choice. I also don't have time to make sure the parallel parking job is done well, just that I'm far enough over that I won't get hit by something before I dart out of the car. Or...at least I try. It's much harder to move at a few days shy of thirty-eight weeks pregnant, let alone dart anywhere, but I do my best. Carefully, I shuffle down the sidewalk, holding my belly in place while internally panicking that I'm either going to lose him or get caught without any credible explanation for what I'm doing here. He'll know I followed him. He'll know I didn't trust him.

For all I know, maybe this is one of the other professors' condos, and he's coming to pick them up so they can ride to the conference together. But then why wouldn't he have mentioned that? It's something that would've come up, isn't it?

When I reach the parking garage, I'm out of breath. Considering my blood pressure lately, I know this is probably not a good idea, but I have to know. I have to know that the man I'm about to start a family with is still the good man I know him to be.

Inside, I try to slow my breathing as I look around. There's only one direction to go, so I walk it slowly, keeping myself close enough to cars that I could easily hide if I need to.

In the shadows of the parking garage, it's hard to identify each car and whether or not it's his.

Note to self: the next time we car shop, his only option is bright, look-at-me red.

When I hear his voice behind me, I freeze, terrified I've been caught.

“Hey, just letting you know I'm on my way up.”

I turn toward the sound, crouching down between a silver minivan and a green truck.

There.

He's walking through the parking garage, oblivious to me or the fact that he's being followed. I still don't see where he parked, but it doesn't matter as he steps into the elevator. I have to figure out where he's going.

As soon as the doors close, I scramble across the silent parking garage, waiting until I hear the elevator stop moving before hitting the button to call it back to me.

When the doors open, the elevator is stuffy and reeks of feet, stale air, and urine. I hold my breath as I step inside, praying it moves fast.

There are multiple floors here, but this elevator only goes to other floors in the parking garage or to a floor marked L . I have no idea which floor Cal might've gone to, but he said he was coming up, so I have to assume he wouldn't be waiting for the person in the lobby. Still, I press the button for the lobby first, trying to formulate a plan as I descend.

My stomach churns, and I have to press my hand against my nose, sucking in the scent of my hand soap in hopes it will stick around and mask the stench in the air.

The back wall of the elevator is just a window caked with fingerprints and smears of unknown substances. I don't dare touch it or the silver, metal handrail as I stare out at the bustling street and the construction across the road.

The elevator stops with a soft ding , and I step forward. The doors open slowly, not letting me escape this metal box of death- stench fast enough. I suck in a gulp of fresh air the second I'm free as I cross the quiet corridor and enter through a glass double door into the lobby of the complex.

There's an elevator and a set of stairs there, but I have no idea which floor he's on. Thankfully, the lobby is empty and quiet as I take the time to think. I can't possibly check every floor before he enters whatever condo he's going to. And once he does, it'll be too late. I'll have no idea where he is or if he's even still here. If he enters and later leaves a condo on the third floor while I'm still checking the second floor, I could spend my whole day searching for a man who's long gone. I have to think of something else. There has to be another way to find him.

I call the elevator, tapping my foot impatiently as I think. On the slow ride to the second floor, I chew the skin around the nail on my middle finger, a nervous habit I haven't done in over a year. Thankfully, this elevator smells more like perfume than feet, so I can focus more on crafting a plan than masking the smell.

The plan comes to me like a flicker of light in a dark sky, appearing slowly, then disappearing. I have to seek it out, trying to make sense of it. Could it even work? Could I make it work?

I have to try.

As I near the second floor, I pull out my phone, reminiscing on the many years as a teenager spent prank calling crushes with my friends. I add *67 to his phone number before calling, so it will show up unknown on his end.

It rings twice before he sends me to voicemail, but I never heard his phone. Back in the elevator, I go to floor three. This building isn't huge. From what I can tell, there are only four condos on each floor, which means standing in the hallway and dialing his number should result in me hearing his god-awful ringtone. For once, I'm grateful that he keeps that thing at such an atrocious volume.

In theory, this should work.

Maybe...

Hopefully...

I dial the number again on the third floor. This time, he answers with an angry, "What?" I nearly end it, but decide to wait, moving slowly through the hallway to listen. "What?" he calls again. "Hello? Who is this?"

I don't hear his voice anywhere except through the phone line. Dead end. He's not here either. I end the call and return to the elevator, pressing the number four. On the fourth floor, I dial his number once more.

In the distance, there is a faint ringing that nearly matches the one on the line. It's his ringtone, the one that sounds old and makes him feel cool. The one that's going to lead me right to him.

He ignores the call, and I call again, passing the first and second apartments. Lowering the phone from my ear as it begins to ring, I hold my breath and spin in place, trying to decipher which condo the sound is coming from.

Here.

I move forward slowly.

He's behind the third door.

Door number three. As if this is some sort of twisted reality show.

"Who was it?"

Everything inside me freezes. The voice chills me to the core as I stop in my tracks.

Her.

No.

She lives here. She can't.

He's here with her. But...why?

"Scammer, probably," he mumbles. "Come here."

Suddenly, he sounds much different than the last time we were all together. Less stiff and formal. Less nervous. She giggles, and my blood runs cold.

His next words send my world into a spiral. "I've missed you."

I know what I should do. I should walk away. I should leave and get myself out of this mess. I should gather evidence, pack my things, and move out. But I can't. Before I know what's happening, my knuckles are on the door, and he's pulling it open, and we're staring at each other. My vision is blurred with tears and rage as she shakes her head, both of them ready to deny what I already know.

"You're cheating!" I shout, not caring that the door is open and I'm still standing in the hallway, not caring that I'm making a fool of myself. "You're cheating on me,

you asshole! How could you? ” I bellow at Cal, a finger pointed at him as I march into her home without waiting for an invitation. White-hot fury radiates through me as I whip my head around to face her. “And you! Was this always your plan? What did you want from me?” Maybe her betrayal stings worst of all, but I don’t understand why. “Was it all a lie?”

“No,” she says, a hand on her stomach. “No, Sadie, listen—” She takes a step forward, but Cal shuts the door and moves between us before she can reach me.

“What are you doing here?” he asks. “How did you even find me?”

My face crumples as I stare at him. There isn’t a hint of guilt or sadness in his expression. “Is that really what you want to ask me right now? You don’t even care that I know about the two of you? That I caught you red-handed?” I look between them. “How could you do this to me?” I step back, my hand caressing my belly as I realize what this means. “How could you do this to us?”

“You don’t understand,” Janelle says, pushing past him. No— to him. She wraps her arm around his.

“What is there to possibly understand?” I’m going to be sick. “Why are you doing this to me? Is it because of what I did? Are you trying to get me back or something? Steal my fiancé and make me pay?”

“What is she talking about?” Cal demands, looking at Janelle for the first time.

“Listen to me. He’s not your fiancé, Sadie,” she says firmly, and it’s as if the room is now spinning, the floor gone.

“What are you talking about? Of course he is.” My body is a solid block of weightless ice.

“No.” She closes her eyes, bracing herself for what’s to come. When she opens them, they drill into mine. “He’s my husband.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HIM — BEFORE

It takes another two years to finally get her down the aisle, and once I do, we start trying for a baby right away. Of course, she doesn't know we've been trying for a baby for much longer than that, but now we're completely unencumbered.

My timeline is wrecked. I was supposed to have a kid between the ages of thirty-five and forty. Over and over, that has been proven to be the most ideal window of time for someone to become a parent. Maybe it would've been easier to just find someone else, but Janelle is special. I refuse to have been wrong about her.

A few months after the wedding, I started talking about how she needs to see a doctor.

