

A ROMANCE NOVEL

BEHIND HER

Lies

BELLA
PERRY

Behind Her Lies

Bella Perry

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2023 Bella Perry LLC

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental and not intended by the author..

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the author. For more information, visit bellaperry.com.

First paperback edition August 2023.

Book design by Bella Perry LLC

Cover background photo by Holden Baxter on Unsplash.

ISBN-13: 979-8-9876617-4-1 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 979-8-9876617-5-8 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 979-8-9876617-3-4 (ebook)

www.bellaperry.com

OceanofPDF.com

Also By Bella Perry

WHERE DID IT GO RIGHT?

OceanofPDF.com

To all of whom are trying their best.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 1

The rain began unexpectedly, the sky turning a solemn gray, complimenting the black attire of everyone at the burial site. It didn't matter, though. Most of the mourners were already making their way back to the parking lot, ready to get into their cars, drive home, and continue with their lives, thanking their luck that it wasn't their husband in that coffin – not that Henry's body was even in there, or ever found for that matter. The few people remaining who felt there was a responsibility to say something, anything, to her, used the rush of aggressive droplets as an excuse to gently pat her arm and give a sheepish shrug of the shoulders with a pitying not-quite-a-smile expression, as if to say what more could they do? The weather was out of their hands, and it was time for them to go like they thought that gesture ticked the check box of obligation at one of these events.

The sudden shuffling of papers tore Josie Marten out of her memories as she looked at the title agent sitting across the table and her real estate agent at his side.

“I'm sorry, what was that?” She asked, trying her best not to look as startled as she felt. She continued to bounce her toddler on her lap, automatically tucking the long strands of dark hair behind her daughter's ear.

“You're all set. That was the last of the paperwork that needed signing.” The title agent picked up the set of keys lying on the table and slid them across to her. “Congratulations on your new home. It's officially yours.” It was evident he repeated that same sentence all day long. “I'll get these scanned in and have a copy emailed to you by the afternoon.”

“Thank you, that'd be great,” Josie said, picking up the keys, and slowly packing the crayons away. It was funny what you always had in your purse once you became a mom. “Come on, kiddo. Let's get this picked up, so we can go.” Thankfully her daughter didn't fuss. They'd entered the independence stage accompanied with a side of tantrums not that long ago. It was a milestone with as much exhaustion as there was excitement.

“Josie, dear, if you need anything at all, you let me know. Okay?”

She looked at her agent and did her best not to roll her eyes. The woman practically smelled of greed, but Josie had been in a rush and didn't want to miss a chance to put in an offer on the house due to shopping around for a good real estate agent first. She didn't know the area or the first person to ask, but it was done with. The woman was practically impossible to reach during the process, but she was the first one to show up early on closing day for that commission check, Josie thought with annoyance. Thankfully, she'd been through this process before and knew how it all worked.

"Right. Have a good weekend." She slid her purse over her shoulder, grabbed her daughter's hand, and made her way to the exit.

"Excuse me. Miss?"

She stopped to look at the front desk clerk. "Yes?"

"Would you like me to snap a quick photo for you?" Her smile was genuine. "You'll want to remember this day, I'm sure."

She thought for a moment, really just ready to get to their new home, work on unpacking their car, and prepare for the movers. She shrugged her shoulders and thought what the hell? Why not? This was the beginning of the rest of their lives now, so she might as well capture the moment.

Smiling, she changed directions and headed for the clerk, pulling her phone out and handing it to the woman. Then she smiled down at her little Becca, who was holding her hand. "Here, sweetie, Mommy's going to hold you for a picture. Can you say cheese?"

The smile her daughter gave her, then directed out somewhat toward the stranger holding the phone, made Josie's heart melt. She knew all moms likely felt this way, but damn it, if she wasn't the luckiest mom to be given this beautiful little girl to raise. She smiled just as big and cheerful as Becca, and automatically hugged her a little tighter.

Pulling into the drive of the three-bedroom and two-bath house, Josie turned down the kid songs she had playing over the car's speakers.

"Mom! Music!"

"We're here. Look, this is our new home! Are you ready to get out?" She turned to look back at her daughter sitting in the car seat. She was tall for a three-year-old but didn't quite hit the height or weight markers to transition to a booster seat. At the sight of the house, Becca started squirming, eager to be let free of the buckles.

“Out. I want to get out.”

“We’re going to. Let me get the key out, and I’ll come around to get you.”

Josie dug through her purse for the keys she tossed in earlier, and then left the handbag sitting on the armrest. She packed her car with as much as it could fit. She doubted anything would go wrong with the movers, but she felt better being prepared for the worst-case scenario. She knew how quickly things could go sideways in life.

Climbing out of the SUV, she walked around to the other side and opened her daughter’s door, unbuckled the straps, then held Becca’s hand as she jumped to the ground.

They both walked toward the front door, Josie admiring the flower beds skirting the front porch and Becca hopping up the stairs like a bunny. She liked that it had an all-glass storm door to let in the natural light. Opening it and using her hip to hold it out of the way, she began to slide her key into the main door. But the sudden barking of a dog startled her, causing her to drop the key as the sound grew closer. Spotting the Golden Retriever running toward their porch, she scooped up Becca and shielded her daughter from the dog.

“Heel! Scout, heel!”

She turned toward the stern voice, as the dog took a sitting position at the top of the stairs, its mouth opening and tongue splaying out in an almost goofy-looking smile. The man who commanded the dog came into view, and taking the same route as his dog had just done, he climbed the stairs, taking them two at a time. The moment he lifted his head, his face coming into view from under his ball cap, her heart stopped.

“I’m sorry about that—” he started.

“Drew?” It was a whisper. Becca was already squirming, trying to get out of her mom’s arms.

“Puppy dog, Mom! There’s a puppy dog! Aww, she’s so cute. I want to go down!”

“Shh. Becca, stop. Hold on a moment.” She tried adjusting her, but it was practically impossible to hold a toddler that didn’t want to be held. Either way, she wasn’t letting go just yet.

Instead, she eyed him suspiciously. “Is this your dog?”

Drew gave her that old, easy smile that she hadn't seen in years as he patted the dog's head. "Yes, this here is Scout. I'm sorry if he startled you. The previous owner used to come home from the grocery store and always snuck him a new bone or some sort of treat."

He took her in, just as beautiful as ever, he thought. Her hair was a little shorter, eyes a bit sharper, and she had a guarded demeanor about her. Then again, it could be the fact that she looked ready to end any potential threat to the little girl trying to escape her overprotective hold. Yet, here she was in front of him again, and man if she wasn't still as sexy as hell.

"Wow, it's been forever," he finally said, getting a grip on himself.

"Hmm." She looked back between Drew and his dog. "Is he friendly?"

"He loves kids, but he might lick you a lot." He was looking at the little girl who was anxious to get down. Her daughter, he realized, finally registering that the little brown-haired child had said *Mom*. "But he's gentle," he added, noticing the caution still in Josie's eyes.

"I love puppy dogs. They're my favorite."

"I love puppy dogs, too," he said, giving her a wink.

Reluctantly, Josie let Becca down, who instantly barreled toward the beautiful dog, wrapping her arms around its neck in a hug. To Josie's relief, the dog really was friendly and gentle, letting Becca pet and practically crawl all over it.

"Are you the new owner?" He nodded toward the house, as if it wasn't obvious what he was talking about.

"As of thirty minutes ago. What are you doing here?" The question came out rude, but it was a shock to see a familiar face in a town she'd never been to before. Especially when that familiar face belonged to Drew Warren.

He rescinded with a smile. "We were working in the garage when Scout heard the car pull up." He shook his head and laughed. "He stayed by my side until the moment I turned, and then he must've thought it was time to come collect."

"My garage?" Her eyes grew wide.

He chuckled. "No, my garage. I live right there." He tilted his head in the direction he'd come from, where she noticed the blue house and its open garage door sitting beside her own.

For the first time, he noticed she smiled back at him and her shoulders seemed to relax a little.

“Yeah, of course,” she laughed. Then, as the meaning of that statement dawned on her, she stopped. “So we’re neighbors?”

“It looks that way.” He was grinning, and he couldn’t help it. It was good to see her again, making college feel like it was just yesterday. “Who’s this little one?”

Unease was creeping in like a bad rash, but she told herself to save it for later. She could compartmentalize her emotions and deal with the fact that she would be living next door to her college sweetheart later, maybe after her car was unloaded, dinner was eaten, a bath given, and she put her daughter to bed. She didn’t have time for this extra layer of thoughts to process right now.

“Rebecca, but everyone calls her Becca.” Instinctively, she took a step closer to her daughter who was immersed in playing with the dog.

“Becca, do you want to say hi? This is our neighbor.”

“Hi. I’m Rebecca Marten, and I’m three.” She held up her fingers to indicate her age, though only two of them were raised. Drew smiled.

Bending down to give Scout a pet, Drew smiled at the little girl. She had Josie’s smile and eyes. “Well hi Becca, my name is Andrew Warren, but you can call me Drew.”

She was already distracted by the dog again, giggling as it licked her hand. “He gave me kisses,” she squealed at her mom, who then grinned at her in return.

“I wasn’t aware the previous owners lived here,” Josie said to Drew, watching as he raised back up. “The people I bought it from had to send all the paperwork from Florida.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been her daughter and son-in-law. They didn’t really speak much and never came around. Her name was Mindy, and she’d lived here alone the past seven years after Earl passed away. She was a tough old bird, and the best neighbor, but a heart attack ended up taking her a few months ago.” He looked down, remembering how happy the woman always seemed, not realizing his voice had grown solemn. “Their daughter never came around, but that didn’t stop them from keeping her in the will, and I guess she didn’t want anything to do with the house.”

He placed his hand on a worn column of the porch, almost admiring the white wooden beam. "It's a great house, though," he said, looking back at Josie. "And a great neighborhood. You'll both be happy here."

She watched him, noticing he talked of the previous owner and home with fondness. It was nice learning about the place they were moving into.

"Well, thank you for the history, and I'm sorry you lost your neighbor. She sounded wonderful."

He nodded. "She was, but enough about that. Do you ladies need any help getting unloaded? I noticed the packed car. Do you have help coming, or is your husband on his way?" He watched as her composure changed, hardened.

"No, thank you. We've got it." She knew the right thing to do was explain it was only the two of them, but she didn't feel like opening that door. The one that would inevitably lead to the truth of her situation, and then she would be forced to put on a front again. That was why she moved somewhere new. She wanted a fresh start. No more lies, no more pretending. She'd have to explain soon enough, but she was fine with postponing it.

"Alright, well I guess we will get out of your way then." He turned. "Scout, come on. Let's let them go about their business."

"No, I want puppy stay." Becca grabbed onto the dog, as though that would settle the matter. "Stay!"

"You've got to let her go, sweetie. They've got things to do."

Squatting down next to her, Drew gave a big grin. "I'm glad you like Scout so much. I bet you two are going to be good friends. How about after you get all settled in, you and your mom can come over to play fetch with him in the back yard? Only if your mom says it's okay, of course."

Her big brown eyes instantly went to Josie, her face full of excitement. "Can we, Mommy?"

How could she possibly squash that excitement? "Yes, once we're all moved in. It may not be today, but—" It was too late, Becca was already squealing and jumping with joy.

"It was nice to meet you," he said to Becca. Then Drew stood back up, Scout following him as he retreated down the stairs. "I'll be running into you, I'm sure," he directed to Josie, turning to give them a smile as his feet reached the ground. "If you ever need anything, I'm right next door."

Josie only nodded, then finally bent down and grabbed the key she'd dropped. "Come on, baby, let's check out our new house."

She fumbled with the lock, reminded herself to get it together, then slid the key in and twisted. As she ushered her daughter inside, she took one more glance next door, seeing Drew standing at the edge of his garage, giving a smile and nod in her direction before she rushed into the house. Drew Warren? Of all the people and all the places, what on earth was he doing in Greysprings?

"Fire, Mom! Fire!"

Josie quickly followed her daughter into the living room to the right. She let out a sigh of relief. "Yes, baby, it's a fireplace. Isn't that cool? We can have fires with our movie nights."

"I like fires."

She smiled at her girl. "I know you do, sweetie."

Double-checking that she shut all the blinds, Josie slowly made her way through their new home. Her head was aching and her arms were sore from holding a toddler more than usual, which wasn't surprising considering the huge changes they'd undergone in such a short amount of time. They started their morning off in a hotel and were ending it on an air mattress in an unfamiliar house. It was only natural that her daughter would want her mother's comfort during these strange, yet exciting, times. But it didn't mean it made unloading a car or dashing to the closest grocery store any easier.

Since the movers would arrive tomorrow, she decided it would be smarter to blow up the mattress in the downstairs bedroom for tonight. It would end up being a catch-all for items and boxes until they got more settled over the next few weeks. It would also mean one less thing to move or do in the morning when they arrived and needed to know where to put which furniture.

As Josie climbed the stairs to the landing that led to the primary and Becca's future room, she smiled at the thought of them being so close. Their previous home was a split floor plan. Henry had insisted on it when they had the home built. They weren't pregnant at that point, but she still didn't like the idea of being that far away from future kids. In hindsight, she found herself thankful.

As she turned on the light in what would be her new bedroom, she noticed the proximity of the house next door. Drew's house. It wasn't only the closeness that surprised her, but the lining up of their upstairs windows. As she neared them to close the blinds, she found herself curious as to what lurked inside her neighbor's home. Whether he had blinds, she wasn't sure. They could've been lifted all the way up, but either way, she was surprised that he left his lights on at night with the windows open. Anyone could see inside. Hadn't he heard of privacy, let alone safety?

She'd always been the type to shut the curtains and close the blinds the moment the sun went down. She never liked the idea of random onlookers being able to see inside her home at night. Yet, here she stood at the window looking over what she presumed to be his bedroom. The dresser a little cluttered on top, dark nightstands on each side of his bed with mismatched lamps, and a deep blue comforter across his bed.

There was a sudden movement in the hall past his open door, a shadow growing larger. She quickly twisted the blinds shut and did the same to the other windows in her room, never sparing a second glance. Her heart was racing as she descended the stairs, not slowing until she climbed under the quilt next to her daughter.

Of all the people, she thought. Rolling onto her side and snuggling closer to Becca, she racked her brain trying to remember him ever mentioning Greysprings before. But nothing came up from her memories.

It didn't matter, though, she told herself. She wasn't going to stick her nose where it didn't belong. This was her chance to give her daughter a better life, shield her of the truth, and make sure she would be safe. Drew didn't change that. He was merely someone from her past, a different past, and that was it.

Sighing deeply, her eyes slowly shut, and she let the exhaustion and nightmares take over.

Chapter 2

The glass shattered on the wall beside her head, the scent of cologne instantly filling the air.

“Damn it, now look at what you’ve made me do!”

“Henry,” her heart was beating loudly, and her wrist was already throbbing from where he’d grabbed her only moments before, but all she could think about was Becca, and what if she woke up and came tottering in here looking for her mommy to help her back to sleep.

She hated begging, hated showing he had any control over her, though she couldn’t hide the fear that came in her eyes every time he struck out. But it didn’t matter. The sooner she pleaded for his mercy, he would start smiling, looking at her like the pathetic woman she’d turned into. It meant reducing the chances of Becca stumbling upon the volatile scene, and that’s all it took. She would beg.

“Please, Henry, I’m so sorry. You’re right, I was stupid. I should’ve never cracked a joke like that. I didn’t mean for it to sound the way it did.” Shakily, she stepped toward him. Alarm bells sounded off through her body as every part of her wanted to retreat further. Lifting her hand out toward his chest, lightly stroking at his blue tie, she continued. “Please, sweetie. Forgive me. I’ll never say something so stupid again. I’m sorry.”

He was staring at her, his head tilted, as he slowly lifted his hands to each side of her face. Her breath caught, but she remained still, not wanting to give into her instinct to avoid his touch. To run away. To grab her daughter and get the hell out of there.

“Josie, oh my sweet, beautiful, clueless Josie.” His hands were beginning to squeeze her cheeks, but she remained still. “You’re lucky I love you so much,” he said.

The ache on the back of her head from him shoving her against the wall earlier said otherwise, but she dared not disagree.

“Next time we are at a work party, your job is to smile, make polite conversation, and talk highly of the type of man I am.” He gave a loud bellow as his head looked around their oversized bedroom suite. “I mean,

look at this shit. Look at this extravagant fucking lifestyle I give to you, and the least you could do is not make a fucking joke about my inability to wash a stupid fucking dish.”

She bared down on her teeth and blinked rapidly as he kept squeezing. As his voice grew louder, the pain worsened, but if she moved or resisted, it would only make things worse. If things got worse, or any louder, it could wake Becca.

As he looked back at her now, that dark gleam of anger and enjoyment sparking in his eyes, she saw the half smile on his face. “Oh, how Noah loved the good sense of humor my wife has. I’m sure as he was laughing his ass off at my humility he was thankful he left his old lady years ago. Fucking asshole.”

Moving his face right up in front of hers, she could smell the remnants of his whiskey he’d been drinking at the event all night. “But don’t worry Josie, I’m a bigger man than him. I promise you one thing. I will never leave.” His laugh slithered out from between his teeth, hot on her face like a personal greeting from the hell he’d crawled out of.

To Josie’s relief he released her. She just stood there, watching him as he threw his head back in that cruel laughter.

“That’s right, baby. I will never leave.” His voice had hardened, become sharper.

Then there was a quick flash of movement before she felt the solid connection of his hand against the left side of her face. An involuntary gasp having left her mouth before her mind had time to register the slap. As she crumpled to the floor she cursed herself for being an idiot by not bracing herself for the hit. She wasn’t sure if he used the back or front of his hand this time, the unmistakable sound still ringing in her ears, but it was all the same as her face radiated with the pain. The tears she’d worked so hard to keep back were now falling on her dress, the same one he told her to wear to the stupid event.

Luckily, he’d decided she was pathetic enough now that he walked out of the room. She sat there a moment, the pain intense, tears unwilling to stop, and whether she was crying for herself or crying for the sweet girl across the house who didn’t choose to be brought into this type of home, she wasn’t sure. Either way, she had to stop the tears and deal with the pain.

This was her life, and as long as she could keep taking it, no one else needed to know and no one else needed the pain.

She would set her alarm extra early to cover any evidence and breakfast would be on the table as usual in the morning. She was just thankful Becca had fallen asleep for the baby sitter before they'd gotten home. She wasn't sure if Henry would've been able to mask his anger much longer this time.