“It's not that unusual, you know. I read it can take up to eight months to conceive on average, or even a year before it's considered abnormal. I've told you my cycles have always been a little weird anyway, and I'm just coming off birth control. It might take some time.”

And she's right. It takes two more months, two more misses, before she agrees to go.

At the appointment, the doctor confirms what I've long suspected. My sperm is healthy as a horse, but my wife is less than ideal for a mate. Her uterus isn't a perfect host, her eggs aren't healthy, and she doesn't ovulate regularly. In general, there's a less than ten percent chance we'll ever conceive naturally, and neither of us can

afford IVF. I don't want to adopt, though the doctor mentions it as an option as well. My kid has to have my DNA. Period.

Now, not only have I waited and wasted so much time on this woman, but she's not going to be able to carry my child anyway. I've never felt so defeated.

We could keep trying, I know. Janelle is only twenty-five. She's young enough that she has a few good years left in her, but I refuse to be an old dad. My plan is important to me, and I'll make it work.

I glance over at Janelle on the way home, a new plan already formulating in my head. An amendment to the plan.

"Maybe this is for the best," she tells me, though there are tears in her eyes. "Maybe we'll just get to enjoy each other for a few more years and then we can, like, adopt a kid from foster care. I've always thought that would be really special."

I feel sick at the suggestion. How can she be okay with this? None of it is okay. As special as she is, I chose the wrong woman to marry. And now it's too late. Divorce definitely isn't part of the plan. I can't admit to both a mistake and failure.

This won't do. This won't do at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HIM — BEFORE

“I have a plan.”

We’re sitting across the dinner table from each other, eating a meal I prepared that’s filled with nutrients to improve her fertility. Walnuts and tomatoes in the salad—the former to improve chances of ovulation and the latter to bolster my already satisfactory sperm—full-fat cottage cheese for her egg health, beans to improve her chances of implantation, salmon for a good source of omega-3s, and half a grapefruit for reproductive health as a dessert. A meal fit for a mother, though I’ve begun to greatly doubt she’ll ever be one.

I’ve limited her sugar, cut her off from alcohol and caffeine completely, and limited her red meat consumption to once a week. Everything that should work, everything that should fix this, and yet none of it is.

Nothing is working, and I’m not a man who takes no for an answer. We may not have money for solutions, but I will find a free one. I will fix this for us.

She looks up from her salmon, her eyes tired. This is killing her. I have to fix it. I know how badly she wants this, just as much as I do. “What plan?”

“To get us a baby.”

She lets out a soft laugh. “That sounds a bit criminal.”

“I want to get a surrogate.”

She pauses for a moment, then puts down her utensils, studying me. “You know we can’t afford that.”

“What if I said I could make it happen for free?”

Now she looks intrigued. Her eyes narrow. “What do you mean? How?”

“We could find someone who would agree.”

She pulls her head back, shaking it in disbelief. “Cal, no one is going to agree to have a baby for us for free. Not to mention all the medical bills associated with a pregnancy.”

I roll my lips together. She’s not going to like the next part, but it’s going to be what it is. And that is our only option.

“Unless she doesn’t know she’s our surrogate.”

Now she’s looking at me as if I’ve lost my mind. “What are you talking about?”

“If I were to get someone pregnant, perhaps someone who didn’t want a baby, then convince her to give up the baby to us, it would be like a free surrogate.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. “You’re talking about cheating on me?”

“Sleeping with someone else, yes. Purely for the act of procreation. I wouldn’t be enjoying it.” Her upper lip curls, and I reach across the table to take her hands. “It wouldn’t be cheating because you’d know about it. You’d be in the loop.”

“Do you have someone in mind?” she asks, worried.

“No. Well—” I bite my lip. “There’s a student in class?—”

She stands, taking the napkin from her lap and throwing it down on the table. “Another student? What is going on with you? Is this some sort of fetish?”

“No,” I tell her, standing up too, my voice calm. I’m already practicing being a calm parent, but she’s still young and has much to learn. “No, of course not. It wouldn’t be anything I’d take pleasure in. It would be for us. For our family. I know for a fact this student doesn’t want kids.”

“How would you know that?” she demands.

“We discussed it. The entire class.”

She shrivels away from me. “You...what? Sussed out your class? Polled them to find a candidate?”

Yes. “No.”

I asked them specifically who in the class wanted kids someday during our discussion of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, with the intention of finding the most attractive student who was also uninterested in children. Someone to check all the boxes.

But I can’t tell her any of that, so instead, I say, “It came up organically and gave me the idea.”

Still, she doesn’t look convinced. “So, what? You’re...you just want to get her pregnant and hope she doesn’t have an abortion? Or change her mind?”

“She won’t.”

“She won’t, to which one?”

“Either one.”

She presses her lips together in frustration. “You don’t know that.”

I rush around the table, taking her hands. “Do you trust me?”

Her eyes waver.

“Do you trust me?” I repeat.

Finally, she nods slowly, her eyes filled with tears. “Yes.”

“Then trust me when I say I’ve got this. I’m going to fix it. She will give us a baby—our baby—and then our family will be complete.”

“You wanted a whole family, lots of kids.” She’s crying now. “This doesn’t fix anything. I’m doing everything I can, everything you and the doctor said. I want to do this for you. I want to give you everything you’ve dreamed of.”

“One will be enough,” I tell her. It’s a painful change to an already perfect plan, but the only one I’m willing to make. “I can be happy with just one.”

Finally, she stops crying. “She doesn’t know you’re married?”

“I don’t think so, no.” I stopped wearing my ring in class months ago, but Janelle doesn’t need to know that.

“And she won’t get hurt?”

Always thinking about others. “No, of course not.”

She sniffles, drying her eyes. “Well, what’s her name? I want to look her up. I want to know her.”

I smile, my heart seizing. She’s on board. It actually worked. “Her name’s Sadie Hawthorne, and let me tell you, Ellie, she’s absolutely perfect.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HIM — BEFORE

When class ends the next day, I ask Sadie to stay behind. She strolls up to my desk with her books in hand. She's older than the other kids in class, already in her thirties, but still young and sturdy enough to be a decent incubator for my baby.

“Professor?” she asks, studying me.

She's attractive in a sort of dowdy way. Dull brown hair, but it's thick and healthy enough to tell me she eats a well-rounded diet, though her body type says she doesn't indulge. A perfect balance. Her fringe bangs are a bit overgrown, but not so much that it tells me she doesn't take care of herself. She hardly wears makeup and never paints her nails, which is good—fewer chemicals—and her clothing isn't ostentatious or attention-seeking. She blends in and is easily forgettable, which will work in my favor should things get ugly, but she's still...attractive. She has a pretty face, nice features. The sort of features I wouldn't mind staring at on a child for the rest of my life.

“Hello, Sadie. I wanted to ask how you're liking the class so far.” I stand from my seat, moving around to lean against the front of the desk so my leg is close to her. When she doesn't shy away, I nudge my knee a bit closer, testing my boundaries.

“Oh.” She appears shocked by the question. “I like it very much. I love reading, but I don't pick up the classics often, so I've enjoyed challenging myself.”

“What’s your major?” I ask, as if I care. She’s smart, I know. She’ll be going for something ambitious, obviously. Women who don’t want kids are like that. Always looking for something else to fill the hole inside themselves.

“I’m double majoring in business and marketing,” she says. “Someday I want to run my own PR firm.”

“And yet you found yourself in a literature class.”

She purses her lips. “And yet.” With a chuckle, she adds, “I actually would love to do PR for publishers and authors, kind of the merging of my two favorite worlds.” Her fingers link together as if fusing her hands in front of her to further illustrate her point.

“Ahh, I see. And here I thought you were just here because of the hot professor.”

Her eyes go wide as she processes what I’ve said. “Oh.”