She sighed, slowly getting herself back up to her feet, wincing whenever she applied pressure to her wrist. Hell, she didn't know how she was supposed to masquerade this entire life any longer, but she didn't have a choice. He'd made it clear. She was trapped. Unless she wanted him to take Becca. He was the one who made the money and had the connections. Besides, who would believe her now when she'd done so well at hiding the truth this long.

As she changed for bed, all she could think was that the joke wasn't even original. It was the same crap spouses gave each other shit for in order to find common ground and bond with the people around them. It didn't matter, though. She should've known better to think he could take a joke at his expense, especially when his boss decided to follow it with his own crack at him. It was in good humor, but Henry would never see it that way.

He never saw anything her way. He only saw a world where everyone was out to get him.

Thankfully, he was already snoring by the time she crawled in the bed next to him. Setting the alarm on vibrate, making sure it was tucked under her pillow so as not to wake him in the morning, she winced as she laid down her head. It'd be better in the morning, she lied to herself.

Josie woke up to the blaring alarm she'd set on her phone before crawling onto the air mattress. They had a lot to get done before the movers arrived. The most important of which was to pick up breakfast. She was able to make do at the grocery store last night by getting microwavable meals and plastic utensils, but without her pots and pans, breakfast was going to be a bust.

She silenced the alarm, wanting to let her girl get some more sleep as she got dressed and ready for the day. Grabbing the worn bag that she packed their spare clothes and toiletries in, she silently walked to the downstairs bathroom to change.

The crisp ironed capris were rather wrinkly after being stuffed in a bag, but she no longer had to worry about those things. She slid into the dark denim, then pulled the white tee over her head. With the summer weather all over the place this past week, it was likely to still be chilly outside this morning. She opted to wear a cream pullover she'd brought and sat out the cardigan she packed for Becca.

Yanking out the blue cosmetic bag, she quickly dabbed on a face of makeup, first going for the concealer. She didn't need to scare off any neighbors or draw any attention with the dark circles under her eyes. Ending with mascara, she decided she looked alright. Before zipping it closed, she decided to add a little touch of lipstick. It was summer after all, so she might as well enjoy the pink accent on her lips.

The fact that her new neighbor was Drew only slightly popped into mind.

"Mom? Mom, where are you?" Becca's sleepy voice carried through the quiet house.

Josie immediately left the bathroom and swiftly made her way back to the bedroom. Crawling onto the air mattress where her daughter was now sitting, she smiled as she barricaded her into a big hug.

"Good morning! How was your first sleep in the new house?" She couldn't help but smile at her.

"Good," Becca said with a yawn.

Josie slid her fingers through her daughter's hair, undoing some of the bedhead before they turned into tangles. "Did you have any dreams?"

"Daddy has dreams."

Josie's heart sank. "Yeah, baby," she said, tracing her daughter's cheek with her finger. "Daddy used to have dreams."

"But Daddy won't get to dream in the new house."

The innocence in her voice and the way the words were both a mix of understanding and question, trying to verbalize her new world, only made Josie love and feel for her daughter more. Having to explain that her father was never coming through the doors again was never something Josie thought she would have to prepare for. It was a moment that shattered her heart as she had to break her daughter's.

"No, sweetie, Daddy won't get to have dreams in our new house." She brought Becca into her arms again. "I love you so much, and I'm amazed at how brave and strong you are. Do you know that?"

“You’re strong too. Strong like me.” Becca turned up to give a kiss.

Returning it, Josie smiled. “I think you’re stronger.” Then releasing her to raise back up, she pulled the sparkly red dress out of the backpack. “What do you say us girls get ready to get some breakfast?”

“My sparkly dress! Yes please, yes. I’m hungry, Mom.”

“I know. Let’s get you changed and get some food.”

“I’m hungry.”

Josie laughed, thankful for how quickly a toddler’s train of thoughts switched tracks. “Alright then, get up you sleepy head.”

She helped Becca get into her favorite outfit, then they brushed their teeth before heading for the car. As she buckled her into the carseat, she snuck a glance next door, noticing there weren’t any vehicles in Drew’s drive. Good, she thought. Although, it was Friday, and he likely had a job. Gosh, why was she letting her mind even go there? She was just happy not to have to make small talk this morning. Even if she did put on a fresh layer of lipstick.

Going around to the driver’s side, she slid into the SUV and pulled up the nearest drive-thru on her maps. “How’s sausage biscuits sound?”

“Yummy,” Becca squealed. “Music, music!”

Josie set her destination then turned up the volume on the same nursery rhyme songs they’d been listening to for ages now. As she backed out of the drive, she admired her new home. The soft white siding and raised front porch looked charming with the thick wooden beams and craftsmen characteristics. And the best part was that it was all hers and Becca’s. Just the two of them. A place where they could leave the ugliness of the outside world at the doorstep, and create a beautiful life of their own inside.

She pulled out on the main road, singing along with her daughter, and grinning as the sun came out from behind the clouds. It was going to be a beautiful day.

By the afternoon, Josie was in good spirits. The moving company had already come and gone, having unloaded all of her boxes into the house and placing furniture in corresponding rooms. She’d also met a neighbor across the street, Ellen, who had apparently retired this past spring, lived in this town her entire life, and who was more than happy to help out if she ever

needed anything. Josie had missed that kind of hospitality and the bond of friendly neighbors.

Her last home had been built back on a few acres, fully fenced in, and the expensive neighborhood was filled with the type of people who didn't want to be bothered. This felt like a welcoming change, like a place to raise her daughter.

Of course, with friendly neighbors came questions, but thankfully she was able to offer general answers and redirect the conversation back to Ellen.

As she worked on slicing through the tape of another box, her phone playing music, and the storm door letting in lots of light, she caught the glimpse of a red truck slowing down in front of her house. Looking up, she realized it was Drew pulling into his own drive. She wasn't used to having a driveway right next to someone. She noticed he didn't park in his garage, but he headed straight inside, which she understood why when she heard the happy and deep barking.

Hmm, maybe she should consider a dog for Becca. That'd never been an option before, and she clearly loved playing with Scout. Maybe that was something they could discuss once they got settled in.

Looking from the entry hall to the living room, she saw Becca immersed with her baby dolls and tea party set on the floor. Opening a couple of her toy boxes first was definitely a smart move.

Folding back the flaps of the box, she began grabbing the pots and pans and walking them toward the kitchen. At this rate, they could actually have a proper meal tonight and maybe even watch a movie. That was, if she could find the box with the remote. Her mind had been all over the place when she was packing up, she hadn't done the best labeling job. Thankfully, she'd decided to hire a moving company to at least take care of the hauling and unloading portion.

She couldn't really blame herself, though, especially with all that ruckus her mom was causing. The way she'd stormed into the house like she'd owned the place, yelling and flinging her hands in the air questioning Josie's sanity. All she could say over and over was how the last thing she needed to do was go off and sell the only house Becca had ever known right after her father had died and then turn around and take her hours away from all of her family. She kept beating it into her, trying to tell her she needed

them nearby, needed their help, that she should take time to get through the grief after losing her husband, and every other comment she could come up with to try and stop the move from happening.

Josie hadn't been surprised. In fact, she'd been expecting it from the moment she decided to list the massive house for sale. To everyone else in her family, it was a sign of her success in life, that she was doing good and had it all. It was as if her value as a person was somehow attached to her mortgage and the fancy life they thought she was living.

But the truth was, there was nothing fancy about her life. Sure, she wore expensive clothes and her husband brought her home jewelry as surprise gifts, but no one knew the beating she took the day she'd come home from their double date missing one of the new diamond earrings he'd just bought her. It wasn't like she'd planned for it to fall out of her ear, but that didn't matter.

No one knew how badly she wanted to stay home and spend Friday night with her toddler, when instead she was told to find a babysitter so that they looked like a happy couple for another work party.

Even though her mom had been trying to tell her who she was, how she felt, and how she needed to live her entire life since she was a kid, she didn't expect her to understand something she knew nothing about.

That house was no home of hers. It was a living hell, a trap, a place that saw more silent tears and desperate prayers than a church pew. The truth was, she had no grief to get over. If her husband taught her anything, it was how to fake it, and that was exactly what she did when all eyes were turned on her at his funeral. She wasn't crying as a widow or newly single mother, she was crying out that her prayers were heard and he was gone.

They were free. And she'd never have to worry about him potentially landing a hand on Becca, and he'd never land a hand on her again. Fuck that house. Fuck everybody's opinion of her sanity. This wasn't grief she was dealing with, this was freedom, but she was fine with them seeing it as whatever they wanted, so long as it meant a better life for her daughter.

And her daughter was the only reason she'd keep on the lies. The past was covered in the webs she'd spun, but that was okay. Everyone could think Henry was some sort of saint, and she was okay with it. She was happy to let her daughter grow up thinking she had a wonderful dad, but everything going forward was going to be the truth. Everything her

daughter learned, experienced, and felt, they were all going to be real memories, not lies, and they were going to be good.

Josie went back to the box for more kitchen supplies, the look of disgust and disappointment in her mom's face still vivid in her mind. That's okay, she told herself, because they were okay now.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 3

Josie had just begun breaking down boxes, telling Becca all about how they'd go looking for parks this weekend, when she heard the doorbell ring. Her heart sounded in her ears, a loud thrumming that pulsed her thoughts. She took a deep breath, reminding herself life was different now.

Henry hadn't liked unexpected visitors, oftentimes letting the random drop-ins of their families put him in a foul mood by nightfall. She always paid extra attention to wearing Becca out on those days. Lots of chasing her around, tag, hide and seek, and anything to assure she'd be in bed early.

She shook the thought away as she approached the door, surprised to find Drew standing there with what appeared to be pizza boxes.

Slowly, she opened both doors. "Yes?"

"Is that how you greet someone who brings over dinner?" He asked, his eyes gleaming, reminding her why she'd gotten entangled with him back in college.

Yeah, he was a good looking one, if not the most handsome man she'd ever known, even compared to Henry, and he'd been a ten out of ten. But it wasn't merely Drew's looks that pulled her in back then, it was also that arrogant ego he had and the way his presence seemed to fill up any room he walked into.

She was also naive in college, not aware of what a world of heartbreak and pain looked like, both the kind you could and couldn't see.

"No one asked you to bring over dinner," she replied coolly.

She watched as his eyes traveled down to the box cutter she was holding, not having realized her grip was tight enough to make her knuckles go white. She loosened it, and slid the blade back into the plastic compartment meant to house it.

"And to think, I thought we were off to good terms yesterday." His smile never faltered, if anything only deepened. Likely to rile her, she assumed.

"Seriously, what are you doing here?"

He sighed, his head tilting to the side as if to suggest no more games. "Honestly, Jos, I'm just being neighborly. I figured you've probably been

busy all day trying to get settled in and thought I might bring some pizzas over to catch up with an old friend and see how it was going.”

Noticing her unmoved stare, he added, “I can even leave the pizzas. No catching up is necessary.”

She studied him. Sure, she’d let some nostalgia creep into the edges of her memories the night before, especially when she observed his bedroom window across from her own, but if anyone knew the difference between daydreams and the real world, it was her.

But there he stood, and the pizzas did smell delicious, not to mention Becca loved pizza nights. Plus, she really didn’t want to cook or run to the store or anything else at this point. She was exhausted.

“What flavor?” she asked.

His big smile returned as he said, “One pepperoni and one cheese.” Then added as an afterthought, “Always.”

A slight tug at her heart. The memories of their own pizza nights floating in. She quickly shoved the thoughts out. Instead, she sighed, more to make him feel like an inconvenience than anything, and especially to not let him know how kind the gesture was or that she’d reapplied lipstick several times to unpack today.

She took a step to the side. “Come on in then, the kitchen is toward the back if you don’t already know.”

“Oh I know where every room in this house is,” he said, giving her a sly look before stepping inside and past her. He was thankful she’d given in, because for a moment there, he thought she might tell him to take a hike.

Not willing to let him make her squirm, she retorted, “Do you offer your services to all widows or just the elderly ones?”

There was a quick look of sadness that vanished quickly as he gave her a crooked grin. “And here I was thinking you looked more mature than when I last saw you.”

She only glared as they walked into the kitchen, where Becca was sitting in a box, coloring to her heart’s delight.

“Hi,” she beamed at Drew. “Puppy dog? I want to see him.”

He smiled down at her. “Sorry sweetheart, Scout stayed home this time. But I did bring pizza.”

Her eyes brightened, and she began crawling out of her artwork. Josie felt the annoyance in her bones, though she shouldn’t have. Since when did

he become good with kids? Last she knew, he never wanted anything to do with them. But she knew better than to hold people to who they used to be. People did indeed change, some for the better and some for the worse.

“Can you go wash your hands, please? Then we’ll sit at the dining table to eat.”

“Yes, Mommy. I do it by myself.”

She smiled as Becca made her way to the downstairs bath where they’d sat her little stool earlier. She loved hearing the pitter patter of her feet across the floors as she was already making this her new home.

“She’s adorable,” Drew said, his face genuine.

Again, that pang of annoyance, but she let it go. “She’s my world.” And she was. Becca was her reason for everything, especially her reason for living. Enduring.

She noticed he was watching her. “You can sit those on the counter, and I’ll grab plates.”

He nodded his head as he followed her directions, leaning against the counter to take in the kitchen. It was the same as it’d always been, except now it held half unpacked items that belonged to its new owner, Josie. Drew still couldn’t believe that of all the people to move in next door, it would be his ex-girlfriend. The one he’d always regretted letting get away.

He’d noticed Becca said her last name was Marten yesterday, so Josie must be married, although he didn’t spy a ring on her finger and there’d been no signs of another vehicle coming or going last night or this morning. The pizza was his way of being neighborly, but it was also his chance to be a little nosy.

“I’ll probably paint the kitchen soon,” she said, noticing him staring at the small and narrow space. It was a u-shaped kitchen, with a small window over the sink, but it wasn’t big enough for two to cook simultaneously. She was okay with that, though. There was something comforting about the cozy space.

“What color?”

“I think maybe a pale green. I don’t know, something pretty but fun. I thought it’d look good with the light countertops.”

“I bet it will. Here let me help with those.” Drew grabbed the plates from her and took them into the dining room, which already housed a table and chairs. He couldn’t help but notice the quality of the table. Something like

that ran expensive and looked like it belonged in a much more modern and larger home. He knew the kinds of homes that were furnished with these pieces, because he'd been in them, and although this was a beautiful neighborhood and much desired for many people, it didn't change the fact that the homes were older and it'd been established a long time ago. Dining tables like this were normally delivered to the newer homes that were constructed by builders with pristine reputations and hard to get onto schedules. He found it curious.

Josie walked in behind him with three bottles of water, sitting them on the table as Becca joined them. She pulled out the heavy chair for her daughter and scooted it in, never losing her smile. Drew had no doubt she was a fantastic mom.

"Pizza, pizza, pizza," Becca began.

"Here you are," he passed her a plate, and Josie laid a piece on it. Then she took a seat across from him, to Becca's side, and began grabbing herself a couple slices.

"This is a nice table," he commented, taking a bite of pizza.

"It's a little oversized for this space, but it'll do." She knew she likely sounded pretentious, but she didn't want to expand on how this home was less than half the size of their previous one.

"Mommy lets me color at the table as long as the colors aren't markers."

"Is that right? And what do you like to color?"

"Tigers. They eat meat."

Josie laughed. "Becca's been obsessed with learning about tigers lately."

"I like tigers. Did you know we have a really awesome zoo here in town?" Drew asked.

"Really?" Josie hadn't known that. Her research focussed on finding a town far enough away with good schools and low crime rates.

"A zoo. I want to go to the zoo, Mommy. I want to see tigers and elephants." Becca's mind was already racing with big ideas about the animals at the zoo.

Josie smiled. "I'll look into it, and maybe we can go soon."

They continued like that for the next twenty minutes, Becca saying the random things that pop into a toddler's head, including silly stories and lots of giggles. Drew encouraged her young mind's imagination by asking questions like what her favorite colors and animals were, and Josie found

herself smiling and laughing, trying not to think about all of the quiet dinners they'd suffered through before.

When Becca finally asked if she could go back to her box and work of art, Josie nodded, half-tempted to beg her little girl to stay and further shield her from any potential questions Drew was likely to ask. Unfortunately, she didn't think using her daughter to ward off the inevitable was good parenting.

"She's incredible," Drew stated as Becca went back to her coloring. "And so smart."

"Yeah, she's pretty great, isn't she?"

He noticed the warmth in her voice as she talked about her daughter. "I know the intelligence comes from you, but does it also come from her dad?" Not so subtle, he realized, but the question was out there now.

It was always a struggle in these moments, where in the blink of an eye, Josie had to decide whether to respond truly, which would be outing what a piece of shit Becca's dad really was and risk that information haunting her daughter for the rest of her life, or choose silent torment as she let the world believe he was something great while her insides felt like they could curl up and die with each lie.

"Everyone has always said she was a good blend. What about you? Do you have any kids?" Skirting around the subject worked for her, and turning the questions on him felt much more comfortable to her.

He noticed the way she flipped the conversation to him, but he went with it. "Nope. Never found myself settling down with anyone."

She stopped from rolling her eyes, though she wanted to. Figures he hadn't settled down. That wasn't really his thing apparently, if memory served her well. Although, he seemed pretty settled in here. "How'd you end up in Greysprings?"

"Do you remember my dad?"

"Yeah, but I thought he lived in Crayton."

He grinned, glad to see she hadn't completely forgotten their history. "He did, but he's originally from here. This was where he grew up, but my grandma moved them to Crayton whenever he was in high school. That's when he met my mom, and well, you know the rest with them." She remembered that his parents were divorced and civil, though anyone in the

same room as them could feel the hate in the air, but they put up with one another to raise Drew by co-parenting as best they could.

“I don’t know if I told you or not, but a couple months before our college graduation, my dad decided to move.” He hadn’t told her, which wasn’t surprising since they weren’t speaking anymore by then. Her chest tightened at the painful memories, but she ignored it and kept listening. “His construction business was successful enough and since I was finally grown in his eyes, he realized he could finally move back home.”

“But how’d you end up here?”

He laughed. “Still as impatient as ever.”

“Still as slow as ever,” she retaliated.

She saw the twinkle in his eye, then he kept going. “Well you know I always worked for him while going to school, learning the ropes and all that. I guess to make a long story short,” he said, as she gestured to him to hurry up with her hands. “When he moved, I went to work for some other companies, but focussed on HVAC and plumbing. Then when I decided to put my business degree to use and go out on my own, my dad convinced me to move here. He persuaded me with a reminder of all the hard work I’d put in for him, saying I deserved an honest testimonial from a reputable builder. Sure enough, he had the kind of connections and referrals that got me more than on my feet until I was well-known and my work and company was respected just as well.” He smiled, remembering how lucky he was to have had this path, because starting a business was no easy task, especially for those who didn’t have connections.

“What about your mom? Is she still in Crayton?”

His laugh was loud enough that even Becca looked at him from her coloring. “Her ass was not moving to the same town as my dad.” He winced. “I’m sorry about the language,” he inclined his head apologetically toward Becca.

“You’re fine.”

“She was bummed I was leaving, but she knew it was a smart move on my end. Besides, she knew I was just as close to dad as I was to her, and I still visit her often. She was actually just here last weekend.”

Josie smiled, remembering how sweet his mom had always been. She was warm and welcoming like an apple pie fresh out of the oven, much to the opposite of her own mother.

“Now the real question is, how on earth did you end—“ his question was interrupted by his cell phone ringing in his pocket. “Sorry, one sec.” He pulled it out then mumbled something under his breath that Josie hadn’t quite caught but guessed was another expletive.

She watched as he leaned his head back to peer out the dining room window toward his house, where she now noticed the sleek white car sitting in his drive. “Expecting someone?” She asked, brows arched in amusement at his frustration.

He stood, pushing the chair in behind him, reaching for his empty plate. “I’m so sorry, I need to head out.”

“Don’t worry about your plate, I got it. Let me send you with the leftovers, though.” She was standing now, too, beginning to shut the boxes.

“No. You guys keep them. Thanks for letting me intrude. We’ll have to get together another time.”

But his back was already turned away as he was headed to the door. Entertained, she followed him. “Thanks for the pizza. Have a good weekend,” she said as he exited through the front, only stopping long enough to give Becca a quick wave.

But at her words, he stopped halfway down the steps to look back at her. “Bye, Josie.”

The way he said her name, like his voice caressed each syllable, made her heart flutter, but only a moment before it was replaced with anger. He didn’t get to give her those reactions anymore. Taking her time to close the doors, she peaked her head over in time to notice the woman, tall and undoubtedly beautiful, standing on his front porch waiting for him.

Figures, she thought, as she locked the doors, then made her way through the house to shut the blinds before picking up the dining room. If she recalled correctly, which she knew she did, he was quite the ladies man before they got together, so she had no doubt he was again after they parted ways.

But that was fine with her. It was none of her business, and thanks to the woman on his porch, she dodged a question that would’ve led straight into the territory she was hoping to prolong. She wanted to live a normal life for as long as possible before people caught wind of her circumstances, and she became another sad story for them to pity. She hated that special voice that

was used for those who they thought were fragile and might break at any further cruelty this world might offer.

Yeah, she could do without that. If this life had taught her anything, it was that she was not fragile. It would take a lot more to break her, and they could shove their pity where the sun didn't shine.

Sliding the pizza boxes into the fridge, she put on a kettle of water for some tea and decided to take a seat next to Becca's box and join in on the fun.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 4

Drew woke up to Scout nudging his hand that was hanging off the edge of his bed. Slowly opening his eyes, letting them adjust to the light coming in through the windows, he crawled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

“Give me a minute, and I’ll let you out,” he said, talking to his dog like he always did. He wasn’t sure what time it was, but it felt good not waking up to an alarm on a Saturday.

Scout sprinted past him down the stairs and headed straight for the back door, where Drew eventually caught up and opened it for him. Normally, he’d go out back and toss the ball for a bit before starting the coffee maker, but this morning he needed the caffeine first. He may have slept in a little, but it didn’t change the fact that he tossed and turned all night. As he ran water into the pot, his mind drifted to last night, revisiting the conversation he’d had with Josie.

He’d hoped to discover a little bit more about what she’d been up to lately, where life had taken her after college, but as he kept flipping over on his mattress last night, he had realized she didn’t tell him anything about herself. All he knew was that she had an adorable and sweet daughter, a fancy dining table, and held her box cutter like she was ready to stab someone with it.

He threw some grounds into the machine, then started the thing. Once he had a hot cup of coffee, he went out back where he noted Scout seemed a little sour at his delayed arrival for fetch. He chuckled, rubbing behind his dog’s ears before sitting down his mug and grabbing the ball.

As he continuously tossed it to the back of the yard, giving Scout a pat on the head each time he returned it, he let his thoughts wander to the woman next door. Walking up those stairs, he’d been ready to apologize profusely to whoever Scout had just surprised, but it’d been him due for the shock. Not only him. Josie, too. He’d seen it on her face, though she’d been quick to mask it. At first, he’d barely registered she’d said anything at all, then his

brain started working again and somehow he managed to carry on an entire conversation without staring at her like some sort of lovestruck idiot.

He still remembered the last day they saw each other. Although, he didn't know it'd be the last day back then, and he'd regretted it ever since. They'd been together since their freshman year of college, or at least the end of that year. He knew from the very beginning, the first time she walked into his dorm room that he shared with three of his friends, that she was a prize.

He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her at first, her long dark hair, tan skin likely from a lot of summer days spent swimming, and that incredible smile. Connor, his first college friend, and also his smartest, had just started dating Josie's roommate. Naturally, they went everywhere together as girls seemed to always do back then, and so when Connor invited Amanda over to hang, there came Josie with her.

He didn't start off by being the dick that he was to her, because like the other guys in the room, he had eyes and the only thing on his mind back then was getting laid. It wasn't until hanging out in their suite had turned into a night of bowling, followed by taking a bottle of Jim back to the dorms that he realized she was different. Not only in the obvious way that she had zero interest or intentions in sleeping with him, but they'd actually been able to carry on a conversation.

After everyone else managed to pass out, he'd found himself sitting on the floor, his back leaning against his bed, while Josie sat as his mirror image, leaning against Jake's bed opposite him. Somehow he'd found himself talking about the struggles of his childhood, his fears of amounting to nothing after graduating, and how he hoped to never end up in the kind of disaster love story that his parents were.

And for whatever reason, she listened. Listened to him drone on and on about things he'd never shared with anyone, not even his three closest friends sleeping in that very dorm suite. The next morning, Amanda and Josie were gone before he woke up, and by the time he saw her again, he'd already begun a fling with Michelle, a random girl from his business class.

The guys didn't understand what he saw in her, giving him shit as they all gathered around the little coffee table in the common area that connected the two smaller bedrooms, each housing two twin-sized beds. The girls that were going out with them that night were going to arrive any minute, and

his friends wasted no time hammering him with questions as they pregamed with their cheap beer.

He'd remembered Josie's face when she'd arrived, the way it went from happy and beaming at everyone, excited for a fun night out with friends, to confusion and hurt when he didn't acknowledge her greeting. He wasn't sure what she thought when Michelle showed up a little later, instantly cozying up to his side, him throwing his arm around her shoulder.

Years later, when he and Josie were dating, she'd ended up telling him it wasn't the fact that he was with another girl that night that bothered her, rather the way she'd thought they'd become friends and he started treating her like an asshole overnight. She'd just assumed it had all been a game to him, which he scoffed at. As though he opened up like that to any girl in hopes of getting in her pants.

Hearing it had been a punch to the gut, because even then, she didn't realize just what that first night of meeting her meant to him. And during their senior year, when they weren't speaking and didn't see one another anymore, he hated himself for each day that he allowed to pass by without telling her how much she meant to him. How sorry and stupid he was. But it was too late.

Graduation happened and everyone went their separate ways, and now here he stood, eight years later, no clue how that much time had passed, and she was living next door. Still unaware of what she meant, still means, to him.

Drew took the last drink of his coffee and hollered for Scout as he turned to go back in the house. He needed to hit the shower and get around for the day. Get out of his house. No, he needed to get out of his head. He couldn't stop the flowing of thoughts, memories, and so many questions that were bubbling over.

He had half the mind to walk next door and demand answers to all of those questions, like if she was married, where her husband was, how the hell she ended up here, if she ever thought back to college, and again, how the hell she was his neighbor. But he knew he had no right asking her anything. It wasn't her who fucked it all up back then, and as far as he could tell, she seemed happy. She had a child, for heaven's sake. What on earth was he doing allowing old memories to flood his mind when the woman he

was daydreaming about had bigger responsibilities than rehashing old stories of back in the day.

He couldn't just go over there and blow up her life because she'd been on his mind for almost a decade. It didn't matter that he'd dated through the years. She'd never left the back of his mind. No one else had been enough to replace her.

But that didn't mean she shared that same reality. Hell, his screw up was probably the best thing to ever happen to her. The day he broke her heart was probably the same day her life started turning around for the better.

Drew turned on the shower now, finding himself slamming the cabinet door as he grabbed a towel from it. Jeeze, he was losing it. She'd only just moved in, and his entire world and mood was already being affected. Again.

Scout had lifted his head from where he had plopped down on the floor.

"I'm fine, boy. I'll be in a better mood after I shower." He tossed the towel on the back of the toilet. "Hopefully."

The weather was incredible, Josie thought, as she and Becca turned the corner of the street and continued their walk back home.

"Mom, our house! Look, it's our house!" Becca was jumping and clapping as she announced it.

"I see it, sweetie. You've done such a good job! You're a walking machine." Their last neighborhood didn't have sidewalks like this one, so they normally drove elsewhere to go on walks. This morning she'd woken up, hearing the birds singing outside the windows and thought it'd be a beautiful way to start their weekend. She decided to start with one block, not sure if Becca would want to walk the entire thing or be held by the end of it, and the truth was, her arms were tired from all the unpacking.

Thankfully, Becca was eager to make the journey around the block, and as they approached their new home, a wagging tail caught her attention. Scout was perched next to Drew's truck, eagerly waiting for his owner to open the door for him to jump in. She bet they went almost everywhere together.

"Good morning, neighbor." She was surprised at the cheeriness of her own voice. Likely due to the beautiful sunshine and endorphins thanks to the morning exercise.

He turned from putting what looked to be a long bag in the back of his truck.

“Good morning, ladies.” He gave Becca a wink, laughing as she tried to return the gesture, but instead both her eyes squeezed shut in emphasis. Then she went straight for Scout, who automatically hit the ground, rolling onto his back to expose his belly.

“What has you two out so early?” He did his best not to let his eyes wander, but he couldn’t help but notice how good Josie looked in her shorts and tank top.

She saw the way his eyes had scanned down her body before returning to meet her gaze, but she was too annoyed to be flattered by it. He’d had his chance years ago, so she wasn’t going to let that pure male lust affect her, even if his grin stirred up old memories. She squashed those thoughts and emotions, and remembered she was having a good morning and was in a good mood.

“We decided it’d be a good morning to stretch our legs and check out our new neighborhood.”

“We eat pancakes and apple juice,” Becca supplied, that being the important information to her.

“Mmm, I love pancakes and apple juice,” he replied. Looking back to Josie, making a point not to stare at her legs again, he noticed she looked more rested than he felt. She probably didn’t spend her night thinking about him the way he had her. It re-sparked that surge of grumpiness he’d felt earlier, and as if sensing it, Scout jumped up from the ground and walked his way over to sit by his feet. Becca only followed, not deterred from smothering the dog with pets and hugs. “Do you have plans today?”

Josie was startled by the question, then waved it off as neighborly, so she answered honestly. “Nope. We’ll probably meander around the house, unpack a few more boxes, and maybe find a park or something to explore.”

Before she could ask about his Saturday agenda, he jumped in. “Scout and I are actually headed somewhere with a playground, walking trails, and lots of fun to be had.”

Becca was in full attention at “playground,” snapping her head to look at him. “With a slide and swing?”

“The best slide and swings in town.” He turned his gaze to her mom, whose face had gone from relaxed to a rather strained look, as though it was

hard for her to keep that smile on her face as her daughter looked to her in excitement. Part of him felt guilty, knowing it wasn't a fair position to put her in, but serves her right for unintentionally ruining his sleep last night. "What do you think mama bear? Would you ladies like a tour of one of our best parks in town from a local?"

She was torn. Of course she wanted to give Becca a great day, but she hadn't planned on spending it with Drew, of all people. She honestly didn't even know why he was offering, except to maybe make up for running out quickly during dinner last night, but she hadn't been bothered by that considering she'd never invited him in the first place.

If they went with him, then it was inevitable to answer questions regarding Becca's father, how they ended up here, and everything else that was surely running through an onlooker's mind. However, if she said no, then there was a good chance they might still run into him there later, although she didn't know why he was headed to a park.

She took a deep breath, reminding herself that this was the beginning of their new life. He was merely a neighbor, and it would be nice to have a friend in a new town. Her game plan of a fresh start where no one would know anything about them had already been ruined, so she might as well roll with it.

"Okay," she conceded. At Becca's squeal, she smiled at the delight radiating from her daughter. How Scout endured the high-pitch joy right by his ear, she didn't know, but it warmed her heart. "First, we need to run inside for water and sunscreen. Let's grab you a hat, too."

She looked at Drew's big, goofy smile, and tried her best not to roll her eyes, but she couldn't hide the smile tugging at her lips.

"Give us five minutes, and we'll be back out."

As they turned to go inside, Becca running ahead of her mom, Drew couldn't help himself but to admire the view of Josie's long legs walking away from him. Especially since he knew they'd be coming back his way in just a few minutes. "I don't mind waiting" he said, half to himself, but she heard and ignored the flutter in her chest, not at the words he'd spoken, but the way his voice had lowered when saying them. The possibility of him not entirely talking about the here and now.

Chapter 5

The winding road was lined with fresh cut grass at the edges, the occasional sign popping up to signal another turn or intersection ahead. Josie had never been this way before, and as she looked out the window, the sun beating down around her, she felt thankful for the cooling feature of Henry's leather seats.

As though he knew he popped into her mind, he reached his hand across the console and landed it on her thigh with a light squeeze. "What are you thinking about over there?"

"I was admiring the peacefulness. It's beautiful out here, and quiet." She looked toward him, noting he was smiling, the corners of his eyes showing the slight wrinkles of his thirty-one years. Likely a mix of that and the fact that he had a very stressful job, which he dedicated a lot of his time to.

She didn't know how he could bear all of that stress. She still didn't quite understand what his job was, except that he worked for a financial firm, handling their biggest clients and accounts. At one point, she'd asked if that meant he was an advisor. He laughed. His response had indicated no, but he never made a point to explain further, leaving it as he handled important peoples' money.

She didn't know any financial advisors that had to travel for business as much as Henry did, but she'd always liked that aspect of his job. For some reason it was attractive when they first began dating, although that could have been due to her complete lack of travel. Besides moving a few hours away for college, she hadn't really been anywhere.

That wasn't completely true. When she dated Andrew Warren, she'd visited his hometown, and they'd go to the lake a lot during the summers. But that was then. She'd moved back home after college, and a couple of years later, she'd met Henry. Not much traveling happened in those two years between boyfriends. Instead, she'd thrown herself into work, nursing the broken heart she'd graduated with.

"We're almost there," Henry interrupted her thoughts. "I can't wait to show you."

“I still can’t believe you’re not going to give me a single clue.” She’d been wondering what it could be all day. When she woke up this morning, he told her he had plans for them today, which consisted of a surprise he wanted to show her.

He only smiled, showing his perfectly white teeth. His hair was a shiny black with the sun illuminating it, his eyes a deep blue. She remembered the first time those eyes met hers. She’d been having a girls’ night out with coworkers, one she’d been reluctant to go to. It was nearly two years after her college breakup, and during that time she’d dated very little, if she could even call the few, disastrous dinners dating, but she let them drag her out. She wasn’t sure if it was her sour mood over hearing the morning radio hosts talk about how the average time to get over a serious relationship took a couple of years, or the fact that she was tired of the same man popping into her dreams every week, but she’d been ready to mingle, find a distraction.

She was tired of her aching heart.

Then she met Henry, all charming and the poster image of class and grace. He didn’t play games with her heart the way Drew had. He was adamant on the fact that he wanted to get to know her from the first moment he walked up to her in that crowded bar and offered to buy her a drink. She wasn’t sure if it was because he was so damn handsome, the fact that she was tired of the aching in her chest, or if it was purely his charisma, but she accepted that drink and never looked back.

Less than a year later, they were engaged. Some people were surprised at the quick pace, but besides her best friend from college, who unfortunately moved back home as well, a whopping fourteen hours away, no one voiced any concerns. In fact, everyone else, especially her family, only encouraged it. They were just happy to see that her life was finally “back on track” they’d said, as though having a boyfriend, then fiancé, dictated the successes and failures of her life. But she didn’t care.

She was finally sleeping at night. Until she wasn’t. Drew occasionally still popped into her dreams or thoughts from time to time, and the guilt over it only made her dive into her relationship further. Henry was a good man. He didn’t deserve another one taking up space in her head.

As if the universe knew her thoughts were drifting away again, the tall rows of trees running alongside their path came to an end, showing a large

brick barrier, something of a fence and gate, taking up their place. She stared at it with interest.

“What do you think is in there?”

“Let’s find out,” Henry replied, slowing the car and flipping on his blinker as he gently turned them into the main gate’s entrance.

He pulled to a stop next to a keypad, rolling his window down to punch in some numbers. “What are you doing?” Josie was puzzled. Had he been here before?

He flashed her a grin. “You’ll see.”

“Is this part of my surprise?” She was taking in the view as the gates opened up for them. But all she saw was manicured grass, perfectly cut in neat little rows that formed a pattern.

“You’ll see,” he said again.

She sighed, only causing him to chuckle. “Always impatient,” he chided with a smile. Drew had always joked about her impatience, too. No, she wouldn’t let this beautiful morning circle back to him. Henry was trying to surprise her. He was being sweet and loving. She wouldn’t think of *him* today.

As they continued driving, she began noticing houses pop up, set far back from the road. Was this a neighborhood? Did people actually live way out here? Further still, she saw sprawling houses of various sizes dot the green, grassy lawns. Some were much larger than others, a few almost hidden, but all incredibly different and beautiful in their own right. The landscaping complimented each house, not a single tree or flower appearing out of place. Who lived out here, she wondered.

“Are you ready?” Henry was slowing down the car, but she didn’t see anything.

“I think so,” she answered honestly. “Ready for what?”

Instead of replying, he came to a stop at the end of a cul de sac, the giant circle having two separate roads, no they must be driveways, venturing off toward its left and right. He opened his car door and got out, not saying a word.