I shake my head. “Teasing, mostly, but I can’t say I haven’t noticed you staring at me.”

Seeming to regain her composure, she says, “Well, you are teaching the class. I guess it would be rude to stare at anyone else.”

That earns a genuine belly laugh from me. “Oh, is that all?”

“Mm-hmm.” She smiles at me, and for the first time I notice that her eyes sort of sparkle when she does it. She’s more attractive than I realized. Maybe this can be fun after all.

“Hey.” I tilt my chin toward her. “Would you like to grab dinner with me sometime?”

“Like a date? Or a tutoring session?”

I grin. “Something tells me you don’t need tutoring.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HIM — BEFORE

We've been dating for just a few months when the pregnancy test comes back positive. Everything's in working order for her, further proving the holes in the condoms would've worked under normal circumstances with a healthy woman.

But it's not Janelle's fault, I know that. Her parents' maybe. Or bad eating habits. All the makeup she wears, and the alcohol and birth control she used to put into her body. Something to upset her natural chemistry and make her physically unfit to carry children.

Sadie's morning sickness has been around for a few days, but I waited until today to finally suggest a pregnancy test. She told me it's impossible, that we've always used protection, and she isn't sleeping with anyone else, but there it is. A single word staring back at me on the tiny, gray screen—that's what we've resorted to, words rather than symbols, because the human population's cognitive ability is in steady decline—pregnant.

I did it. I made a child. I'm going to be a father to the most perfect child that ever lived. As if I'm a pool ball that has been bouncing around the felt table, finally slotted in a basket, everything seems to fall into place. The feeling of elation that swells in me is nothing short of the sort of white light I imagine you sink into as you die. Pure peace.

“What are we going to do?” she asks, staring up at me over the test. “We can't have a

baby.” She scoffs, pacing, clearly distraught.

“It’s okay,” I tell her, trying to maintain my shocked expression while my face fights against a smile. “It’s going to be okay.” I catch her by the shoulders, stilling her. “What do you want to do? Talk to me. I’m here for you.”

I wait for her to tell me she can’t keep the baby, then for me to swoop in like the hero I am, but instead, she simply stares into space, thinking. “I...I don’t know. I never thought... How did this happen?”

I shake my head. “It was never supposed to.”

“If anyone finds out, you could lose your job.”

I tap my lip. “Unless no one knows it’s mine.”

Her panicked eyes dart to meet mine.

“Look, I know it’s not ideal, but I would take the baby if you don’t want it. I’ve always wanted kids. You don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to be involved. I know you don’t want kids. We can keep this quiet until you have it, and then I’ll take it.”

Her chin quivers. “You—you mean you actually want the baby?”

I nod. “I think I do, yeah. I mean, this isn’t how I pictured it happening, but I think it could be pretty amazing.”

“I graduate in just a few weeks,” she says softly, back to thinking.

“Yeah, that’s true. It makes it easier to hide. If you don’t overindulge, by the time you

start showing, you would be out of school.”

Her eyes bounce back up to mine with a bit of hope. I’m helping her out. Saving the day. “We’re really going to do this?”

“Yeah—I—er—we— what? ” The world stops spinning. The bright light is gone. I’m sinking.

“You want to raise the baby with me? You want to be with me?”

My stomach plummets. “Is...that what you want?”

Her hands go to the flat tummy now carrying my child. “Yeah,” she says softly. “I think I do. If you’re in, I’m...I’m in. I really think we could do this, Cal. Together.”

With the walls closing in around me, the oxygen being forced from the room, I do the only thing I can think of. I drop to one knee. “Let’s do this, then. Let’s go all in. Marry me, Sadie.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HIM — BEFORE

Back at home that night, I prepare a meal for Janelle and pour her a glass of wine. She's been drinking more since we stopped trying so hard for a baby, and I've allowed it, but this is the first time I've been the one to pour the glass.

When she comes in the door from her workout class, she looks distracted. She's been busy lately, taking on extra classes to keep away from me, I think. I know this can't be easy on her—knowing I'm sleeping with someone else. Dating someone else. But now it's all going to be worth it.

She finds me in the kitchen and stops in her tracks. “What is it?” she blurts out. She can tell something is different, changed, from the look on my face.

I hand her glass to her, but she doesn't drink it. Undeterred, I lift mine in the air. “Well, are you, uh, are you ready to be a mom?”

She pales. “What?”

I beam. “We're going to be parents, honey. It finally happened.”

“She's...she's pregnant? You actually did it? Already?”

I nod. “We had a positive test today.” I pull her in for a hug, but she's stiff in my arms. “Guess this old guy still has working parts after all.” She's quiet, still, and I

pull back. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m just...processing.” She looks down. “Did she tell you she wants to give the baby up?”

My jaw tenses. I’d hoped to save this part for a little later. “Not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

I sigh, dropping my arms away from her and scratching my forehead. “She wants to keep the baby. The, um, the two of us.”

Janelle’s arms go out to her sides. “Excuse me?”

“She wants us to raise it. Together.”

“And what did you say to that?”

I puff out a breath of air. “I...proposed.”

She grabs for the chair, sinking down and setting the glass away from her. “You proposed? Are you kidding me?” She pauses, chewing her bottom lip. “How is that possible? Are you leaving me?”

Suddenly, I understand the sadness in her eyes. “Oh, honey, no. Of course not. This baby is ours—yours and mine—just like I said it would be. I just need more time to convince her to give it up. I’ve got it handled. She’ll realize soon enough this isn’t what she wants. She’s too independent to be a good mother.” She winces. “But for now...I have to play the part. I have to be fully committed.”

Her eyes flicker with worry. “What does that mean?”

“I’m going to move in with her.”

She stands back up. “What? No . You live with me. Your wife .”

I put my hands on her shoulders, speaking slowly, calmly. As if speaking to a child. I’m going to be so good at this parenting thing. The best there is. “And for now, I’m going to have to move out. Most of my stuff will stay here, but I’ll get a little apartment with her. We’ll live together because that’s what she wants. I’ll play the role, and then in nine months, I’ll bring our baby home to us.”

“And if you can’t? If she doesn’t change her mind?”

My lips go tight. “Don’t worry about it, okay? Let me take care of everything.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this.” She’s sobbing then, and I try to gather her in my arms, but she shoves me back. “You ruined everything!” she shouts, backing up and turning to run away from me. “This is not what I wanted.”

I don’t chase her. She’s mad, and I don’t blame her, but she’ll come around. She’ll see this is for the best sooner or later. I’ll make sure of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HIM — PRESENT DAY

“I don’t understand,” Sadie says, staring at the two of us. Our unit. Our family. The past nine months have been difficult, balancing two women who need me for so much. The emotions coming at me from all sides. But it’s been worth it. She’s far enough along at this point that even if the baby were to come right now— even if we had to cut it out of her ourselves —the baby would survive. My daughter would survive.

What I want to know is why my wife is looking at Sadie like that. As if they know each other.

Janelle opens her mouth. “Sadie, listen?—”

“He can’t be your husband. We’re engaged.” Sadie shakes her head, but before Janelle can answer, I step forward.

I’ll be able to handle this so much better than she will. I can control Sadie, even now. “Obviously, this wasn’t the way I wanted to tell you this...” I begin, releasing a slow breath. “But it’s true. Janelle isn’t my daughter like we told you. She’s my wife.”

Sadie is visibly pale, clutching her stomach. “Is this some sort of sick game? A...a joke? Are you all just trying to mess with my head?”

“Of course not. None of it was planned, okay? What happened with us was a mistake.

I made a mistake, but the biggest miracle came out of it.” I gesture toward her stomach. “Janelle and I have always wanted a family, and she can’t have kids of her own.” I pull her against my side like the loving husband I am. “So when I found out you were pregnant, I came clean about the affair, with hopes that it would mean we could finally have a baby of our own and give you what you want, too.”