Her curiosity had her jumping out after him, not waiting for an explanation. “What are we doing here?” she asked, once she stood next to him at the edge of the grass.

“Do you like it?” His eyes sparkled.

“Like what? The grass?” She saw the annoyance creep into his eyes, as though she should know what he was talking about, or maybe he didn’t enjoy her sarcastic humor, so she added, “It’s absolutely beautiful out here, Henry. But I still don’t understand what it is we are doing.”

Slowly his lips spread back out from that thin line they’d formed and showed his dentist-designed teeth in a full smile again. “We’re admiring our new front lawn.”

“We’re what?” Did she just hear him right?

He laughed, tossing his arm around her shoulder. “That’s right, we’re looking at our new home.” His hand shot out, slowly cascading along the horizon giving the impression that he was seeing something not yet there. She supposed he was, because there definitely wasn’t a house in view. “I bought it for us. For you. I will meet with the builders next week, and though it’s going to cost me a fortune, I’ve made it clear I want to be coming home here after our honeymoon.”

She was in shock. He bought them a space way out here? She wasn’t kidding when she said it was beautiful, but it was also secluded, quiet, almost too quiet, and would make her commute to work much longer. Here she goes again, she thought, remembering their last argument, when he’d pointed out she never appreciated what he did for her. He was trying to do something sweet and special, romantic even, and she was only concerned about herself. When did she become a miserable, self-absorbed, pessimist?

Turning to look at him, she reached for his hand, entwining her fingers with his. “I love you,” she replied, because she didn’t quite know what else to say.

“I love you too, Josie. I intend to give you the world, and this is only the start.” He wasn’t looking at her when he said it, only admiring the view straight ahead, once again likely seeing what she couldn’t. The serene look on his face was the opposite of hers.

She was already worrying about the what-ifs. What if her traitorous heart and thoughts didn’t deserve this fancy house that was soon to be built here? What if it felt too lonely out here? And mostly, what if the world he wanted to give her wasn’t the one she wanted?

It was a quick drive to the playground, and thankfully Becca had been talkative, telling Drew all about her first time sleeping on an air mattress,

how she was older now because she turned three, and when she becomes a mom that she could drink coffee, too. Josie felt a pang of guilt for letting her daughter relieve her of making small talk, but it had quickly simmered away as she listened to the adorable storytelling.

Drew had been a good sport through it all as well. He'd kept her going with his questions and overdramatic interest. He'd caught Josie smiling at him when she didn't think he was looking, but the truth was, he enjoyed every bit of Becca's tales. She was a breath of fresh air, seeing the entire world with excitement and true delight in her eyes.

It'd been especially rewarding when the playground came into view upon pulling into the park's lot, and he watched in the rearview mirror as her face lit up, and she began bouncing in the booster seat that Josie installed in his truck.

"Oh, wow, this is a really nice park." Josie was taking in the updated equipment, noticing little signs indicating age ranges for each playground grouping.

"It's the city's biggest, but there is one more that also has walking paths and baseball fields attached to it." As Josie was unbuckling Becca, he grabbed Scout's leash from the floor board and went to open the door for him.

"Slide!" Becca was all arms and legs trying to struggle free from her mom's hold.

Laughing, Josie sat her down. "We're going, but we have to hold hands to cross over the lot. Then you can run wild and play as hard as you want."

She noticed Drew and Scout joined in their trek to the fenced in playground. "Are dogs allowed in there?"

"I doubt it."

He kept walking with them, even as they entered through the gate and into the play area. None of the other parents or kids seemed to mind, so Josie wasn't going to say anything.

"Alright, kiddo. Mommy's going to be right here if you need anything. Remember to take turns and be nice."

"I will. I listen," she insisted with an enthusiasm that suggested she was just ready to play.

"Yes you do. Have fun." But Becca was already running off, stopping beside another little girl likely close in age, both saying hi and then running

off together to climb to the slide.

Letting out a sigh, Josie did as she always did whenever they went to a park or public play area. She scanned their surroundings, taking in the other parents around her, and looking for anything out of the ordinary. She wasn't sure why she always felt the need to mark her environment, but it was routine. Lastly, she turned her head, hoping to spot a bathroom in case Becca decided she wouldn't be able to hold it for the ride back home.

"What are you looking for?" Drew was watching her curiously, noticing the tension in her shoulders didn't match the smile on her face.

"The potties." She laughed, her body loosening with it. "Sorry, the bathrooms."

He liked that laugh. Gosh, he missed that laugh. It'd been a long time since he'd heard it. "You can tell you're a mom," he said with a grin. "They're up there in the middle of the ball fields by the concession building."

"That's nifty." She followed his gaze toward the four fields that housed a small building in the middle.

She looked back to her daughter, starting to relax as she watched Becca go down the slide belly first and wearing an adventurous smile. She leaned back against the fence, letting it hold her weight, and Drew followed her lead as she crossed one leg in front of the other, content to let her daughter play and have fun.

Noticing him settling in at her side, she realized she still wasn't sure what business he had at a park. "Were you actually coming here?"

He cocked his head at her. "What? You think I'd make that up just to hijack your Saturday and force you to spend some time with me?"

The thought hadn't even crossed her mind until that moment. "I didn't until now."

He laughed. "I was actually coming to hit some balls."

"By yourself?"

"And Scout." He automatically reached down and gave his four-legged friend a good scratching behind the ears. "He makes an excellent fielder."

"That's really sweet." It was, she realized. He made a point to include his dog in his lifestyle, and based on the size and energy she'd already seen in Scout, she had no doubt it took several rounds to wear him out.

“If you think Becca would enjoy it, you guys could come hit a few with me.”

“Oh, I don’t know. She’ll want to play here awhile.”

“That’s fine. I’m in no hurry.” He watched the little girl making another friend, the three kids now playing their own version of tag, one where it didn’t seem like any of them were keeping track of who was “It.” It was hard not to laugh.

Josie thought about it. “We don’t want to take up your entire Saturday.”

“I invited you, remember?” He faced her, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her gaze had fixated on the kids, though he didn’t think she was really seeing anything as she chewed on her lip in deep thought. “You don’t have to, but I think it could be fun. Up to you, though.”

“Okay.” Letting out a breath, she added, “Becca has never swung a bat, so it’ll be a learning curve.”

For whatever reason, he was relieved they were going to do it with him. “That’s no big deal. I’m happy to teach her.” Wrong thing to say, he realized, watching her expression instantly freeze. But then it was gone, just like that, as though it never happened. “Or you can of course, or her dad.” Shit, he didn’t mean to go there. He was only making it worse. “Or whoever. It doesn’t matter who teaches her. I just meant I’m happy to help. Or not help.” He winced. “I mean—”

“It’s all good. I’ll teach her. I used to play in a rec league, unless you forgot from too many keg stands as a dumb kid.” She was throwing him a life raft because it was painful watching him stumble over his own words. She knew he was trying to be kind and include them, and it wasn’t fair to make him suffer through unknown territories. Especially since she’d been avoiding having to give him any insight into her life.

“How could I forget the MVP two years in a row?” He was grateful she cut him off, from babbling on like an idiot any further. What was he thinking offering to teach someone else’s kid how to play baseball, or technically hit a ball, when their parents – or was it parent? – was perfectly capable of doing so? What was he even doing here inviting them for an outing like it was normal? He hadn’t seen Josie in years and only just met her daughter, yet he let his foolish emotions take over this morning, and there he went inviting them out for a fun day of play.

Josie interrupted his thoughts when she said, “I’ll be right back.” And he watched as she took off toward Becca, who was attempting to climb onto the older kids’ playground equipment. She really did seem like a good mom, he thought, then turned to Scout. “Boy, I am in over my head.”

A few moments later, Josie was back at his side, the previous conversation gone like a passing breeze and all was relaxed again. He decided idle chit chat and random facts about Greyspring’s history was a safer route than potentially putting his foot in his mouth again. They remained that way for another half hour before Becca was hopping like a frog all the way to the ball fields, Scout letting her hold onto his leash the entire way.

Drew still wasn’t sure what he was getting himself into, or if he would even be able to snag another chance at getting into anything at all, but for right now, he was enjoying this day. It was shaping out to be one of his favorite Saturdays so far. As long as he ignored his awkward slip up earlier.

Josie did most of the teaching when it came to how to hit a ball, and he became the human batting tee, propping a ball on the side of his closed fist in line for her swing. The first time she connected, giving it a good smack, he was pretty sure the entire town heard Josie’s cheer. Hell, he might’ve hollered a bit himself, but no one was as ecstatic as the little girl whose dark hair swept over her face as she jumped in circles, the bat still half swinging in one hand.

Like mother like daughter, he mused, looking up toward Josie, noticing her own victory dance happening. A smudge of dirt claimed her forehead, her ponytail coming loose, and the sun brightening her otherwise deep auburn hair. Drew’s chest tightened for a moment, something he was sure had to do with regret, guilt, and happiness all twisted into one.

The truth was, he’d been wanting to settle down for a long time, but he hadn’t found the right woman over the years. He doubted he ever would, because he’d spent countless days driving to and from work, spotting families loaded up in the car for school drop-offs, or scooted together in a round booth at a local restaurant, or even here playing at the park, and the first face that always popped into his mind was Josie’s. With it came the harsh reality that wasn’t going to be his life.

But not today. Today he was getting a glimpse into those daydreams. A glimpse into another life. He knew he didn’t deserve it, and hell, this was

probably a one-off situation that'd never happen again. Either way, he still couldn't stop the small bit of hope creeping into his heart.

"Can we? Can we?" Becca's enthusiasm cut through his mind.

He looked toward Josie, who was smiling. "If you want to, of course. Otherwise, we can grab ice cream after you drop us off," she said.

Clued in, he grinned. "Let's do it. Ice cream's on me." Before Josie could object, he added, "MVPs don't pay, and it looks like I've got two hanging with me today." And at the sound of Becca's squeal, it was settled.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 6

Ice cream had turned into dessert after burgers and fries, because the moment they crawled back into Drew's truck, Becca's stomach was grumbling. Even as she scarfed down her food, she insisted she wasn't hungry and was ready for the ice cream. All Josie could do was laugh, as she, too, downed her lunch. Then she refused to let Drew pay and insisted she buy his for the great day he'd created.

Headed back to their neighborhood now, she turned to check the backseat and felt her heart warm at the sight of Becca and Scout both asleep, him sprawled out with his head on her lap.

"She's tuckered out," she said, facing the road again. "This morning was good for her."

"I think I'm tuckered out," Drew responded, loving the way it made her laugh. "Thanks for coming."

"Thanks for inviting us." She meant it. She was glad he did, but she was really glad that she said yes. And then she surprised herself when she said, "I was worried this move would be hard on her, so I'd been prepared to take it slow and sprinkle in a lot of good memories along the way. Stuff like today. I don't want this time in her life to be a bunch of forgotten memories due to the bad one she's sure to remember, or at least be told about."

He wanted to press her, ask questions, but he was surprised she'd even said that much and he worried she'd rebuild her walls if he asked anything. Instead, he nodded his head as though he understood and let her keep going.

"She's my entire world, Drew." She blinked several times, surprised by the tears that threatened to spring up.

Her words were honest and raw. And that was only the second time she'd said his name since seeing him again after so many years. He wanted answers, he wanted to be there for her for whatever it was that she wasn't saying yet. He knew there was more to it, he could hear the pain and emotion in her voice, even if she was trying to hide it. And damn it, he liked the sound of his name on her lips. He wanted her to let him help bear her burdens, no matter what they were. He just wanted to make her happy and

smiling, hear her laugh again and again, and be the reason for it. That probably made him a piece of work, but it was true.

“Josie, I—”

“Keep driving!” The desperation and shock in her voice startled him. He’d just begun slowing down as his truck approached their houses.

“What?”

“Don’t pull in, keep going. Please.” She said again.

He did, and as they passed by, he noticed the cobalt blue SUV sitting in her drive, a woman in its driver seat. At the sight of her, a new feeling shot through his spine, and it was enough to ruin whatever good he’d been feeling during this drive.

“Was that your mom?” He questioned.

She was trying to think, pinching the skin along her forehead as she did so. What on earth was her mom thinking, showing up here without so much as a warning. “Yep,” was all she said as she dug through her purse to pull out her cell phone. Several missed calls and messages, none of which indicated a heads up. The calls only started within the last twenty minutes, and it took a lot longer than that for her to travel here.

“Did I intrude on your plans or something?” He remembered her mom distinctly. Her passive aggressive insults she’d spew while smiling at her daughter’s face, his face, anyone’s face. She had a way of saying things that made a person truly question whether she was being offensive on purpose or if they were merely overreacting. He swore the woman got off on it. She enjoyed belittling those around her, especially Josie.

He never understood how she could go back to visit them in college over winter and holiday breaks. He’d always urged her to stay behind or go with him to see his family, but she insisted she needed to spend at least a couple of days with her parents first.

She always came back completely and utterly drained, as though being their metaphorical punching bag had more physical consequence than one could see.

He was not a fan of her family. Even her sister, Chelsea, was as bad as their mom, somehow always managing to make Josie come off as a bad person whenever she went around. He doubted that changed. Resentment and miserableness that ran that deep would take a lot of self-awareness, and

probably a lot of therapy, to alter, and Chelsea wasn't the type to admit she could improve.

"No. We didn't have plans," was all Josie replied. She didn't mean to be short, she just couldn't think. She didn't expect her mom to show up on her doorstep, though she shouldn't be surprised. The woman felt entitled to do as she pleased.

"Do you want me to take you somewhere else?" He asked the question while trying to maintain a neutral tone. She would despise any sign of concern coming from him.

As he pulled to the side of the street in a parallel parking zone, Josie leaned back against the seat, taking slow, deep breaths and counting to four with each inhale, hold, and then exhale. She'd found this technique while scouring the internet for ways to cope with stressful situations. Although then, it had been to help her not succumb to fear and tears immediately each time Henry came in the door with one of his moods written across his face. Now, it was to deal with the situation at hand. The woman who brought her into this world.

They were one street over and at the halt of movement, Becca began stirring in the backseat. "We home?" she asked through her sleep fog.

"Not quite, baby. Soon." Josie rubbed her temples for a moment.

"I could give you a tour of the city," Drew offered.

At the tinge of pity in his voice she straightened, her spine stiffening and shoulders rearing back. What was she doing hiding like a child? She was a grown ass woman, and she'd been dealing with her mother a long, long time. Her entire life to be exact. She knew her mom would be coming to see for herself where she'd ended up, all the while making her snide remarks on Josie's life decisions. Admittedly, she did think she'd get a heads up first.

It didn't matter. She wasn't a coward. If she could handle Henry's beatings, she could handle the scrutiny, disappointment, and disgust at what would only be deemed as her failures that her mom was about to lay on her.

"We'll get out here," she said, her voice steel.

"What? No, let me drive you back." He reached across for her hand out of worry, but she automatically pulled it away, reaching down to grab her phone, keys, and small wallet out of her purse.

"We're going to walk back," she insisted. "If it's okay, I'm going to leave the booster and my purse in here. I can get it back tonight or tomorrow. I

don't have to go anywhere right away.”

“Yeah, that's fine,” he said, trying not to stare as she shifted into a totally different person right in front of him. It was like she was on autopilot, becoming a specific version of herself to brace for the upcoming encounter with her mom.

She looked at him and gave a smile that didn't reach her eyes. “If you don't mind waiting until we've made it home and gotten her inside, I would owe you one.”

He raised a brow, trying to be light-hearted. “What? You don't want your mom knowing you moved next door to your ex-boyfriend?”

She knew the humor was forced, but she appreciated it anyways, and it didn't stop the grin from forming at her lips as she tugged her door open. “I don't know if she could handle any more unexpected news at this point.” She went to Becca's door, thankful she wasn't still sleeping. She was already feeling like a pretty crappy mother, spinning this lie that they were out walking.

She'd never ask Becca to lie about what they were doing, but she was sure hoping she may get distracted by the surprise visitor to overshare too much.

Drew had rolled down his passenger window, and she said to him, “Thank you for a great day. I'll see you later.”

He nodded. “I look forward to it.” And then they were off, Becca in her mom's arms as she still appeared to be waking up. He noted she scrambled to get down before they turned the street's corner toward their house. He laughed. That girl would probably run the rest of the way home. She was a ball of energy.

As he sat there, letting the time pass to give them their head start and avoid any further surprises, he found her words hitting him. *Any more unexpected news*. What did that mean? He stashed the insight away for later. Maybe with time she would open up, tell him how she ended up here. For now, he would take what she was offering. It was still more than he expected or deserved.

“**Nana! Nana!**” Becca was all shouts as the woman stepped out of the car. Josie was surprised her mom didn't notice them as they walked up the drive, considering Eleanor was normally pretty sharp about her

surroundings. However, she couldn't stifle her laugh at the pure shock that spread across her mom's face when she knocked on the window. She'd practically jumped out of her skin at the tapping.

Instantly, her mom opened the door, stooping down to scoop Becca up into a big hug, covering her in kisses and compliments. "How's my girl? Nana couldn't wait to see you!" In between more kisses, she kept smiling and talking. "You've already gotten prettier, and likely smarter too. Look at the red on those cheeks."

"Hey, mom. Want to come inside and see our new home?" Josie was smiling at the scene in front of her, because for as much as she didn't want a surprise visit from her mom at the moment, Becca's joy and excitement made it worth it.

"Why is she so red? Did you not put sunscreen on her? What were you doing anyway? I tried calling several times." Eleanor looked at her daughter, and Josie noticed the same judgment creeping in her eyes that was always there.

Trying not to roll her eyes, she said, "Of course I put sunscreen on her. We were walking and she's flushed like a normal toddler who loves to run, hop, and skip their way around a block." She turned toward the house, gesturing for them to follow, but stopped as she remembered her manners. "Do you need me to carry anything in?"

"No, I'm not staying." Eleanor carried Becca, passing Josie and walking up the porch steps. Josie noticed her taking in her scenery all around, eyeing the landscaping, neighborhood, and front porch along the way.

"You drove all this way just to drive back? That's a long time in the car. You know you're welcome to stay." Even as she said it, she knew it wasn't entirely true.

"I have a hotel for the night. I'm going to do some shopping later then I'll drive home in the morning."

Josie unlocked the door for them and they all filed inside. It felt like a waste for her mom to drive all this way to only visit them for a short bit, stay at a hotel and then journey back home, but she wasn't going to make a big deal about it. Especially if it meant she was off the hook of her mom's prying eyes and snide comments sooner rather than later.