“What I want?” she snarls.

“You told me you don’t want kids. And that’s okay. It’s all going to be okay.”

“What are you talking about? When did I say that?”

“I don’t know, exactly. You’ve just mentioned it before...” I trail off, realizing I’ve said too much.

Her eyes flick here and there, staring into space, lips moving with no discernible words as she thinks to herself. Finally, she looks at me. “You mean in class? Before we were even dating?” Her gaze falls on Janelle, but I step in front of her. “Is that why you chose me? Did you seek me out for this? Target me? Was this...was this on purpose?”

I scowl. I’m really playing this role well. I’m prepared for it. I’ve practiced, written lines, played the scene out in my head a million times. That’s the key in life—always be prepared. “Of course not. Do you really think I’m such a monster?”

“Why would you propose to me if you’re married? Why would you lie about everything?”

“I had hoped, eventually, the relationship would come to its natural end. I wanted to make sure you were safe and protected while you were carrying my child. I thought the best way to do that was to be nearby.”

She covers her mouth, staring at me as tears continue to fall from her eyes. “Did you ever even love me? Did you care at all? For even a second?”

“I cared about you, Sadie. Of course I did. How could I not? But that doesn’t change the fact that I also love my wife.” I look down. “It doesn’t change the fact that I screwed up.” My face wrinkles as I try to make her understand, try to appeal to the emotions she must be overwhelmed with right now. The pregnancy hormones surging through her blood only help my case. She’s biologically conditioned to care, more so now than ever before.

“You lied to me. You went through all of this for nothing.” Then her face hardens, and she drops her arm. “Because I’m not giving you my child.”

“My child,” I correct her.

“You don’t even know if it’s yours,” she snaps.

A rubber band snaps inside me. I lunge forward. I’ve never laid a hand on a woman, but I will not be disrespected. I grab her throat, my fist closing around the delicate column. “Don’t ever speak to me that way in front of my child.”

The room is as dizzy as a tornado with us stumbling backward, her scrambling to stop me, and Janelle screaming. We knock into a table, sending a stack of books and a lamp tumbling to the floor.

“Calvin!” Janelle shouts, begging. “Calvin, stop! She can’t breathe. The baby.” She’s unstable. Emotional. Panicked. Using only her lizard brain, not her rational one. She can’t see that I’m the one who will get us through this. That I know what I have to do. She’s trying to pull me off of Sadie, grabbing at my arm, clawing my skin, but I don’t feel a thing. It’s as if my entire body is completely numb, focused solely on the task at hand. My fingers close tighter around her neck. I can’t stop. If she dies, we have

minutes to get the baby out of her. Minutes where the baby can still survive. I've done the research. I know what it entails. I can end this right now. Solve all of our problems.

“Please!” Janelle begs.

Sadie, on the other hand, refuses to beg, though her hands are fighting to pry mine away, all ten fingers red and white from the pressure she's applying to mine. She's fighting for her life at this moment, and I respect the hell out of her for it.

Her face is nearly purple, eyes pleading with me, mouth open now though no sound is coming out. I was wrong before. She's not all that pretty, and the sparkle has long since dulled from her eyes.

In fact, lately, I've found her quite dull in general. She's?—

Pain.

A white-hot shard of lightning passes through my head, quick as a camera flash, and I release her. “What the?” I reach for my head, for the source of the pain. It comes again, and I stumble backward, dropping to the ground.

I'm falling. Flying. I don't understand what has happened.

I'm inside a tornado of agony.

Overwhelmed with darkness.

A third blow happens, with another blast of lightning.

Then there's only darkness.

Only quiet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HER — BEFORE

“Last thirty seconds, okay? Push!” From the front of the class, the instructor, Ellie, shouts out instructions, her frustratingly perky voice like nails on a chalkboard to my tired ears. “You’ve got it, guys! Almost there! That’s right, Norma! Keep it up! Look at her, out-pedaling all the rest of you at seventy-three years old. Keep going, keep going! Final push! Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one!” The music ends, and the lights come on as twenty stationary bikes all come to a stop at once, their noisy whirring slowly dying off.

My legs burn. They’re heavy and lifeless as I slip from my bike, gasping for breath.

Ellie dries her face with the towel from around her neck. “Great class today, everyone! Kicked some ass before sunrise, and now you can go out and slay the day. Don’t forget to hydrate and get your electrolytes in. I’ll see you next time.” She jumps off her bike, her legs apparently not made of jelly like the rest of ours, and chugs the water from her water bottle.

All around, cliques of women join up, lamenting about the hard workout and chatting about their plans for the day, their husbands, and their kids.

Like always, I keep to myself, though I can’t help scanning the faces in the room wistfully. I wish it were easier to make friends as an adult, but it’s really not. I don’t know how most people do it. I was certain coming to this class would help, that it would give me someone to talk to with Mom so sick, but even weeks in, I don’t have

a single friend in this class.

I know there's no one to blame but myself. I struggle to put myself out there. Even now, I'm only here because I was invited to try a month free after I received a flier in the mail.

“Hey, you're doing great!”

I look up, already recognizing the voice. It's not the first time the instructor has tried to speak to me. I know she's just trying to get me to sign up for more classes since my trial is nearly up, but she's nice enough, and since she's the only one who has tried to speak to me here, I don't mind chatting. “Thanks. I'm definitely feeling it.” I squat, bending my legs to stretch them out. I rub my thighs and calves, massaging the sore muscles.

“Yeah, it gets easier with each class, but those first few weeks are always rough. Are you thinking about sticking around for a while? A month or two in, and it'll be a piece of...” She winces, squeezing one eye closed. “Um, celery?” We laugh. “Maybe not as fun as a piece of cake, but not the worst thing either. And it's good for you.” She bobs her head, like she's confirming it to herself. “Yep. Celery fits.”

I chuckle again. “Yeah, I don't know how much longer I'll be coming. Not because of you or the class—you make it as fun as it could possibly be, trust me. But I have school and work, and I'm not sure I have time for this, to be honest. I stay really busy.” I pause, then I admit, “Plus, mornings are not my thing at all.”

“Oh, really?” She studies me. “What made you sign up, then?”

I can't admit that I was pathetic enough to hope I'd make friends here, so I go with the other part of the truth. “Eh, I got a free month, and I've been seeing this new guy, so I was hoping to kind of...” I trail off, feeling desperate and silly. Why the hell am I

in an exercise class right now trying to look better for my professor when I could be getting sleep? Maybe it's because in class we're surrounded by a bunch of twenty-somethings, and I'm closer to his age than theirs. I just want him to think I'm hot.

"Got it," she says with a chuckle. "It's always a man, isn't it?"

I smile at her. Somehow, despite being all too perky at this time of day, she's surprisingly easy to talk to. "How does that manage to happen?"

"You're asking the wrong person." She scoffs.

I laugh. "Well, anyway, thanks for class! I'll see you next time. Maybe."

She holds up her hand to stop me. "Hey, wait. I know you said you're super busy, but if you don't have plans, I don't have another class for a few hours and was planning to grab an acai bowl from next door. Want to join me?"

I waver.

"Come on. We can spend the whole time complaining about men."

Now that is an offer I can't refuse. "Sold."

At the shop next door, we order our bowls and sit at a table by the window. "So how long have you been working at SpinSista?"

"Oh, a few years now, I guess."

"It seems like it would be fun. I work from home, so it can be sort of...quiet." I nearly say lonely, but I catch myself.

“Oh, wow. I get too in my head for that,” she says. “I need people around.” There’s a nervous giggle. “Probably the root of my trouble with men, actually. I get a little lonely and make bad decisions.”

I point to the tan line from a ring on her finger. “You’re married?”

Self-consciously, she looks down. “Sort of?”

“How can you be sort of married?” I ask with a dry laugh. The seriousness on her face tells me this is no laughing matter, though, so I clear my throat. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t pry.”

“It’s okay. I don’t really have girlfriends anymore, since I graduated, so it’s nice to talk to someone, honestly.”

“Me either,” I admit. “Actually, I’m in college now. A late bloomer. But even there, I tend to keep to myself. So feel free to dish. Or whatever the cool kids are calling it these days.” I wiggle my fingers at her, as if drawing the gossip out.

She’s quiet for a while, stirring her fruit around. “He’s controlling, I guess. Not abusive or anything, but he controls what I eat and what I wear. He has to have everything just so, you know? I’m the opposite, and maybe some of it is good, honestly.” She puffs out a breath of air, blowing hair from her eyes. “My mom always said I needed structure.”

“Are you close with your mom?”

“She died a few years ago,” she admits.

“Oh. Mine’s sick. Dementia. She hasn’t recognized me in a few months.” I hadn’t meant to be so honest, but somehow, it slipped out. I want to trust her. I desperately

need to trust someone I can talk to about all of this, and Cal doesn't exactly scream empathetic listener most days. He's too focused on fixing things, making it better step by step, to provide emotional support.

Ellie surprises me by taking my hand. "I'm so sorry."

I give her a small smile. "Me too." Suddenly, our age difference is clear, and I want to help her out of this situation. I'm probably less than a decade older, but that experience has to account for something, right? "So why haven't you left the controlling guy? Does he have a name?"

She hesitates. "It's complicated. I love him. He's also kind of...all I have."

I swallow. "Well, not anymore."

Her smile is sad.

"I just mean, if you need someone to talk to, I'm around."

"Thanks, Sadie."

"Anytime."

"And same to you," she says. "If you need a friend, I'm here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

HER — BEFORE

I never knew I was into girls until Ellie and I started spending more time together. I guess I've always found them attractive, as in celebrities, but I've never met a woman in real life that I'm attracted to in the way that I found her attractive.

Of course, she's married, and I'm dating Cal, but it's something I'm becoming increasingly aware of as we spend more time together. Which is why, when she kisses me out of the blue one day, everything changes.

I had no idea if she felt the same, no idea if I was being completely delusional about our chances, about the meaning behind her lingering looks.

The minute she leans in, I think she's going to get a fuzz from my hair or something, but instead, her eyes close. When our lips touch, it's as if the entire world opens up, like I'm seeing color for the first time. We've been seeing each other every day after class, and yes, I've been coming every day rather than weekly like before, but until now, I could tell myself it was just because I finally had a friend after so long of feeling alone. And that was mostly true.

I've always thought of sexuality as being fluid. Like for the right person, nearly everyone could swing to one end of the spectrum or the other, but that has never been more clear for me than with Ellie.

We're standing outside of the acai bowl shop, preparing to hug before we walk away

like we always do, and her lips are on mine as all thoughts seem to halt. Nothing else matters at this moment, nothing else exists. Not Cal or her husband or school or our age difference or the fact that this is all new to me. There is only one single thought running through my mind— so this is what it's supposed to feel like.

The kiss—like most perfect things—ends too soon, bringing us crashing back down to reality.

She covers her mouth. “Oh my god, Sadie. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have?—”

“No,” I cut her off. “I mean, yes, you're probably right, you shouldn't have, but...” I touch my lips, the lingering feeling of hers still on my skin. “It's okay. I...I liked it.”

She smiles. “I've never done that before.”

“Me either,” I admit.

“We probably shouldn't do it again.”

“Probably not.”

She smiles again. “But I kind of want to.”

“Me too.” My throat is dry as her hand skates up the flesh of my arm.

“Can I walk you to your car?”

I know what she's really asking. I know that if she walks me to my car, it'll happen again. That it might never stop happening. That this might be both the beginning of something amazing and the end of everything I knew. I know I should tell her no until I talk to Cal. And still, I hear myself saying, “Yes.”

As I walk into her class the next day, a tablespoon of worry sits in the deepest part of my gut. I'm not sure what I'm worried about, though—that she'll regret what happened, that I'll regret it somehow, or that I might be ruining what I have with Cal.

The truth is, I like them both. Cal has been kind to me. He's charming and charismatic and smart. He's everything I've ever dreamed of in a partner.

But Ellie is...Ellie. She listens to me. She gets me in a way I've never really been understood before. She's funny and beautiful, and I relate to her on a deeper level than I do Cal. It's just a fact.

As I find my way to my bike, I'm holding my breath. She's up near the front chatting with a few of the other women, and I wonder if maybe we'll just pretend the whole thing never happened. Maybe coming back here was a mistake.

Then, like a magnet, her eyes find mine. I can't look away as she excuses herself and slips away from the women, her smile lighting up the room.

She's effortlessly confident in a way that will forever make me jealous. As she moves toward me, my heart swells, and I wait for her to look away or seem nervous at all, but there's no hint of it.

She stops next to my bike, her lips curving into a bright smile. "Hi."

"Hi." My voice is breathless and whiny. I'm nervous. I'm so incredibly nervous.

"I, um, I didn't know if you'd come back."

I take a sip of my water for something to do. Something to fill the awkward air. "I didn't know if I would either," I finally admit.

She bounces up on her tiptoes. “I’m really glad you did.” For the first time, she looks almost as nervous as I feel, all the confidence I saw moments ago wiped away.

I can’t fight the grin. “I am too.”

Her gaze trails down my body. “You look great, by the way. I love those leggings.”

“Thanks.” I shrug. “They’re from Target.”

She chews her bottom lip. “So, listen, I was wondering if you wanted to go out again after this.” I hesitate, and she adds, “I know things are complicated, and you’re dating someone, and I’m married, so all of this is very wrong, but...” She tucks a loose piece of blonde hair behind her ear. “I haven’t been happy in my marriage in a long time. I think you know that. I don’t want to bring you in the middle of my drama, but I’m going to leave him.”

Every muscle in my chest tightens.

“I decided it before I got to know you, but it’s taken some time to say it out loud, even to myself.” She shakes her head. “I know it’s weird timing, and you can totally say no, and we can still be friends—or not, if that’s not cool with you—but I’d really hate to miss out on whatever this is.”

Still, I don’t say anything. I can’t. It’s as if my brain has short-circuited. Yesterday, what we did was wrong. I know that. But I thought it was forbidden. An affair. Something hot and illicit that we’d both forget about in a week or two. Today she’s telling me it could be real. That we could be real if I want this.

My throat is suddenly too dry. I gulp down water as the music from the front of the class starts, telling us it’s time for our workout to begin.

When I close my water bottle, she's still waiting, patient as ever. "You can take some time to think about it, if you need to."

I nearly nod. Every muscle in my neck contracts to get ready for it, but instead, I reach for her hand to stop her from walking away. "I don't need to think," I say finally. Her eyes widen as I drop her hand. "I don't know what this is either, or if it will amount to anything, but I want to find out, too."

"Yeah?" Her bright smile sends a wave of relief through me.

"I'd love to go out again." Go out. Those words are a confirmation this is happening. I'm agreeing to go on a date with a woman. I want to date a woman. This woman.

She presses her lips together, appearing pleased. "Then it's a date."

"It's a date," I confirm.

Warmth spreads through me like spilled hot tea as she walks away, breaking eye contact at the last possible second before she reaches the front of the room.

I have no idea what this is, and I hate that I'll have to hide it from Cal, but I do want to explore this. I want to know if my feelings for Ellie are real and if they might be stronger than my feelings for Cal.