"Look, Nana!" Becca pointed to the fireplace in the living room, then started pulling her grandma in toward the puzzle that was still laying out

from the night before. She'd been so proud when she completed it that she'd begged her mom not to put it away yet.

"I see." Eleanor was looking around the living room when Josie stepped in behind them.

"Would you like anything to drink? I have water or lemonade."

"Apple juice please. I drink lots of water later." Becca gave her best puppy dog face to win her mom over.

Josie smiled, knowing how this cycle went. She'd insist on drinking her water later each time, hoping to get more juice first. "Sorry kiddo, but we don't have apple juice. It's water for you. We have to rehydrate."

"She doesn't need any of those sugar drinks anyways," Eleanor chided. "It's terrible how many kids don't get enough water these days."

"We grew up on apple juice and kool aid, and we turned out just fine," Josie said. All she heard was a slight *hmp* from her mom before deciding to fetch them all waters.

As she returned, her mom said, "It appears you're settling in." It was a statement, but somehow Eleanor managed to make it sound like an insult.

"Would you like a tour?" Josie handed her a glass of water and sat the other one on the coffee table where Becca was starting another puzzle. Each one was a different animal.

"I guess so, though it doesn't seem like there could be much more to see."

"It's almost the same size as your's and dad's." It was going to be one of those days, she realized.

"Really? Wow. I guess it just feels smaller. You know how some houses are like that." Eleanor had stood and was now trailing Josie to the kitchen, peeking her head into the downstairs bath as they passed it. "Where's the rest of your kitchen?"

"You're looking at it." She really hoped this visit was almost over.

"Oh, okay." Her mom gave her a smile that looked forced. She only ignored it and kept on the tour. She managed to let the rest of the comments slide off her skin until they reached her bedroom.

"You didn't make your bed? Josie, you can't let yourself go."

"I'm not letting myself go," she defended. "Becca and I were having a fun Saturday, and making the bed wasn't my top priority. We rolled out of it for some breakfast and then a walk."

As if she'd said something alarming, Eleanor's brows lifted. "She's sleeping with you?"

"Yeah. So?"

Her mom shook her head with a sigh. "I knew this wasn't the right decision. You should have—"

"The right decision? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. You should have never made your daughter move after all that she's been through. Away from her family and friends. You're piling more and more loss on her, and now she's taking steps backwards and having to sleep in bed with you."

Oh, she was not having this. "You don't know what you're talking about. First off, she didn't have any friends yet. She was always home with me or around family. It's not like she was already in school and had friends and classmates."

"And who's fault is that? You could have signed her up for some of those child dance classes or gymnastics. You'd have benefited from some mom groups yourself." The look in Eleanor's eyes was pure distaste and resentment. She was standing, feet slightly apart as though she were positioning for a physical fight with her daughter rather than verbal.

Josie only lifted her chin, shoulders rearing back. She wouldn't cower to this nonsense. Nor would she explain Henry said no to any sort of classes or groups, not wanting them getting too close with anyone. "The moment she starts school, she'll be involved with learning, extracurricular activities, play dates, and birthday parties constantly for the rest of her life. I'm not going to shove her into child classes just because you think I should. I asked if it sounded fun and she said no." Which was true, although it was after Henry died.

"What does she know? She's three." A look of exasperation crossed Eleanor's face.

Fury entered Josie's. "I'm not going to force her to do things she doesn't want to do. She won't be expected to live her life to appease everyone else. And for your information, she has always slept in my bed whenever Henry wasn't around. Every work trip he took, she and I would have a girls sleepover in Mommy's room, and so whenever she was told he wasn't coming home again, she asked if that meant she got to have more girls' nights with Mommy, and I sure as hell wasn't going to say no." She did her

best to take a deep breath and lower her voice. “I don’t care what you think regarding this move, but you will not come into my home and insult me.”

Her mom glared at her, but she didn’t back down. It was Eleanor who looked away, brushing past her daughter for the stairwell, tossing her parting blow as she went. “Your sister was right. I should have listened to her. She knew you’d make my coming here about you somehow and not appreciate the fact that I was willing to drive several hours on my weekend to see you.”

“Then maybe you should surprise her with a visit next time instead.” Every part of Josie wanted to slam her fist through a wall or at least slam a door, but she knew neither of those actions would help her any. Instead, she descended the stairs, watching as her mother made her grand dramatic exit. She caught the end of it as she entered the living room.

Becca was hugging her Nana asking her to stay and color when Eleanor made her spiteful reply. “I wish I could sweetie, but your mom doesn’t want me here. She’s made that very clear, so I think it’s best that I go. Nana loves you so very much though.”

Even as she began to sulk and frown, Becca let her go and sat on the floor next to the coffee table, watching as Eleanor made her way to the front door.

“I’ll be right back in,” Josie said, a little too upbeat and reassuring, hoping to replace the cheer they’d been feeling before her mom came and ruined the mood.

As soon as she stepped onto the front porch, she snapped at her. “What the hell was that? Don’t use my daughter’s emotions to try and attack me.”

“Oh, here we go again. Not everything is about you, Josie.” Her tone was short, as though Josie was inconveniencing her by addressing what she just witnessed. “And have some respect. Watch your mouth. That’s not ladylike.”

“You have some respect,” Josie retorted. “That three-year-old in there is your granddaughter and your actions and words are going to emotionally damage her if you keep it up. I won’t have her around someone doing things like that.”

“So now you’re going to keep us from her, too? Was moving away not enough?” Eleanor had stopped at her driver’s side door, looking at her daughter with a burning fire in her eyes.

Josie swore that it was hate in them, but then again she wouldn't know the difference because that seemed like the only look she'd ever gotten from her mother for as long as she could remember. Even when she was doting on her success, all of which was credited to who she married, where she lived, and their obviously high income.

"You know what?" Her mom's question sparked her attention. The way Eleanor's face relaxed just a hint and eyes grew slightly narrower, Josie knew the final hit was coming. Because whether it was physical or not, Josie learned that look of satisfaction on her opponent's face right before they were about to land the knockout.

"What?" She asked through gritted teeth.

"I'm thankful Henry isn't here to see you like this. Speaking with a foul mouth, insulting your own mother, and alienating Rebecca from her family. If he wasn't already gone, then this would have surely killed him to watch." She shook her head as though the thought broke her heart. "He was the best thing to ever happen to you and the least you could do was honor his memory."

Josie's blood was boiling, she could barely see straight let alone think logically. Every part of her wanted to rip off the veil to the charade of life she'd created, expose the truth to everyone, but some part in her knew that her mom would find a way to call her a liar. She'd find a way to still not believe her and make Henry out to be the saint.

So she let her insides roar in flames, while she looked at her mom, all emotions removed from her expression. "Becca is the best thing to ever happen to me. Not Henry. Drive safe." Then she turned around and walked back into the house.

Chapter 7

Drew could hear the slam of Josie's front door from his garage. He looked at Scout with big eyes and a long whistle, suggesting that was some scene they'd just overheard. He hadn't meant to accidentally invade her privacy, but it wasn't his fault that their homes were sitting right next to each other with maybe fifteen feet to separate them.

Him and Scout had just stepped into the garage to grab a cold beer from his cooler whenever he heard the women barreling down the porch steps next door. He'd tried to mosey his way back inside but the onslaughts were already spewing out.

"That was brutal," he said to Scout with a shake of his head. "Eleanor was always a rough one, but she's always done well to hide it from others," he added, as though Scout deserved an explanation of what they'd just overheard. He was half-tempted to grab a second beer and take it next door to offer to Josie. God knows she probably needed it, he thought, but then again, drinking beer and grilling in the back yard with him was probably not high on her list when she had a daughter to care for and an angry mother who just drove off like a mad woman.

He'd always known Eleanor was difficult, if not downright ruthless and vicious, but most of what he'd truly known about her came from Josie's retellings of childhood or rehashing of her visits back home during college. He went with her often enough, and when he did, he never saw the version of her family that she told him about.

Well, technically, he never saw that version of her mom. Her dad, Donny, seemed to only know how to make a person feel worthless. He was one of those people who instead of saying he was proud of someone, he'd ask questions to show his interest and pride, although those questions tended to leave the one responding with a feeling of not measuring up.

He remembered when he first met Donny, and he'd seemed taken aback at Drew's ambitions and what he was going to school for, as well as what his intentions were for after college. Although, the following questions of, "Oh, so your dad handed you your experience?" and "Have you ever had to

work a real job or have you always worked for your dad?” didn’t do much for Drew’s ego. In fact, he’d been shocked whenever Josie told him how her dad said he really liked him, even going as far as to tell her he seemed to have his head on his shoulders. Funny, considering their conversation only left Drew wondering if the entire world would always think he had everything handed to him.

Her sister, Chelsea, was a piece of work, too. He remembered her being over the top at all of the family get-togethers, needing all of the attention focussed on her. The few times it could turn to someone else, she reveled in cracking jokes at their expense. Although they were never jokes, rather passive-aggressive insults stated with a sinister smile that she probably thought looked innocent. She was repulsive in Drew’s opinion. And her cruelty was almost always directed solely at Josie.

It was like she enjoyed tormenting her with every last embarrassing memory or moment of their lives, and not the cute and funny ones either. It was never anything like how she might’ve pulled a silly prank or had a huge crush on an actor until she was a teenager. Instead, it veered on the side of humiliation, like when her high school boyfriend dumped her in hopes of dating Chelsea, or the time her period stained her pants during an assembly and everyone laughed at her while she had no idea what happened. Even if it could’ve been a sweet and endearing memory, Chelsea had a way of turning it into something ugly and horrible.

So Drew had never been surprised when he showed up to a dinner table or birthday celebration and found himself cringing at the things that came out of her family’s mouth. He’d always hated the way she would visibly lose the light in her eyes whenever they went back to her hometown. Yet, she would never let him say anything or address the issues. If anything, it caused them fights from time to time whenever he got tired of her not confronting the way they treated her. In all the time they’d dated, he’d never known Josie not to have a backbone, and yet she would let her family walk all over her. He didn’t understand it, and she never cared to discuss it.

Sometimes she wouldn’t invite him, and he’d always felt selfishly relieved. Especially after the one time her mom let her masquerade slip, thinking everyone was still outside finishing off the dessert she’d baked. She hadn’t known Drew had followed Josie inside to help clear the table of everyone’s plates, and before he’d rounded the corner into the kitchen

behind Josie, her mom began ripping into her. Admittedly, the complete one-eighty of her personality shocked him enough to quit walking, enough that he stood just on the other side of the wall, whether out of surprise, horror, or pure curiosity.

Nonetheless, he saw Eleanor's true colors as they were all directed straight at her daughter, who had taken it all in stride. There was no shock in Josie's voice when she responded, and the moment he finally started thinking again and took that final step into view a few minutes later, her mother quit speaking mid-sentence and gave him what was nothing short of a death glare before slamming a plate into the dishwasher and storming out.

He was almost in awe of her complete and utter lack of care as to what she must've looked like in his eyes. They'd left soon after, and the tension between Drew and Josie only grew whenever it came to discussions of her family or another obligatory event coming up. He'd only been invited to a couple more after that, but although her mom had been civil, if not eerily nice, it was as though a veil had been lifted and he could no longer unsee what he knew to be true.

Popping the top off his beer bottle on the way back into the house, he looked down to Scout. "We'll check on her later. Or maybe tomorrow." He gave his dog a pat on the head, as though reassuring his four-legged friend instead of himself. "She's tough." And as he said it, he smiled. Because it hit him that what he'd heard had been more than the viper's poison of her mother, but it had also been Josie standing up for herself and for Becca.

He nodded his head and took a swig of the bottle's liquid. She was finally standing up for herself.

Then something else hit him. *Henry*. Who was Henry? Obviously Becca's father, or at least he'd bet a lot of money on it. And what did she mean gone? Something about the way Eleanor had said it sent a chill down his spine. Was it that they had an ugly divorce, or maybe the guy broke Josie's heart? Maybe it was worse. Maybe he up and left them, deciding not to be a father or husband. Worse yet, maybe he was dead.

The latter made him nauseous, partly because he couldn't imagine what Josie and Becca had been going through if that was the case, and the other part was purely guilt because he knew he could never compete with or replace a loved one who was ripped from them too soon.

Drew turned and went back to the garage. Suddenly it felt like a two beers kind of day.

The head thundering rage Josie was feeling quickly dissipated and was replaced with a frantic worry whenever she walked back into the house and didn't see Becca in the living room. She'd quickly walked the entire downstairs, not wanting to cause her daughter any more emotional stress by yelling for her in a panic. However, that caution vanished as her steps progressed into a jog as she hit the stairwell and rushed up them.

"Becca?" She hollered for her daughter. "Sweetie, where are you?" She had a sudden thought that maybe Becca overheard her mom yelling at Nana outside and it sent her into hiding or maybe even caused her to leave.

Hastily, she checked her daughter's room upstairs, then the bathroom in case she'd had to potty. Calling her name again, her heart beat calmed, as did her breathing, when she walked into her own room and spotted Becca there next to the bed. She was fighting with a pillow, trying to get it to stack on top of another one.

Relief washed over her, and she felt half ridiculous for thinking the worst. Then again, she always thought the worst, so she wasn't surprised.

"Baby, what are you doing? Did you hear Mama calling for you?"

She looked at her mom with a mixture of emotions across her delicate features, one being frustration. "The pillow won't sit up," she said, as if that answered everything.

Josie finally noticed the bed, and her heart sank a little. She walked over to her daughter and took a seat, patting a spot next to her. "Come have a seat with me. Let's talk."

"I have to fix the pillow first," Becca insisted.

Josie reached over and helped her get it into position, then at her daughter's smile of approval, she brought her up on the bed next to her. She really was the perfect blend of her and Henry's features. Becca had gotten the best of both of them, and yet whenever she looked at her daughter, she knew she'd grow up to be her own person no matter whose nose or hair coloring she got.

It didn't stop Josie from thanking her lucky stars that Becca had received her family line's eyes. She didn't know what it'd be like to look into Henry's eyes in her own child for the rest of her life, but she was sure thankful she wouldn't have to. It wouldn't have affected her love, nothing

ever would. She knew that. But it was bad enough that every time she closed her eyes she saw him staring back at her.

Josie was pretty sure it was ill-mannered to think poorly of the dead, but that never stopped her from waking from those nightmares to a rush of relief and gratitude to know he was gone. She knew that made her a terrible mother, but she'd take that dark secret along with all the others to the grave if it meant sparing Becca of the ugliness and pain she endured. She'd rather it eat her alive than subject her daughter to any of it.

Tucking her daughter's hair behind her ears, she gave her a small smile. "Are you okay?"

Becca's reply was small and quiet. "Yeah."

"What were you up here doing, sweetie?" She gave her an encouraging smile.

Becca's shoulders slumped. "I made the bed so Nana could stay." Josie's shoulders followed Becca's lead. "I didn't mean to make her mad for sleeping in the bed, so I made it. She doesn't have to be mad. You don't need to yell at her and we can play and color." Becca started crying. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to sleep in it. I won't do it again, I promise."

Blinking back her own tears, Josie smiled down at her daughter and caught her eyes with her own. "Baby girl, you did nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing wrong." She reached out her hand, opening it, and Becca slid her's into Josie's palm. She gave her a loving squeeze and they held hands as she continued. "You are always welcome in Mommy's bed. Sometimes Nana gets grumpy and doesn't do a good job of handling those feelings. Mommy didn't do a good job of handling my feelings either. I should have talked with Nana instead of yelling."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted Nana to stay," Becca interrupted.

"I know you did, baby. But you have nothing to be sorry about. I'm sorry that her visit didn't last longer, but none of it was your fault. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"Good, because if you quit sleeping with me, I'll have to crawl in your bed and tickle you until you come back!" Josie had scooped up her daughter and put her in the middle of the bed before tickling both of her feet and under her neck. At the sheer joy of her giggles and attempts to tickle back, a little bit of sunshine made its way back into her heart.

After spending some time goofing off together, and once they were both in good spirits again, Josie slid off the side of the bed and said, “Let’s finish our day off as fun as it started. What do you want to do tonight? Should we go get popcorn and watch a movie?”

“Yes! Yes! I want to get popcorn.”

“Okay, go put on some shoes, and we’ll go to the store. Maybe we can find a different store this time. It’ll be like our own fun little adventure and we’ll be explorers.”

Becca’s smile was as wide as her face when she hopped off the bed and ran to the door. “Okay, Mom. I go get my shoes on.”

Josie took a huge breath, holding it a moment before letting it go. It was all going to be okay, she reassured herself. Before leaving the room, she decided to finish the bed making job that Becca had started.

But when she walked to her side of the bed she stopped short. Her stomach clenched and she froze. Henry. His smell lingered in the air. It was his favorite cologne, and he always wore it for important events.

Her lungs started to work overtime as she went from holding her breath to feeling like there wasn’t enough air in the room to inhale. Everything felt hot and sticky, she could see the room around her but not focus on anything as though she was both there in her body and not at the same time. Looking at herself from way up above, her vision beginning to blur and a loud sound filling her ears.

It was coming from her, she realized. Her breathing had grown short and hoarse, coming in fast and loud pants, and at the acknowledgment she tried to slow it down.

It’s just his cologne. He’s gone. He’s dead. Henry is dead. He can never hurt me again. He will never lay a hand on Becca. I am okay. I will be okay. I am strong. I can do this. I will survive this.

Josie tried taking a big inhale, counting to four, holding it, then exhaling for four counts. Her throat burned. She brought her hands to her chest, trying to focus on the movements in her body, continuing to remind herself that she was okay over and over in her head.

I am safe. We are safe. It’s just a memory. Henry is dead, and he can’t hurt us. We are okay. I am strong enough to survive this. We are safe.

She had her breathing back under control when Becca walked in, giving her a funny look. “What are you doing?” she asked, staring at her mom who

at some point must've slid to the ground, her back against the bed.

"Nothing." She hated lying to her daughter, and she did it enough involving her father, so she tried to be as honest as possible in all other aspects of life. "That's not true. I was just breathing, focussing on my inhales and exhales."

"That's silly," Becca laughed, still looking at her mom with her palms to her chest. "Why?"

"Sometimes it makes me feel better. I needed a moment to catch my breath." She was thankful Becca had already lost interest as her daughter raced over to grab her hand.

"Let's go. I got my shoes. Get in the car so we can get popcorn." She was pulling her mom toward the door.