As she welcomes us to class, her eyes find mine again, like they can't resist. Like she's as drawn to me as I am to her.

I feel the matching flush of her cheeks on my own, and before the workout begins, my heart has already picked up speed.

Two weeks later, the nausea begins. I think I have the flu at first, or that I'm

especially stressed about finals, but no amount of nausea medicine seems to ward off the vomiting.

When Cal suggests I take a pregnancy test, I nearly laugh him off the couch. It's a ridiculous notion. Not only because we've always used protection, but because we've only slept together a handful of times and...it just can't be possible.

But it is. The moment that test flashes positive, my life implodes before my eyes. The future I saw for myself at eight this morning is no longer the one available. I had plans to see Ellie. Plans to figure out what all of this means, but now...I have no idea what I'm going to do.

There are options, of course. I never wanted children, but suddenly knowing the universe has other plans, I don't know. It's like I don't recognize myself.

When Cal suggests we keep the baby, there's a gentle tug inside of me. Something crying yes that I don't fully understand. Saying yes to his proposal is both the easiest and hardest thing I've ever had to do. It's crazy. We hardly know each other, but he's kind. He's handsome. He takes care of me. He has a stable job. It's better than most men I know. And if he's ready for this...I guess I can be, too.

I guess I should be.

That night in bed, I text Ellie to let her know it's over, that I can't do this anymore and won't be back to spin class, and then I block her number, too terrified to see her response.

Too terrified that, if given the chance—if she asked me to—I might be tempted to throw it all away to be with her instead.

CHAPTER THIRTY

HER — PRESENT DAY

My ears ring, my head pulsing with heaviness. The second Cal's hand leaves my throat, I gasp for air as if I might not get another chance. I don't have time to process anything else except that I need oxygen, and I don't have it. My lungs burn, skin aflame from the memory of his hand crushing my windpipe.

If I hadn't just experienced it, if I couldn't still feel the indentations from his fingers on my skin, I might think I imagined it. Cal loves me. Cal wanted to marry me. But now, none of that is true. Now, Cal is married. Now, Cal lied to me about everything. Now, Cal looked me in the eyes and tried to kill me. To kill our daughter.

What have I ever done that was so wrong?

What have I ever done but love him? But try?

If I hadn't come here, where would we be? I would still be home, playing the role of the doting, ignorant fiancée, waiting for him to return to me. No idea that his return would not have been a happy one. That eventually he would try to take our daughter. That he would ruin my life, my future, everything.

The baby rolls over in my stomach, probably sensing my distress, and I gasp with pain. I'm still trying to draw all the air I possibly can into my lungs with long, deep breaths—one hand on my chest and the other on my stomach—when my eyes find Cal on the floor. He's lying there, eyes closed, blood spilling out across the gray grain

of the faux wood floor. The contents of my stomach roil, my reality flipping on its axis. I glance up, my eyes finding their focus on Janelle for the first time. I still can't breathe, and each breath is painful, like I'm already bruising inside and out from what happened.

From when Cal tried to kill me.

It doesn't feel real. My hands slide to my neck, covering the space where his rested as I stare at her. "What did you do?" I demand. My voice doesn't sound like mine anymore. It's hoarse and gravelly. Feral.

I don't know if I'm asking her what she did just now to Cal or in general to me. There's so much I want to know and so much I may never know. I take a step backward away from her.

In her hand, she's holding a lamp, the shade missing, bulb shattered. Vaguely, I remember the way it sounded—the dull thud—as it cracked into Cal's skull moments ago. I remember that it happened—replaying it in my mind for the first time. The memory is hazy and oxygen-deprived, hidden behind a thin veil, but it's there.

"I—I didn't have a choice! He was—he was going to kill you." Her eyes go wide as she cuts a glance to the lamp in her hand. At once, it drops from her palm as if it's on fire. "I didn't know what to do!"

"Is he dead?" I ask. I feel as if I'm going to faint.

"No," she says quickly, then adds, "I don't think so." She bends down closer to him, studying him. Gently, she puts a hand on his chest, closes her eyes for a beat, then looks back at me. "He's breathing."

"We need to call the police," I say.

She's still. Unmoving.

"What are you waiting for?"

"He tried to kill you," she repeats again, trying to let it sink in for me.

"I know that."

She stands up in front of me, hands clasped together. "I don't think you do. I don't think you've actually processed what just happened. You have to run, Sadie. And not just out of here, but out of this town. Out of the state if you can. He won't stop coming for you. For her." She gestures toward my stomach.

For the first time, it clicks for me that every horrible thing Janelle has ever told me about her husband was about Cal. One by one, I replay the conversations, then connect them to moments in Cal's and my relationship. How controlling he was with my meals after we found out I was pregnant. How he had to know everywhere I was going and why. How he researched and monitored every vitamin I could possibly need, then found ways to make sure I got it, either through diet or supplements.

He maintained me like a plant, and I called it love.

"He will not stop," she repeats again, slower this time. "He wanted a baby, and when I couldn't give him one, he went after you. He will stop at nothing to have that child."

When I couldn't give him one, he went after you. Her words replay in my head, the truth of them slamming into my chest. "He lied to me." It's not really even a shock, as devastating as it is. He planned everything. Of course he did. He's always been the planner, so why would I expect anything less?

She nods, licking her lips. “I’m so sorry. When I met you, I wanted to warn you, but I knew if I just came right out with it, you’d never believe me. I worried you’d think I was lying because I was jealous or bitter. And...and I thought we had more time, and then...” She puts her head down. “I should’ve stopped him, but I trusted him. I believed he loved me.”

“Why are you helping me now? Don’t you want the baby, too? Why wouldn’t you want him to win?”

She snuffles. “I’ve always wanted to be a mom, yes, but not like this. In the beginning, maybe I did want it, but then it got all screwed up. He swore to me you didn’t want her. He told me you were coming around to the idea of giving her up, but that it was hard for you. I believed him over and over and over because...god, I don’t even know why. Because he’s a man, I guess. Because he was older. Smarter. Because I thought he would take care of me.”

The words are eerily reminiscent of my own thoughts. I think back to the impatient and dismissive nurse not believing me when I said the room we were in wasn’t mine, and to everything I told Calvin recently—my fears and concerns about the couple at the cabin and the intruder in our house. Instances where I wasn’t believed over the smallest of things. Meanwhile, Cal was able to control and manipulate and hurt us over and over, purely because we believed him.

She snuffles. “I tried to call you so many times. To visit you and warn you, but I worried about what would happen if he found out. He has a tracking app set up on my phone, so I could never go anywhere but work or home without him asking questions. I...I should’ve done more, but I couldn’t. And then, recently, I found some research in his search history about surgically removing a baby via cesarean section.” The words wash over me like cold water as she grimaces. “Detailed research. Notes. Supply lists. And it scared me. When I found out he was taking you away for a vacation, I suggested you stay at a place a woman from my spin class owns. I had her

send me a link to her cabin and then showed it to him. Cal didn't realize we knew each other, and I told her I couldn't explain it, but I needed her to watch out for you. That you were dating a bad guy, and I was worried for you."

Suddenly, it clicks for me. "Norma?" Now I understand why they were constantly around, why they came running when they thought they heard me scream, why she kept watching me so closely.

Janelle nods. "She takes my spin class, and they had the place. I knew because they go up there for a couple weeks every few months, and she misses class. I was so worried he'd try to hurt you there, but I thought if I called the police, he'd just call me crazy. Without proof, I knew they wouldn't believe me, and it would be my word against his. They'd just think I was a crazy, angry wife. I needed someone there to protect you when I couldn't be. Her husband, George, is a retired cop. I knew if anyone could protect you, it was them."

I swallow. I don't know what to make of any of this. It's too much to handle.

I take a deep breath, and as I do, my entire stomach tenses, like the baby is adjusting in my stomach again, rolling from one side to the other.

"How could he do this to me?" I cry, my body weak.

She looks at my neck, and I sense that there's probably proof of his actions on my skin. Purpled fingerprints, evidence that his love for me was always a lie. I was simply a vessel.

Again, my stomach tightens. The baby must know something is wrong here. She can sense my stress. I'm certain my blood pressure is dangerously high.

Janelle looks at me, eyes wide. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine.” I wave her off, breathing through the discomfort. “We need to decide what to do about him.”

“I’m going to call the police once you leave. I’ll tell them what happened, but you need to be long gone by then.”

“No way. There’s proof of what he did on my skin. I’m staying here to make sure he goes down for it.”

She stares at me, mouth open. “Why?”

“I’m not saying I forgive you,” I admit, “but Cal tried to kill me. I’m not going to stand around and let it happen. Neither of us can risk them not believing us. For your freedom and my baby’s sake. We can’t let him get away with this. I refuse to let him win.”

My stomach tenses once more, the sensation so uncomfortable I feel like she must be completely stretched out in there. This time, the ache of it steals my breath. I lean back against the wall. “Oh.” I breathe out slowly, gritting my teeth as the waves of pain move through me. “Oohhh.”

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“Nothing. She’s just really active right now.”

“She must sense your stress.”

I nod. “We need to call the police.” I don’t add, Before I chicken out.

Later, when the police arrive, Janelle and I are separated in order to give our statements. During mine, a pair of EMTs check me over, examining the wounds on

my neck and taking my blood pressure.

“Had Janelle Moon hit Calvin on the head before or after he choked you?” the officer asks, looking pointedly at his partner.

“After. I told you that,” I say.

“And what were you doing here in the first place? Did you follow Mr. Moon to confront his wife?”

“Of course not.”

“Had the two of you ever met before?”

I swallow. There’s no way to lie about this. “Yes. A few times. But I didn’t know who she was. I didn’t know they were married.”

If they look into it, if they see we were involved in the same classes, if they somehow find out she was at the cabin with us this weekend, or that the two of us were texting daily in the weeks before I found out I was pregnant, I don’t know what it will mean. I don’t know if they’ll take our word over his.

The officers exchange looks again.

The EMT lowers the stethoscope. “Your blood pressure is way too high, which is putting you and your baby in danger. We are going to have to take you to the hospital.”

“Okay,” I mutter, fear trickling through my veins, overriding the discomfort in my stomach.

“We have to take her in,” the EMT says again, this time to the officers, not wasting any time as she helps me to my feet. “The rest of this will have to wait.” She places her hand on my stomach as it tenses again. “Oh. Did you feel that?”

“Yeah.” I wince. “She’s been rolling around a lot today. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“It’s happened a lot, then?” she asks, placing the stethoscope on my stomach, the other hand flat next to it.

“Yeah, it’s just random,” I say, but just as I say it, it happens again. I nearly double over, holding my breath. It’s not painful so much as uncomfortable. She’s getting too big for my stomach or something.

The EMT smiles at me sadly, drawing me out of my thoughts. “Sweetie, what you’re feeling isn’t her moving around. You’re in labor. Your baby is ready to meet you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

HER — PRESENT DAY

When my daughter comes into the world, I am alone.

Technically, I'm surrounded by a team of doctors and nurses, none of whom I know, but in all the ways that matter, I am alone. The sounds of her cries are quite possibly the most beautiful music I've ever heard, instantly erasing whatever agonizing pain I was in before.

The doctor places her on my chest, and I stare down at her, searching for signs of myself. For proof that she's mine, and she'll always be mine. Tears blur my vision, smearing her image. She's a screaming pink bundle of joy, and none of her features look anything like me yet, but they don't look like Cal either.

Someday, when I look at her, will I see her father's face?

A nurse asks if I'd like a photo of the two of us, and she takes my phone and snaps the picture. In it, I can see the bright purple outline of Cal's fingers around my neck, proof that he almost made sure this moment never happened. Proof of everything he nearly stole.

The nurse asks if there are any family or friends in the waiting room I need her to get for me, but I suspect she already knows the answer as she smooths down my hair, her gaze flicking guiltily to my neck every few seconds.

“She’s beautiful,” she whispers, smoothing a hand over the baby’s head. “Congratulations, Momma.”

I smile, but the word still feels a bit foreign to me. Someday, I will be her momma, but today, I feel too lost to be anyone’s mom. Today, I feel too lost to be anything.

When the door opens, my heart skips a beat and falls just as quickly as I see the police officers from earlier entering the room. The nurse looks at me warily. “She just had a baby. Surely this can wait.”

“This’ll just take a second,” the first officer says.

Slowly, reluctantly, the nurse leaves, and when we’re alone, the officer draws nearer to me. “I wanted you to know Calvin Moon survived the accident, so no murder charges will be filed.” My whole body goes numb. “I’ll let him decide whether to apprise you of his medical state, but until he contacts you, I’d suggest you stay away from him. He still has the option to press charges for assault and battery.” His gaze rakes over me. “Would you like to press charges against him?”

I swallow. As much as I can help it, I don’t want today to be tainted by Calvin any more than it already has. “No.”

“You sure?” the second officer asks, his brown eyes narrowing at me. Maybe this will make him think I’m the guilty one or that I have something to hide. Maybe I don’t care at this moment.

When the officers leave a few minutes later, we’re alone again, and I feel myself falling asleep as my daughter suckles at my breast. What feels like every few seconds, the nurses come in to press on my stomach or check this or that, but for the most part, we’re just alone.

Just me and her.

For the longest time, alone felt scary, but now, it's the greatest sense of peace I've ever known.

When the door opens later, ripping me from sleep, I pull the baby closer to me, protecting her from whatever monster might be lurking.

As Janelle walks in, her blonde hair has been pulled back in a low ponytail, and she looks as scared as a deer in headlights. Her big blue eyes stare at me with quiet questions.

"Is she...okay?"

I nod. I don't owe her any answers, but I'm acutely aware I only made it to this moment because of her. Despite what she's done, that means something to me.

"Did they tell you about Calvin?"

Again, I nod. "Have you seen him? What are you going to do?"

"Yeah, I saw him. He's in room four seventeen, so pretty far away. He won't be able to bother you. I already told them what happened. That it was self-defense." She pauses. "He said it was a heated moment that got out of hand. He wouldn't admit to what he did to you, but he's not pressing charges, either."

That doesn't sound like Cal. Giving up. Giving in. I just hope he doesn't change his mind once he's out of the hospital. "I don't know if I ever said thank you for what you did. I don't know if, if you hadn't done what you did, I don't know if I'd..." I choke back tears. "Just...thank you."

She nods slowly, eyes down. "Sadie, I don't even know what to say to you right now. I'm so sorry about everything."

“I know,” I tell her. I don’t say it’s okay because I’m not sure it is. I’m not sure it will ever be. All this time, I was so terrified Janelle might reveal my secret to Cal—that I had cheated on him during the beginning of our relationship, that without our daughter, I might not have chosen him—and now I know his secret was so much worse. “I’m not going to give her to him. I’ll fight him with everything I have.”

“I hope you win,” she says, her voice soft. “I truly do.”

I don’t like how unsure she sounds. Instinctively, my hands tighten around her. “She’s mine.”

“She’s beautiful,” she says.

“Why did you lie to me? Why did Cal tell me you were his daughter? Why did you play the part?” It doesn’t matter. Really, it doesn’t. And for all I know, everything she tells me could be a lie. But I need to ask. I have to have an explanation for it all.