Josie laughed at her determination. "I'm coming, I'm coming. Mom's just a slow poke." On their way out the door, the top of her dresser caught her attention. A small part of her that was still on edge started to relax. Her jewelry box was open and the small bottles lining her dresser had been disrupted, some of which were Henry's old colognes. She didn't take the time to consider what to do with all of his belongings whenever she packed the house to move, and she'd been more worried about getting everything unpacked here to make it feel like their home sooner rather than later, so she still didn't take the time to get rid of them.

Becca must've been playing with them whenever Josie was outside arguing like a child with her mother. She was probably spraying them throughout the room to make it smell nice for her Nana, and that was obviously what triggered her panic.

Josie let out a breath and scooped her daughter up before they headed down the stairs. "Put me down. I want to walk," Becca replied to the unexpected action.

"I will in a second. I just need a big hug first." At that, Becca turned in her mom's arms and gave her a tight squeeze around the neck and a big kiss on the cheek. "I love you so much."

"I love you too. And popcorn." Josie laughed at her reply and enjoyed the lightness that reentered the air as they descended the stairs and Becca continued with all the things she loved. "And Nana. And coloring. And Tigers. And puppy dogs. And slides. And Scout. And—"

"Scout? He's already made the list?" Josie asked with a laugh.

“Yeah. I love Scout. He’s my favorite. He’s nice.” At her simple answer as they walked to the car, Josie automatically looked to the house next door, where that lovable dog lived. Along with its owner. She sighed, not wanting to let her thoughts trail on. Instead, she buckled her daughter in, and they set off to find a new store and popcorn.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 8

"Josie, I can't understand you through the tears. Stop, take a breath, and then tell me what's going on." Eleanor was straining to decipher the words between sobs.

Trying to inhale deeply, her entire body shuddering as she did so, Josie exhaled, tasting the saltiness of her tears as they streamed down her face. She gave up trying to wipe them away a long time ago. And she quit trying to stifle them long before that. It was pointless to hide them now when she couldn't even hold them back at her utter shock and horror when Henry first got up in her face.

He'd promised her it would be different now. They were pregnant. He loved her. He'd do anything to give her the world, and it really had stopped for several months. But then he came home after an extended business trip, and the moment he walked in the door she knew he was in one of those moods.

At every question she asked, like "How'd the trip go?" he became angrier at her, throwing out statements like, "As if you care. You get to stay home all day. You don't know what it's like to work your ass off all so someone else can enjoy the benefits of your money. How'd the trip go, my ass."

She didn't understand it. Any of it. She had done nothing but work her ass off up until they became pregnant, and even then, it was his idea for her to leave her job. She hated the idea, still regretted it, because with it went her social life, her coworkers, even her friends. She missed having somewhere to report to every day, prove how good she was at what she did, and even the competition.

But Henry said the stress wouldn't be good for the baby. He insisted they needed a parent at home, that it was the right thing to do to give their baby the best care. She had tried persuading his perspective differently, arguing that kids who went to daycare got more interaction with other kids their age, that it was good for kids to see their parents working, even that it may do her sanity a favor to keep her job, even if just part-time.

He wouldn't have any of it, though. His mind was made up, and after a while she realized maybe he was right, or at least, maybe he had a point. Whenever he made more than enough to support them on a single income,

then how selfish of her would it be to send her child to daycare just to have a social life at work? He'd even started bringing home news reports regarding tragic events that happened to children at daycare facilities or under someone else's supervision other than the parent, and it had her losing sleep and hating herself until she decided becoming a stay-at-home mom was the right decision.

But it hadn't even been the full nine months yet. Their baby girl was still in her uterus, and he was already claiming she didn't understand what it was like to deal with a real job? She had no clue what got him all twisted up, but her gut clenched in response, knowing what was coming. All she could do was lay low, tiptoe the best she could, and straddle the line of looking at him enough but not too much, looking at him the right way but nothing that came off as confrontational to him, breathing normal but not too loud and definitely not too shallow.

She knew it was a lost battle before it began, but she also made herself a promise whenever that stick said positive, whenever she realized she was bringing another life into this world. She would protect this baby no matter what.

When she made that clear to him, he swore he was done. He got on his hands and knees to beg her forgiveness, and for whatever reason, whether it was because she knew what it was like to be a kid who hated their parents all through childhood, or because she was scared of what a split home might look like, she stayed. She unpacked her bags, and she stayed. The last few months she'd been spinning the image of a happy family, one that ate dinners at the table together, laughing and talking, a family that spent Saturdays at the park, Sundays grilling, and rushed around in the mornings trying to get everyone everywhere on time as someone was sure to forget a lunch, important work meeting, or wear mismatched shoes, and at the end of each day, everyone went to bed happy, hearts full, and feeling loved.

But now she knew she'd been spinning a lie to herself. And he spun one, too, as he'd grabbed her by the hair at the back of her head, began screaming right up in her face, then as though her shock and horror offended him, his right hand pulled her face away from his. Far enough that his left could come up and make contact. That first connection was her initial wake up call that night. Everything that came afterward was a mixture of pain and humiliation as he took his demons out on her, those of

which she realized she didn't know, because she clearly didn't know this man as well as she'd thought when she said yes.

The perfect picture he painted of himself for her to believe and fall in love with had done nothing but slowly fade with time until his true colors showed through, but by then it was too late. They were already married when the abuse began, and as if the slipping of that ring onto her finger gave him the freedom to treat her however he wanted, he began showing her who he was not long after. The fancy house he had built for her began to feel like an isolated prison to keep others out and her agony in.

But every time she tried to leave, he'd just show up. Their accounts were already joined, so he knew when she booked a hotel and where it was. Then life would smooth out and all would be like she'd imagined marriage to be, except the few busted lips and bruises along the way. She began questioning her own sanity, feeling embarrassed at who she'd become. Each time the thought of telling someone came to mind, she didn't know how to explain why she'd stayed. They wouldn't get it. How would they treat her afterward? How would they look at her?

Then she became pregnant. She always wanted a family, especially a little girl. And now that fairytale felt like a nightmare to punish her for staying.

As she protected her stomach during his latest rampage, all she could tell herself was her daughter would never experience this. She would never deal with this, no matter what Josie had to do.

Whenever he was through laughing at what a pathetic mess she was, he stormed for the door, grabbing his keys on the way out. The last thing she heard before he left was, "Don't wait up."

She laid there curled up on the kitchen floor, the blood from her lips slipping down to the ground, her tears with it. She wasn't sure how much time passed. Minutes. Hours. She didn't know, but when she raised herself up off the floor, she felt around on the counter for her cell phone and then slipped back down against the cabinets.

When her mom picked up, the flood gates opened back up. There was something familiar and comforting about having her on the other end of the phone, even if she'd never been the perfect mother. She was still her mom, though. Josie knew her mom loved her.

“Josie, I can’t understand you through the tears. Stop, take a breath, and then tell me what’s going on.” Eleanor was straining to decipher the words between sobs.

Once Josie got her breathing somewhat even enough that she could speak, though her voice was still shaky and she had to stop often to keep her voice from cracking, she began. “Mom, I need help. It’s bad. Henry and I got into a fight, and it’s bad.”

There was a pause. “What kind of fight?”

Josie couldn’t stop the sobs but brought herself back together enough to continue. “He... He came home mad... He’s been gone for work, and I didn’t do anything. I swear, I did nothing. He was just mad—”

“Jesus, Josie. If I picked up the phone crying and swearing innocence every time your dad and I pissed each other off, I wouldn’t be able to afford the phone bill.” Eleanor scoffed in annoyance.

“No, it’s not like that. Mom, I... Uh, he... It’s just that—”

“Listen to me. Marriage is hard, and there are going to be fights. That’s part of it. But you have to have self-accountability. You’re about to bring a baby into this world, for goodness’ sakes. You need to grow up, Josie. Henry probably had a stressful time at work. You need to consider what he sacrifices for you. Look around you, your fancy house, expensive car, and you’ll get to stay home with your daughter. Hell, your dad and I had to save for years to be able to get a new car, and then it was the unfortunate luck of a car accident and the insurance claim to even be able to afford it.”

“Mom, please,” her voice broke, a fresh round of tears that she didn’t even know she had left began making their way down.

“Please, what? Please tell you that he’s an asshole and the one in the wrong? Okay, so he’s an asshole. He had a bad day and didn’t thank you for cooking a delicious dinner or whatever. Back in your grandma’s day, that was expected of a woman, and even now, I couldn’t tell you the last time your dad even complimented a recipe I made, but hey, he always notices when it’s not on the table.” Eleanor laughed at that one. “You’ll yell at each other, get annoyed, even hate each other sometimes. But at the end of the day, you still love each other and you’ll move on. That’s what marriage is. You need to get it together before your due date gets here. If you can’t handle it now, then you’re not ready to be a mom. Just wait until you have a baby to feed, diapers to change, no sleep, and still have to keep the house

clean, get dinner on the table, and run the errands. You're becoming a mom, you need to start acting like one."

The disapproving tone and judgment pouring through the phone was almost as unbearable as the physical pain she'd endured. "Yeah. Okay." Josie didn't know what to say. Her mom had made it pretty clear – they saw a woman who stays home, a man who works, pays the bills, affords a big house, and she was the incapable mother to be.

"It'll get better with time. Just remember that even when he's in the wrong, sometimes it's easier to pick your battles and let it go. But your dad and I are about to watch a show, so I'll talk to you later. We love you."

"Love you, too." She sat the phone on the floor next to her, her vision blurring through her tears, head pounding like a train smacked into it, faint coloring showing on her skin that went unprotected to Henry's anger.

If her own mother wouldn't listen, then who would? Her mom had no clue what was going on behind closed doors, but how could she expect her to? Josie had done such a good job of hiding it all. She didn't want people knowing what was happening in her personal life, even before it turned ugly. She'd learned before, back in college, that heartbreak was only worse whenever everyone else knew all the details. She didn't want to do that to herself again. Have people pitying her, judging her relationship, asking questions. Especially if it might end up in a broken heart, too. Little did she know she was cutting the rope that could've been her lifeline.

If her own mom didn't believe her, then how would a court room of strangers? She shook her head. He made the money, he had a good reputation, the connections, everything. He even had her own family wrapped around his finger. If she left, it wouldn't stop him from going after their daughter. If she couldn't even protect herself then how in the hell would she protect her baby girl from whatever he might do to her, especially when it was her week to stay at her dad's and Josie wasn't there to try and shield her, to take the brunt of it.

To hell with sacrificing her sanity to be a stay-at-home mom. She'd sacrifice anything, her heart, blood, and bones included, if it meant protecting her daughter from Henry ever laying a hand on her. Even if it meant one long miserable life married to that monster, tip toeing on thin ice, feeling the pain of his fingers ripping in on the backs of her arms, the blunt force and humiliation of having her shoved and held into the floor so hard

that she saw stars, and the rapture of his knuckles making contact like their own sick beat to her unexpected life song.

If she left to save herself, what would she risk exposing her daughter to?

So she slowly grabbed the counter and worked to lift herself up into a stand, wincing as her weight shifted into her right wrist. He'd grabbed it when he realized what she was doing, what she was trying to protect, and as if to prove she was nothing compared to him, he squeezed hard then bent it back and back until the sheer sound of her scream seemed to be annoying enough to make him move on.

Slowly, unsteadily, she shuffled to the laundry room, where they kept the first aid supplies. A small yelp escaped her throat when she had to reach up and pull the box down from an upper shelf. She vaguely remembered all the places that took a beating, but she hurt all over. Grabbing a wrap, she began working on her wrist, hoping she was doing it right and praying it would help.

By the time she was done, she went to the shower and turned it on. Stripping down was another exercise of cruelty and suffering, but she knew better than to stain the bed. When she finally did crawl in bed, which she thankfully did alone, she found herself praying that God would somehow get her out of this mess. Let her and her baby live a long, happy, fulfilled, and beautiful life. Without him.

Then she spent the next couple of weeks trapped in her personal prison, avoiding family and friends, even the grocery store, while the concealer couldn't hide the evidence on one of her eyes, her jaw, and that right wrist.

Once the signs began to fade, she only braced herself for what was to come, for the future she now knew better than try to pretend could be anything better, and she constantly reminded herself she was strong enough to protect her daughter. At all costs. She had to be.

She had no choice.

Chapter 9

The summer breeze felt good on Josie's skin as she and Becca strolled through their neighborhood mid Sunday morning. She got a decent amount of sleep considering the unexpected and disaster of a visit yesterday, but thankfully the popcorn adventure salvaged the night and put a smile back on her daughter's face by bedtime.

When she awoke to the sound of birds this morning, she found herself smiling and thankful. When was the last time she appreciated something as simple as birds singing? She decided music during breakfast felt good, and they even cracked some of the windows open to let in the morning breeze before it became too hot out. Not long after, she noticed people out walking their dogs, as well as lawn mowers and weed eaters powering up for weekend chores. Something about it all felt very movie-like to her, and she was loving it. This was their life, and they were doing it.

Whenever Becca asked to go on another walk, she didn't hesitate before racing her to their tennis shoes, which they ditched by the front door yesterday. Now, as they chatted about which bugs were faster, worms or caterpillars, she waved as they started to pass Ellen, the only neighbor she'd yet to meet.

"Good morning, ladies. Are you getting settled in?" Ellen was in a pair of olive cargo capris, a blue and white striped crewneck, walking shoes, and a sun hat. She looked like she stepped right out of an L.L.Bean magazine, and Josie had a sudden realization that she was jealous of her neighbor's style, even if she was older than her own mother.

"Good morning." Josie smiled back. "We are, and we're loving how beautiful the neighborhood is. Our last one wasn't as walkable, so I think we've found our new favorite morning routine." Technically, their last one was walkable, though it didn't have sidewalks. It just wasn't as welcoming, nor did anyone walk it. If anything, they'd probably have been sued for walking in the street, getting in the way of one of their neighbor's expensive cars that were always flying up and down the road.

“I raised all of my kids here, and it brings my heart joy to still see little ones enjoying these streets.” Ellen peered down at Becca and pointed at her shoes. “I like those sparkly shoes of yours. Did you pick them out?”

“They’re purple!” Becca said with pride. Then she stomped her foot to show off the real prize.

“Wow, they light up! I always wanted a pair of shoes that did that,” Ellen said.

“You can wear them next. We share,” Becca replied.

Josie and Ellen both laughed. “I think I might need a size bigger, but thank you dear. You are too sweet.” Then looking toward Josie, she added, “You’ve done a good job, Mom.”

The words caught her off guard, and Josie stumbled to reply at first. “Oh, thank you. It’s all her though. I think I just got lucky.”

“Didn’t we all?” The look in Ellen’s eyes suggested she was thinking of her own kids and memories from over the years. “I won’t keep you from your walk. Enjoy this beautiful sunshine.”

“You too,” Josie replied.

But Ellen stopped mid step as she remembered something. “Did that gentleman get a hold of you yesterday? I was out watering my hydrangeas whenever I saw him on your front porch. I noticed your car was gone, and I was going to let him know you’d probably be back later, but he was already leaving before I could put down my watering can.”

At that, Josie remembered she needed to get her belongings back from Drew. She must’ve missed him when they ran to the store. “No, he didn’t. He was just returning some stuff. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Oh, okay. I just wanted to let you know.” With a laugh, she added, “Some might call me nosey, but I just like to keep an eye out on the neighborhood.”

Josie laughed, and they said their goodbyes again before parting ways. It felt good having neighbors who cared enough to look after one another, even if one might turn out to be a busybody, though she didn’t think it’d bother her. She’d never had anyone that focussed on her, unless of course it was with a hidden agenda or to criticize her.

As their tennis shoes crunched over the gravel in their driveway, a familiar bark bellowed before she saw Scout come barreling at them. Becca

set off in her own run before grabbing on to the dog and wrapping her arms around his neck, probably a little too tight.

“Easy, Becca. We have to be gentle,” Josie told her. She looked up at the same time as Drew let the push mower’s motor shut off in his front yard. She hadn’t seen him at first thanks to both of their vehicles parked in the parallel driveways.

He walked over with a nod, then lifted his hat at the same time he brought his shirt up to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Now, that was a sight she didn’t need haunting her on lonely nights. Why couldn’t he have put on eighty pounds and have an addiction to fast food?

She tore her gaze away from the pronounced muscles peeking out from below his t-shirt, but clearly not quick enough. His face was smug when his eyes met hers.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice cheery.

“Good morning to you.” She felt caught and embarrassed, and before she could think of something else to say, Becca saved her.

“Can we get his treats?” Becca asked, sitting in the gravel next to Scout who was laying down with his head on her legs. Thank God for kids, she thought.

“Yes, I’ll be right back.” She looked to Drew before moving. “Can you watch her for a second, please?”

“No problem.” He watched as she jogged inside, noticing she was once again wearing shorts that complimented her legs. Then he turned to Becca and couldn’t stop the smile when he saw how happy and content she was with Scout wallowing all over her begging for attention. “Did you have a good walk?” he asked.

“Yeah. I like walking. It’s fun.” She smiled up at him, and he noticed she had Josie’s big brown eyes. Then he remembered what he overheard yesterday about Henry, his guesses at the any number of scenarios she could be going through right now, and he suddenly felt guilty for ogling her mom a moment ago.

“Well maybe you can walk Scout one day if you and your mom are up for it.”

“Up for what?” Josie asked, as she came back out with a bone in one hand and a couple dog biscuits in the other.

“I want to do it!” Becca shouted as she jumped up to grab for the treats.

Josie kept them out of reach. “Hold on. Remember what we talked about? We have to ask Drew to make sure it’s okay first.”

Becca turned and used her sweetest voice as she asked, “Can Scout have these treats I picked out for him?”

He pretended to think about it before giving her a big sigh and a nod. “Of course he can.”

“Yay! Can I do it? Can I have them?”

“Yes, but do the treats first, then the bone. He might want to chew on the bone awhile.” Josie surrendered the goodies to her toddler and smiled as Becca gave him a biscuit.

“Watch this,” Drew said. He knelt next to Becca and said, “Scout, sit.” After he sat, Drew said, “Lift out your hand and say ‘shake.’” Becca did as he said and started jumping and giggling when Scout lifted his paw to meet her hand.

“Did you see it, Mom?” She was laughing. “He shake my hand. Scout shake his paw.”

Josie was laughing too as she said, “I did, sweetie. Good job! Now give him the treat for being a good boy.” She watched as Becca gave it to him then waited until he was through eating it before trying to stick the bone in his mouth. “He’ll grab it, baby. You don’t have to feed it to him.” But she was still laughing, because that dog did not mind having a bone stuffed in his face.

“You guys didn’t have to do that,” Drew said. Though he liked knowing they’d thought of Scout, especially if giving him treats was going to make Becca so happy and let him hear Josie laugh so carefree.

“I know that, but we wanted to. We saw a pet store when we went to get popcorn yesterday, and I thought it would be fun. Becca was delighted when I showed her the section where she could pick out the special biscuits in any shape or size.”

“He’s a sucker for treats.” Drew watched as Becca began chasing after Scout, trying to take the bone back. Josie looked to him, and as if realizing she’d been enjoying herself, she stiffened.

“We had better leave you to it. I don’t want to keep you from your mowing.” She wasn’t sure why she suddenly felt awkward standing there next to him. Maybe it was because he saw her gawking at him a few

minutes ago, or maybe it was because it felt nice to chat with another adult for a change.

“Oh, you’re no bother.” But she was already hollering for Becca, and he was trying to quickly think of a way to keep her around. “Do you already have dinner plans?”

Becca had just ran up to her side, complaining she didn’t want to go in yet, as she thought about his question. “Not really,” she said.

“Interested in some grilling? It won’t be anything fancy, but I have some hamburgers and hotdogs sitting in the fridge.” He felt like an amateur, unsure of his footing, but at least he was trying.

That actually sounded really nice, Josie thought. Anytime Henry uncovered the grill, it was to invite people over and host some fancy get-together as though they always had ribs and thick cut steaks for every meal. A simple backyard hotdog sounded delicious.

“What time?” she asked.

He smiled, knowing he’d have to run to the store to get buns and something besides beer to drink. “Come over around four.”

The sun was brutal as Josie balanced a summer pasta salad in the crook of her elbow, held Becca’s water bottle with one hand, and used her other to guide her daughter to Drew’s front door that afternoon. She knocked a couple of times and tried the doorbell. He never came. She knew he was home considering his truck was in the drive, garage door open, as it usually was, and his front door was open except for the screen.

She peered through the screen as she called out his name, but there was no answer. As she listened, she could hear a light backdrop of country music floating through and movement caught her eye from the back windows.

“Let’s go around back, kiddo. I think Drew and Scout are already out there.”

“Okay,” Becca said, as she turned toward the stairs and began jumping down, her mom quickly grabbing her hand as she always did when she worried Becca might stumble or fall.

Between their houses was a wooden privacy fence that snaked up alongside their garages, a small entry gate for each yard. Josie opened the gate for Becca to go through and as they ventured into the back yard, her

assumptions proved correct. Drew was tossing a frisbee for a sprinting Scout, a small radio sitting on the concrete patio connecting to the back door.

“I want to throw!” Becca yelled, ditching Josie’s hand and running to meet Drew as Scout retrieved the frisbee.

“Hey,” he beamed at them.

“I tried the front door, but then I guessed you were probably back here. I hope it’s okay that we let ourselves in.”

“Absolutely,” he smiled. “Here, give this a big fling, and he’ll bring it back to you,” Drew said to Becca before approaching Josie to take the bowl from her. “What do we have here?”

“It’s nothing fancy. I just thought it was the least I could do versus showing up empty handed.” She took a look around, admiring his back yard. To her surprise, there were garden beds lining the fencing, some small trees spread throughout, and even a couple potted plants by his patio.

“You didn’t have to do that, though, I love a good side dish.” He gave her a smile. “I’m going to run this into the fridge until the food’s ready. Can I get you something to drink? Becca, do you want anything to drink?”

Becca was too distracted chasing after Scout to hear him, but Josie said, “I brought her over a water bottle.”

“What about you? I have water, sweet tea, beer, or wine.” He noticed she was still looking around the yard, something like admiration in her eyes.

“Wine?” She laughed. “Since when do you drink wine? What happened to it being for pretentious wannabes?”

The corners of his eyes wrinkled as he let out a laugh and scratched the back of his head. “Well, I may have just picked it up from the store earlier.” At her laughter, he added, “And it may be crap, because I had to ask a stranger on the aisle for recommendations.” He was laughing now, too. “But in all fairness, I have grown up since deeming all alcohol besides beer and whiskey to be a waste. I’ve even had my fair share of wines over the years. Even if they wouldn’t have been my preferred choice.”

He was thankful this was off to a good start, because he really had been fretting standing in that aisle trying to decide between the fifty million bottles of wine that all looked the same to him. Why one was less than ten dollars and the other over forty, he had no idea, but he was thankful when a guy walked down the aisle like he knew what he was after. He didn’t even

pretend to hide his ignorance when it came to the stuff. Might've actually begged him for all he remembered. He just wanted to make a good impression.

The fact that Josie was already smiling and laughing, the tension that he usually saw in her shoulders nowhere to be seen currently, it was already worth it.

"I'll take a glass of water for now, but I'll definitely try some of your wine later," she assured.

"I'll be right back, then." Halfway to the door, he paused and looked back. "Oh, um, is it okay for me to have a beer?" He gestured awkwardly toward Becca, not sure if she understood what he was asking. She looked taken aback.

No one had ever asked her that before. Definitely not Henry when he would come in the door and pour a heavy glass of whiskey, one after another, nor when he invited people over for dinner and kept the drinks flowing. Was it normal for other people to consider children being present first, or was he just not used to being around kids? Maybe he was trying to be polite.

"Of course," she said. "It's your home."

"If you'd rather I didn't, I won't," he shot back.

She gave him a reassuring smile. "No, really. Becca's seen people drink plenty."

He nodded, then stopped again when he heard her say, "But Drew?"

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Thank you." The sincerity in her voice struck a chord in him, and as he went inside to put the side dish into the fridge and retrieve drinks, he wondered what she must've been thinking to feel the need to say thank you.

He really did just want a laid back Sunday afternoon, but a part of him also wanted to get to know this new Josie a little more. Not new, he corrected himself, rather older, or maybe just wiser and more mature. He felt like the same Josie he knew was still in there, he could tell, but there were also new layers, and he was hoping to peel some of them back to get to know her again. Connect with her.

He knew he had no right to be so curious, but if he didn't at least try, he would spend the rest of his life kicking himself, especially knowing she lived right next door.

Josie had just finished giving the frisbee another toss when she heard Drew come back outside. “Your back yard is amazing,” she admitted.

“My turn,” Becca shouted as Scout ran back to them.

“You go ahead. Mommy’s going to chat with Drew a bit.”

He handed her the ice water as she came to stand next to him, then he cracked open his beer and took a drink. “I didn’t do a bit of it except maintain it to be honest.”

She looked around. A lot had to have been done within the last several years, and she knew he’d been here longer than that. “Hire it out?” she asked.

He opened the lid to his grill and reached down to open the propane’s valve. “No, I actually took care of a unique HVAC issue for a family, and unfortunately there was some miscommunication between my techs and our front desk, so the job wasn’t done to what I’d say is my standard. Then what should’ve been an easy fix still wasn’t enough.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he remembered the job. “I ended up taking over on it, because they’d been patient long enough, and well, you see, they’d bought a remodeled home built back in the fifties. Over the years, an addition was added with a fireplace, but upon the recent remodel it was removed and the bigger and newer furnace put in to compensate was more than their current duct system could handle, but no one noticed.”

She couldn’t help but smile as he was carrying on about his work. It was evident he cared a lot about what he did and the company he’d built, even if she didn’t know the first thing about HVAC units.

Realizing he was making a short story long, he said, “Basically, we were fixing something and caught a code that was easy to miss that it was overheating. It needed more air flow, which it gets from those vents in the ceilings.”

When she realized he paused to make sure she was following, she replied, “Oh, yeah, I know what you’re talking about.” Which reminded her that she needed to add picking up a new furnace filter to her list of errands.

“We added one for them in the addition and reconfigured the ductwork in their attic, but it wasn’t enough. Unfortunately, with the quirks of an old house, we didn’t have the luxuries to do a lot of what we’d have preferred due to the sizes of spaces and what not. We were able to make do, though,

and increased the air circulation box that sat on top.” He noticed her grinning at him and stopped. “What?”

“Nothing. I’m just curious if I should grab a pen and paper to start taking notes?”

“You were always a smart ass,” he laughed.

“You know I’m kidding. It might come in handy having you next door, especially considering I’m clueless about this stuff.” She took a drink of the water, watching as he scraped the grill grate clean.

When he was done, he gestured to the yard with a sheepish shrug and said, “It was all backstory to say that I didn’t feel right about charging them for the work considering the length of time it took, and the fact that we had to do the job differently than we told them originally. Since I wouldn’t take their money, they wouldn’t let me say no to free landscaping service.”

Josie’s brows rose. “Wow, that worked out in your favor. They did great.”

“I had no clue they even did landscaping to be honest. That was about five years ago, and now we’re pretty good friends. In fact, I recommend them to a lot of development builders and new homeowners who haven’t learned their green thumb yet.” It was kind of crazy how things worked out, he thought. He’d never considered how that one job had turned into a friendship that was also mutually beneficial for both of their businesses, as he knew they’d recommended him to people, too.

“I think that’s awesome,” she replied, and she really did. “Want me to grab anything or do anything to help?” she asked, looking at his setup.

“Want to run inside, that door takes you straight into my kitchen, and grab the hotdogs and hamburger patties from the fridge?”

“Sure,” she said, turning to head for the door.

“Oh, and your purse is on the counter. The booster seat is still in my truck, but I can run around and grab it.” He’d meant to take it out earlier but forgot.

“Oh okay, I’ll grab it before we head home, but I’ll get the booster from you later,” she tossed over her shoulder as she opened the door. “I have one in my car. That was just the one from Henry’s.” She stopped halfway through the door, then quickly recovered and shut it behind her as she entered the house. She hadn’t meant to offer up that detail, but it slipped out.

It didn't matter. She couldn't live like a stranger here anyways since Drew already knew her. There were bound to be conversations about what they'd both gotten up to since college, and obviously there was no father figure around since her moving in next door. She'd just hoped to prolong it at least a little longer. Enjoy a summer barbecue like she was a normal person.

The bright kitchen surprised her as she walked to the fridge. She didn't expect his house's kitchen to be bigger than hers, not that she'd thought about it. The L-shape of it allowed for an island, one it looked like he might've built himself with a butcher block top. The cabinets were outdated but a deep blue, however, it was the natural light streaming in through the back door's window, the little window over the sink, and the screen of the garage door off to the side that made it feel so bright and homey in here.

She liked it. Opening the simple fridge, she found the metal pan with prepared patties, already seasoned and ready to go, and then she opened a crisper drawer, where she spotted a package of hotdogs.

As she returned outside, using her hip to keep the door open long enough to walk through, she saw as Drew took a deep breath. She knew what was coming.

He'd been surprised at the sudden information before she went inside, and the way she'd frozen in the doorway made him wonder if it was because of any emotions the memory caused or due to her misstep by saying the name. Either way, he knew this was his moment of opportunity, and he needed to know.

It wasn't just about him. He didn't need to go making her life difficult, bringing his old feelings to her front door, especially if her heart was guarded, taken, or couldn't handle anymore.

"So," he started. "Henry?" But her eyes grew big and he heard the thumping of steps as Becca came running up.

"Is the food ready? I'm hungry," she declared.

"We're cooking it now. It won't take long," Josie reassured her. "Drink some water, please."

"Then can I have lemonade?" Becca asked.

"I didn't bring any, sweetie," Josie said.

Drew looked to Josie. "I picked up some apple juice, if that's okay."

At Becca's widened smile, Josie said, "You can have some, but you have to finish your water first."

"Okay," she agreed, and her mom smiled at her.

Then Josie looked up to see Drew watching her, and she felt bad for leaving him in the dark, knowing it wasn't right of her. His eyes were looking at her closely, and she knew he probably hadn't been missing much. He'd always been sharp and aware.

"Later," she said, giving him a nod, which she knew he understood as he reciprocated the action.

"Later what?" Becca asked.

Slowly moving closer to her toddler, Josie said slowly, "Oh, you know. Later I'll help him cook right after I'm done—" she lunged for her daughter, fingers out and wiggling. "Tickling you!"

And they were off. Becca screaming and taunting that Josie wouldn't catch her, and the latter letting her outrun and maneuvering her at every turn. It all felt surreal, Drew thought, watching them as he placed the meat on the grill. It felt like one of those happy moments you saw on tv. Right before something terrible happens and changes the entire trajectory of the storyline.

He tried to shake off the invisible dark cloud, but he couldn't quiet the nagging sense that the other shoe was about to drop.

Chapter 10

The floorboards still felt warm under Josie's feet from the sun shining in earlier. She walked through her home double-checking that all of the blinds and curtains were closed, and then she settled herself onto the couch. She had a book in hand that she'd read at least a dozen times over the years, but she let it lay on the overstuffed pillow next to her.

Her body gave a jerk as she exhaled a laugh at the idea of her actually being able to relax. She knew what was coming next, and she wasn't ready for it. She'd lied to countless people over the years, pretending to be someone she wasn't, pretending to be happy. She allowed them to perceive her life a certain way, let them envy her lifestyle, clothes, car, and everything in between. Even her marriage. Though it was all a sham.

But she didn't want to lie to Drew. Not really. She'd never lied to him, not that it mattered since she owed him nothing, especially after taking her heart and crushing it years ago. So maybe it was that she didn't want to lie to herself anymore. Play this role for everyone else to see. Maybe she wanted to know what it would feel like to live an honest life again, and what if she started that tonight, with Drew.

Not with him, of course, but by being honest about Henry, about her past. She just didn't know if she could. It was like she'd worn all the heavy layers of lies for so long that if she started peeling them back now, she wasn't sure if she'd still be underneath. For all she knew, she'd be nothing more than some crumbling drywall under years of paint coats, wallpapering, paneling, and more paint. Maybe that was her. She could only hold on and exist so long as her lies were left untouched, just adding another layer of paint versus starting at the beginning.

If she did crumble, if life as she knew it actually did fall out from under her by owning her truth, the reality of her life, what was the worst that would happen? Or did it just mean starting over? Tearing down all of the old facade and starting new, fresh. Installing a new sheet of drywall.

She didn't know.

Either way, she'd have to decide soon enough, because Becca went to bed at her usual hour, and Drew was going to pop over anytime now to talk.

That's what they'd decided to do in their general conversation, as if there was nothing specific to talk about, rather chat like two friends catching up as Becca ate alongside them, unaware that her mom was agreeing he could come over later for answers. It had been fun getting to grill over there, she had to admit. Even if her slip up of Henry's name changed the course of her evening.

The food had been delicious and Becca could barely hold her eyes open when they came home. Scout had been so good for her, as had the sun. Except to eat, that girl ran and played the entire time, and she had the best day. That was always worth it to Josie, seeing that huge smile on her face, no worries in the world, and enjoying all that life had to offer.

She stiffened at the slight tapping on the front door, then quickly jumped up from the couch. She knew he was going to be here any moment, it was silly to be alarmed over the sudden sound.

Unlocking the deadbolt and doorknob, she opened the front door to see Drew standing there holding a bottle of wine and two glasses. He gave a slight shrug of his shoulder and nervous grin as she looked at him. He had changed into a pair of jeans and a faded out gray t-shirt. She could barely make out what it said, but it was evidently an old team shirt, likely from his baseball days. He played a lot on pick up teams in college and the intramural leagues every year.

The look suited him, she thought, noticing he didn't bother brushing his hair. He looked like he might've rolled off his own couch before slipping on shoes to come over here, and something about it made her heartbeat quicken and sent an awareness in an area she'd assumed wouldn't show much interest in any man again.

"Are you going to let me in?" he asked through the storm door, then smiled bigger as she jolted like he caught her doing something she wasn't supposed to.

Damn it, she thought. She looked like an idiot letting her mind get carried away and now his nervous grin dissolved into his typical cocky self. It annoyed her enough to set her mind right, and she unlocked the glass door. "I was just waiting to see if you'd offer to leave the wine and go, like you

did the pizza, or if you were only a package deal tonight,” she remarked, hoping the rude humor would hide what she was really thinking.

He laughed. “Ahh, I see. Nope, you got to take us both tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Then come on in,” she said, holding the door open, so that she could lock it before following him into the kitchen. It was still slightly weird to her that he knew her house better than she did. Or at least felt at home in it.

“It’s looking good in here,” Drew remarked, noticing she’d gotten their belongings settled, with vases and lamps put out, artwork hung, and he smiled at the little pictures of Becca in the hallway. It felt cozy.

“Thanks,” she said, following behind him. “I still have boxes to deal with, but I’m in no hurry to force it. I wanted to get enough out and put away that it felt like a home, but now I’m content to take my time and enjoy the little moments with Becca.”

He sat the wine on the counter, along with the two glasses, and began pulling open drawers in search of something. “Yeah, I get that. I hear it flies by.”

“Go on and make yourself at home, won’t you?” She laughed as she pulled open the drawer next to the stove where she kept the silverware, as well as the corkscrew. “Here.”

“Ahh, there it is. Thanks. I hope you don’t mind, but I thought it might be nice to crack it open since we forgot about it at dinner.” He hadn’t even realized they didn’t open any wine earlier until he was cleaning up the kitchen. Josie had offered to help, but he wouldn’t let her. There really wasn’t much to do anyhow, but he could see Becca was tired and had no doubt they both had more to do in the evenings post dinner than he did. His pretty well included giving Scout a pat on the head, tossing his work clothes into the washer, and plopping on the couch for a couple episodes. By Sunday nights, he didn’t do a whole lot and allowed himself to relax before the work week.

“It sounds kind of nice actually,” Josie admitted.

He popped the cork and turned his head, giving her a genuine smile. “Good.”

“Although, I do own wine glasses so you know.” Still, she grabbed one that he’d brought and lifted it for him to pour her a glass.

“Noted. I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

He didn't meet her eyes, because he didn't want to know what he'd see there. If he was a better gentleman, he'd keep his flirting to himself, at least until he knew her situation, but it was hard not to sneak a few sly comments in.

All thoughts of being the distant, mature man he'd grown into flew out the window the moment she'd opened the door. She'd pulled back half her hair into a clip and was wearing a pair of glasses that gave him all sorts of fantasies. It didn't help that she had on a matching blue pajama set. Or hell, maybe it was what they called loungewear these days. He had no clue, as he'd learned at his latest family reunion when all the women were talking about the collections of their favorite store lines. All he knew was that the material fell over her summer-kissed skin with such a softness that he wanted to wrap her up in his arms and feel all of her for himself.