She looks at the ground, shuffling her feet. “I was worried about you. I hated myself for not warning you when I had the chance. And when I found the research Cal was doing, I did the only thing I thought I could do—I asked him if I could start coming around. He didn’t think it was a good idea at first, but I was insistent. I told him I just wanted to be a part of it. That I needed to feel closer to everything that was happening.” Finally, she meets my eyes. “We came up with the plan ourselves. The easiest way for me to be involved and around you without you being suspicious about who I was. I thought if I could be around, could get you alone, I knew you’d want answers once you realized who I was. I thought if we could, I don’t know, maybe I could try to tell you what was happening...somehow. If you even believed me. It wasn’t a good plan, but if anything happened to you because of me, I’d never forgive myself.”

I glance down at my daughter, pulling the blanket around her face. “And the house? Our picture, the lamp? Did you do that, too?”

She fills her lungs with a deep, shaky breath. “I couldn’t let you be alone with him until I could convince him the plan was bad. I went to visit him at the school, and I asked him to come today because I was begging him not to go through with it. I wanted you two to leave the apartment because I couldn’t guarantee your safety there. I thought if you were somewhere more public, like a hotel, you’d be safe. Safer, anyway. I kept texting you, hoping you’d unblock my number so I could warn you, but you never responded.” She swallows and steps forward, pulling a piece of paper from her back pocket. Unfolding it, she hands it over to me. “For the record, I don’t think you’re safe even now. As long as you have what he wants. I still think you should leave. Get as far away from here as possible. But...maybe this will help.”

I read over the document slowly, noticing Cal’s scratchy notes at the bottom. As realization sweeps over me, tears blur my eyes. It’s just a piece of the research she mentioned before. Just a hint of what he was planning, and it’s atrocious.

“He was going to kill me,” I whisper, still unable to believe it, even seeing it in his own handwriting. “He was going to take the baby and leave me to bleed out.”

“You were never married,” she says. “In Tennessee, that means he has no rights to the baby unless he files a petition with the court for paternity. To do that would be messy. It would make him look less than perfect. I think that’s why he was planning—” She cuts herself off. “I think that’s why his plans changed. He had all these notes in his cloud when I went searching. He’s been planning this for a long time. But he won’t fight you in court. That would be—” She smiles to herself. “That would be against the plan.”

It’s a sad smile that crosses my lips as I realize she might be right. “What will happen to you?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. “I’m filing for divorce, obviously, but after that...” She puffs out a long breath. “I’m not sure yet.”

“You could come with me.” I don’t know where the offer comes from, except that my eyes are suddenly filled with tears. I don’t know if I forgive her or if I ever will, but she’s a victim in this, too. She’s also the only reason I’m alive.

She doesn’t meet my eyes, looking at the baby in my arms instead. “I wish I could, but I have things to take care of here. Maybe...maybe let me know where you end up, and I’ll find you.”

She reaches out and takes my hand, tears now falling down her own cheeks as she glances at the baby again. “She’s a lucky girl, you know? To have such a strong mother.”

“I’m not strong,” I argue through my tears. “I should’ve seen him—should’ve seen this —coming long before now.”

She presses her lips together, looking away. “Calvin is good at making people see what they want to see, but you came to our house, you followed him, because you sensed that something was wrong. If you hadn’t...I’m not sure what would’ve happened. I don’t know that I would’ve ever been able to convince him to stop.”

I stare down at my daughter, fast asleep in my arms. “We’re going to be okay,” I tell her. And Janelle. And myself.

“He didn’t break us,” Janelle adds, already backing up toward the door.

I meet her eyes. “And he never will.”

She brushes a tear from her cheek. “Take care of yourself, Sadie.”

“You too,” I whisper, my voice choked with sobs. For the first time, I don’t mind the tears.

When she closes the door, I kiss my daughter's nose, realizing that I still need to give her a name. For the first time, it hits me that the decision is entirely up to me. I no longer have to listen to Cal's pros and cons list for every name he prefers. "He didn't break us, Amelia." My mother's name. The woman who gave me my strength. The woman I feel here beside me, inside me, even when she can't be.

Later that night, when Amelia is asleep, I place her in the clear bassinet next to the bed, and we go for a walk. The hallway is empty and quiet as I pad down the hall toward the room Janelle mentioned Cal is staying in—417.

My hands shake as I push open the door. I'm exhausted and in pain, but I'm not weak. If anything, I feel stronger than I have in a long time. Strong enough for this.

In comparison, on the bed, he looks almost frail. His eyes are closed, his chest is rising and falling with slow, steady breaths. Already, Janelle told me, he's confirmed to the police that he won't be pressing charges. He's told them what happened. His version of it anyway. A version that leaves Janelle and me as innocent as he is.

I could walk away from all of this.

I run it through my head. He shouldn't press charges, but somehow, I know him better than that. Even if the battle isn't legal, Cal won't go down without a fight. Janelle was right. My instincts are right. He won't just let us disappear.

This is the only way.

I look around for something to use, and I find it when my eyes land on a tray with a roll of gauze, tape, and medical scissors. With trembling hands, I grab the scissors and approach his bed.

Cautiously, I touch his fingers. This is the same hand that has held mine so many times, the hand that has prepared my meals, the hand that was wrapped around my

throat just hours ago.

If I think too much, I'll chicken out. I glance at my daughter.

I'm doing this for her. For us.

With that thought, I lift the scissors and press them into his skin. With a fluid motion, I slice them down his wrist. Dark blood immediately pours out. His heart monitor begins to beep faster, and his eyes flutter open.

He looks left, right, his eyes finding focus as he checks his wrist, the source of the pain. The next thing he sees is my face, my smile, as I hold our daughter in my arms.

Almost like my body is proving a point, blood passes between my legs at once, spilling onto the floor. It's further proof that she's mine, that I went through the brutal work to bring her into this world. And that she'll never be his.

His panicked eyes flick from me to the baby, and I place her down again in the bassinet seconds before he opens his mouth. I know him—know exactly what he's going to do next.

There's something beautiful about knowing someone in this way.

I grab the pillow from under his head and cover his face. His hand reaches, stretching for the button to call a nurse, but I'm stronger right now. I'm strong enough to do this.

He thrashes around, fighting to force the pillow away from his face, but he's weak. His motions are drugged and sloppy with sleep, injury, and whatever pain medication they have him on.

It's funny, in the end, that despite both being brutally injured and in pain today, he

was clearly given something strong enough to knock him out, while I was hardly given more than over-the-counter pain medication, and that will be the thing that saves me.

The fight lasts longer than I expected. It's brutal, nasty work taking someone out of this world, almost as tough as bringing someone into it.

I hold the pillow over his face until he stops fighting. By the time he does, I'm sweaty and exhausted.

My heart pounds in my chest from the exertion as I carefully place the pillow back under his head and wipe the scissors off—clearing away my fingerprints—before laying the scissors in his opposite hand. His eyes are wide open, and I press them closed, stepping back. Blood still seeps from the deep wound on his wrist, down the bed, soaking into the mattress, and down onto the floor.

This man gave me my greatest blessing, and I will forever remember him as my greatest curse. These two things will remain true in my mind—agonizing and contradictory.

In the end, he left me with no choice.

He did this to himself . I repeat my story in my head. I came to see him, to show him his daughter, to try to forgive, and I found him like this.

Even if the officers don't want to believe me, there will never be any proof. It will always be just my word against a dead guy's, and if there's one thing Cal taught me, it's how to be a damn good liar. I've spent the last nine months practically receiving a masterclass in it.

Step One: Always have a plan.

When there's enough blood spilled to have killed him. When there's no doubt of what happened and how he did this to himself, clearly overcome with the guilt of what happened today, I open my mouth.

Then, with all of my strength—because I am strong—I begin to scream.