And damn it, if she wasn't wearing another pair of shorts making it hard not to stare at those long legs. He used to tell her all the time in college how dangerous those things were and she'd laugh him off like he was crazy. It only made it worse that he had vivid memories of them leading up to an exceptional ass, one that he also remembered immensely enjoying grabbing both in and out of bed.

Thank God she was at least wearing a bra under that v-neck, because he wouldn't have been able to stay a gentleman. So help him, he would've had to drop the wine on the porch and run home if he wanted to sustain any self-control.

"Thanks," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yeah." She probably wouldn't be thanking him if she knew what was running through his head right now, he thought. But it was time to get back to why he came here. "No problem."

"We can take these to the living room." Josie turned and led the way, feeling a bit excited to have company tonight but still wary of the decisions she'd have to make. She decided to feel the night out, feel Drew out, and let herself determine what she wanted to share, or not, on the spot. Worse case scenario, she could just kick him out if she changed her mind and didn't want to do this. She was certain his ego could take it.

"Are you sure we can have this on your fancy couch?" he was half-joking, considering her couch really did look expensive.

She rolled her eyes. “Now you sound like my mother with those passive aggressive attacks.”

Ouch. “Now that’s someone I don’t want to be similar to,” he said without a second thought. Then he winced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve always known she was far from perfect.” If not the devil’s sister, but that was a thought for another time.

Drew took a seat at the opposite end of the couch, turning to face her, one arm slung over the back of it. As Josie curled up on the other end, he questioned if he should tell her the truth about overhearing their spat outside.

“I thought I might read tonight,” Josie said as she casually tossed the book onto the coffee table. “Wine sounds better though.”

He nodded in agreement and smiled. Her voice had become forced and her smile less easy. He decided to change topics away from her mom. “I sat the booster seat on your front porch next to the door by the way. I’m not sure if you saw it when you came to the door.”

“Perfect. Thank you again for doing that. I’m sure it was weird, but not having my neighbor dropping me off really saved me from a headache.”

Shit, he’d inadvertently brought them back to her mom. Well, it was now or never. “About that,” he started. “I was actually doing some stuff in my garage when I overheard the two of you at each other’s throats outside.” Looking at her, Drew watched as she took a deep breath. “I’m sorry you still have to deal with that shit. I know it’s not my place, but damn, that woman is something.”

To his surprise, she laughed. He was probably waiting for her to defend Eleanor like she always used to do, but she wasn’t that same naive girl. She knew her mom’s actions and words weren’t okay, even if she also knew they probably stimulated from her own upbringing and experiences in life. Either way, it wasn’t Josie’s job to defend her. Everyone had to grow up and take responsibility for their actions at some point, and though her family may still be her family, it wasn’t her job to psychoanalyze or justify their bad behavior.

She solely did her best to set boundaries and mentally prepare for time with them. Besides, she’d had her own shit show of a life to deal with, lies to sell, bruises to hide, self-confidence to fake, that it didn’t give her a place to judge nor the patience to put up with it half the time.

“I bet that was entertaining,” was all she said before taking a sip of wine.

He looked at her like she was a stranger, which only made her ask, “What?”

“I guess I wasn’t expecting you to be so laid back about it.” He was thinking about all the blow up fights they used to end up in after he so much as mentioned she gave her family too much credit.

She nodded her head in contemplation. “Let’s just say I never disagreed with you whenever we were younger, but I hadn’t yet realized I was taking responsibility for people I didn’t need to.”

“Well, shit,” he said before taking his own swig. “Someone went off and became a mature woman over the years.” And boy did she sound it. And look it, he thought, trying not to trace the hollow of her neck with his eyes.

She laughed again. “Something like that. I guess becoming a mom helped change the way I see things, especially knowing everything I do and the decisions I make are all affecting the childhood Becca has, the problems she’ll face in adulthood, and be the first building blocks of who she becomes.”

Not to mention, she was frantic over the home life Becca was being raised in and read every parenting book she could find. After that, she dived into as much psychology research she could access, particularly pertaining to the parent and child dynamics and how relationships affect a person so that she could try to compensate for the shitty hand Becca had been dealt in life. Which she figured would all backfire on her one day and she’ll still have screwed up her daughter unintentionally.

He let out a low whistle as he took another drink. “Josie the mom.” He watched her look away under his gaze. “It suits you, you know.”

“How’s that?”

“It just does. You’re an amazing mom. It’s evident, and I don’t know, it feels fitting. I always knew you’d make a great mom.” At the way her eyes darted back to his with a sharp look, he regretted stumbling into this territory. He sighed. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

“About what?” she asked. “Telling me I’m a great mom?”

She was testing him, and he knew it. Her voice had an edge to it and her invisible walls had come back up. So he only took another big breath before hoping he wouldn’t put his foot in his mouth. This was a conversation he’d thought about for years, but he never thought they’d actually have it.

“About that day... That Fourth of July party and everything that happened.”

She only looked at him, keeping her face reprieved of any emotion, but she knew if she let a single bit in then it would flood in, and she'd worked hard to put this part of her life behind her. She didn't want Drew knowing how often she'd thought about him over the years. About how badly he broke her heart, or all the nights as she lay in the fetus position, praying she didn't have any broken bones, that she'd pathetically fantasized about him popping back into her life and saving her. Saving her from the hell she'd gotten herself into, and saving her still broken heart from the memories of what she had.

She'd spent the years deciding to resent him rather than miss him. She knew he would never save her, because he was the one who didn't want to be with her.

Thankfully, he continued. “Look, I was an idiot kid who said stupid things and didn't know what I wanted, and I guess I was afraid—”

“Afraid of what?” she snapped. “We weren't the ones who had found out they were pregnant.” Anger. That's what was seeping through her shield, and she was okay with it. She'd let herself be angry.

He leaned forward to put his wine glass on the coffee table and placed both hands together as he looked at her. “I know that, Josie.”

“Are you sure? Because you seemed pretty adamant on making it clear to me that day that we were so screwed and a family was the worst possible thing to happen.”

They both remembered it clearly still. They were at his dad's lake house for their annual holiday celebration. Everyone drove out and crashed at the house, which his dad let them use since he went on vacation that time of year. They were surrounded by their friends, it had been a great summer so far, and they would be starting their final year of college in August.

Everything had been fine until one of the guys kept giving Amanda a hard time for not taking any jello shots, and finally her and Connor had come out with the exciting news that they were pregnant. The cheers of congratulations were genuine, as was the relief from everyone that it wasn't them, Josie and Drew included.

It wasn't until later that night when she found him sitting on the dock, his feet in the water, that she went and sat down next to him. She'd brought

him a beer and leaned into his shoulder, but she found him stiffening, signaling something was up.

Not even twenty minutes later she was sprinting for the lake house, tears streaking down her face, and she burst inside in search of her keys and weekend bag. She'd been bummed earlier when she wasn't feeling good from the long day in the sun and eating too much, but then she was thankful for it, because she'd stopped drinking a long time ago and was sober to drive. Except she'd wished she hadn't been sober while Drew ripped her heart into shreds. She'd grabbed her stuff, got in her car, and tore out of there, unaware if he'd ever gotten up from that stupid dock.

They never recovered. A few get-togethers the following academic year had placed them in the same setting, but it was miserable for her so she quit going. By graduation they were practically strangers who never saw each other. She wouldn't let Amanda fill her in on what he was doing, and instead kept her head down, focussed on school, and tried to ignore the constant ache in her chest.

Chapter 11

Josie sat there, her wine glass still in her hands as she faced Drew, who looked like he was struggling with the right words to say. He knew he had some explaining to do, but that's not what bothered him. Hell, he didn't even mind groveling and apologizing until the sun came up, because he knew he'd messed up.

It was what would come next that had him hesitant. He'd spent years thinking about what he would say and what he would do if he got a second chance, but the difference between reality and daydreams was that in his version he got to pick the ending. She would forgive him and they could start over again. However, he had no control over her reactions or decisions in real life, and the possibility of losing her all over again scared the hell out of him.

"Are you going to say anything?" she shot at him. She knew her tone was insulting and aggressive, but she was okay with that. If he expected answers from her about Henry and her life, then he damn well better be doing the same.

He straightened and looked at her. "Yes, I just wish I knew where to start."

"How about what the hell that night was all about?" she suggested.

He took a deep breath and did his best to jump in. "Look, I'd had a lot to drink, and—"

That lit a fire in her. "Don't blame the alcohol for your actions. Even if you weren't thinking clearly your actions are your own. It was your decision to drink so much."

"I wasn't blaming the alcohol, Josie! I know what self-accountability is. I was just saying I'd been drinking all day. Hell, I don't know what I was saying, because I don't know how to go about this." He ran a hand through his hair, taken aback by her statement.

"Go about what?" she asked with exasperation.

"Apologizing!" Realizing his voice was rising, he lowered it, not wanting to wake up Becca. "Apologizing, saying sorry, explaining what I was

thinking back then. I fucked up, okay. That was the biggest mistake of my life and not a day goes by that I don't regret it, and I don't know where to begin or how to explain it, and I'm just sorry. Okay?" He massaged his temples with his hand, knowing this wasn't going how he'd planned.

Something in her softened, whether it was at how bothered he looked by this conversation or the words themselves. He said he regretted it, she thought with shock. She'd both hated and loved him for years afterward, and now he was telling her he'd been thinking about her, or at least that day, too?

"Okay," she said with more gentleness. "How about starting with why you decided to break up with me out of what felt like the blue that night?"

"Do you remember when we first met?" he asked.

She looked confused, but said, "Yes, I had come over to your dorms with Amanda. Her and Connor had just started dating."

"And do you remember that night? Everyone else was fast asleep two sheets to the wind, and we stayed up all night talking."

"Yeah," she said slowly.

"It scared the shit out of me." He watched her brows knit together in confusion. He reached out to his wine, took a drink, then sat the glass back onto the table. "I spent my entire life watching my parents hate each other. Back then, I thought all relationships were doomed to end up like that." Seeing her eyes narrow, he said, "I know it sounds stupid. I was young and still figuring out the world. But that's all I knew. People fell head over heels for each other, started families, and then one day they seemingly wake up hating each other, and their kids, like me, spend the rest of their lives bouncing between houses, watching the two people who love them most in the world be miserable around each other for the kids' sakes."

He shook his head thinking about it. "Don't get me wrong. I had the best childhood. My parents were terrific each in their own way, but I could never shake the feeling that I was like the tether between them that kept them miserable and reminded them of their mistake."

"Drew," she began, but he held up his hand and kept going.

"I knew you were something special that first night we hung out. You were fun, caring, smart, and beautiful. Somehow I was opening up to you like a foolish boy in love, and that freaked me out. I didn't want to end up

like them, so that's why I brought Michelle around and then the others. I wanted you to think I was just another guy who strung along girls, I guess."

She nodded, as if understanding. "But we ended up dating."

"Yep," he said. "I couldn't stop thinking about you, and I got tired of watching everyone else have fun. It didn't help that you didn't make it easy," he added with his first grin since they began on this subject.

Josie let out a little laugh. "You did a good job. I thought you were another fuck boy like the rest." Then she gave him a big smile of her own. "Plus I enjoyed you chasing me."

He laughed at that too, remembering how hard he had to work to get her to give him a chance after he finally got his head out of his ass. Something began to lift from him, like an unseen weight that had been pressing down on his chest for far too long.

"So what happened at the lake house to change everything? If memory serves me, we had a really good relationship, except for the wedge known as my family dynamics. I know we had a lot of fights pertaining to them, but none around that time." She could understand where he was coming from regarding his parents, even if she would have never understood it back then. That's what growing up and experience did for a person, though. Gave them new understanding, even for situations that aren't theirs. Experiencing the ups and downs of life tended to make it easier to put herself in someone else's shoes.

It also helped that she could relate more than she cared to admit to herself. Whenever she found out she was pregnant, it had hit her what kind of man was going to be the father of the child she was to bring into this world.

"It was the realization of where we were headed, I guess," he said. "Amanda and Connor were so excited when they announced they were pregnant. They had no clue where life was headed, what would come next, but they were happy and excited. They didn't care because they had each other. Next thing I knew, I saw that as us, and I knew if we were pregnant that I would be down on one knee so fast. Hell, I'd been happy to already be down on one knee asking you to marry me." He let out a slow breath. "That's all I wanted was a life with you."

She was trying to hold herself together, but she could feel her chest tightening and her eyes stinging, threatening tears. Although, she hadn't felt

tears like these wanting to come since giving birth. Since then, they'd only been the response of pain, fear, and shame.

He looked up and saw her face, the way she was holding her lips tight together and the sheen around her eyes as she faced him. He moved next to her, taking the glass from her hands and putting it on the coffee table next to them.

Grabbing her hands he said, "I am so sorry, Josie. I panicked that night. I saw the future I wanted with you and like an idiot, I threw it all away. I said everything I could think of to hurt you, hurt us, and do anything to make sure I didn't end up like my parents."

She kept blinking, trying to stop the tears, but they were coming down her cheeks now, and she hated it. She'd allowed herself to hate him for eight years, and now here she was feeling every last bit of her hate, sadness, anger, betrayal, resentment, and humiliation she'd juggled over that time. She felt so stupid and embarrassed for letting herself dream of a future with him back then, telling herself afterward that she was too young and naive to know what was best for her.

Now he was telling her he'd wanted the same. She was crying for all of the emotions she tried bottling up over and over, for the years lost, and for her memories with Henry, which should've been time spent with Drew instead. She was crying for the life she could have had, the idea of Becca having a good dad, and at the acknowledgement that she could no longer blame him for the decisions she made that entangled her with Henry and everything that happened afterward.

"When you said you never wanted kids, never wanted to get married or settle down," she said quietly, "I always assumed you meant not with me."

"I only wanted those things with you. No one else," he said. He went to wipe her tears away, but he stopped when she flinched backward. "Sorry," he said.

She realized what she did. It was an automatic response. "Why didn't you ever reach out?"

"I wanted to. At first it was the shame of what I did, the way I told you that I didn't actually love you and you were more invested than me. Then with the more time that passed it became harder. I knew I was being a coward, but Amanda told me you were doing good, that your grades were

up, and you never asked about me. I began telling myself you were better off without me, even if I didn't think I was."

He ran a hand through his hair, remembering it all. "I guess I kept talking myself out of it because I wasn't ready to face it. I was still scared shitless."

She let out a big exhale, trying to process all of the information. Then her stomach dropped as he said, "I finally got the courage to call you a few years later. I heard through the grapevine, well Connor, that you were engaged. I knew if the guy was good enough to get you to pay him any attention and get a ring on your finger, then he would never let you go after walking down that aisle. Like the piece of shit I am, I realized that was my last chance to tell you how I felt before you were married."

"What?" He never called her. She would remember that.

"Did you not listen to my voicemail?" he asked. "I knew you probably never wanted to speak to me again, and I didn't want to leave it all on your voicemail, but I thought it was probably obvious by the way I practically begged you to call me." He let out a huff at the memory, shaking his head over how pathetic he probably sounded.

"I never got a voicemail, let alone a phone call," she said with conviction.

"Connor said your number was the same." He looked at her, seeing her enlarged eyes and a mix of emotions on her face. "I called, Josie. I promise."

She shook her head, ransacking her memories. "If I would've seen a missed call, I would have called you back."

Her voice rang with disbelief through his ears, but the words struck home. *She would've called him back.* "Trust me when I say if there's one thing in my life that I could go back and redo, it would've been us. I would have never tried deterring you from me at the start and I would have never let you go at the end." He reached for her hands and she let him this time.

They sat like that for a few moments. Josie found herself staring at their hands, unsure of the last time someone held her so gently and lovingly besides her daughter.

Drew was a spin cycle of words left unspoken, memories, hopes, and emotions. He now knew she had still cared as much as he did. She would've called him back, and that meant something. But what he didn't know was how she felt now.

“What about now?” he asked. “Would you call me back now?”

She blinked up at him, the tension clear in the lines between his brows. Somehow he was only getting better looking with age, she thought, even as he looked at her with nerves and worry creasing the corners of his eyes. She looked down as she thought of how to explain what her life had been like. That yes, of course she would call him back now, but she was supposed to be a grieving widow to the outside world. How could she explain it all without him thinking she was pathetic? Without him judging what kind of mom she was to raise her daughter in a home like that? For taking all of his abuse, for that’s what it was no matter what she tried telling herself over the years. She was the victim of abuse, but yet she felt like it was all her fault, that she allowed it and stayed, no matter what her reasoning was, and she couldn’t bear the thought of seeing the judgment or disgust in his eyes, or worse yet, the pity. What if he pitied her?

He took her motion and hesitation as an indication of not wanting to hurt him. He cursed himself inside his head, but said, “It’s okay, I get it. You had a life to live and you lived it. Henry,” he said with a nod of sad understanding.

Startled, she gave his hand a squeeze. “Henry...” she drifted off, not knowing which direction to go at the fork in the road. She sighed. Then took another breath and let that one out in a sigh, too.

“Look, I get it. You don’t owe me anything,” he said, meaning it. This must’ve been what it felt like to be her on that dock, having someone drive a nail straight into the heart.

“No, no,” she started. “It’s just that, well, Henry...” He was looking at her, and she knew she had to say something. “Henry is dead.”

He flinched at the words, which she figured was probably the reaction people expected her to have to the statement. But his response was interrupted by the sound of gravel crunching under tires and then lights seeping through the closed slits of the blinds in the living room.

“Are you expecting someone?” he asked as he stood to check the window.

“No. Maybe it’s your friend popping over again.” She hesitated at the words. She didn’t mean to sound snide or jealous, maybe she was more like her mom than she cared to admit with remarks like that.

He raised a brow at her before saying, "Spying on me, Josie?" He laughed, knowing she was embarrassed by the comment. "She works at the front desk for me. Her and her husband only drive cars, so I let them borrow my truck to pick up wood for a project they're working on. It seems you're not the only one who leaves their stuff in my truck." He chuckled. "I forgot she was dropping by to pick up her husband's wallet."

Josie didn't say anything, though she found herself relieved at the news. A ridiculous reaction she told herself. She only just found out that her ex college sweetheart still held feelings for her, and she was already showing jealousy over his personal life. He may not feel the same once he learned the truth about her. If he learned the truth. She felt like a horrible person.

She went to stand next to him, them both peering through the blinds at the vehicle. "It appears they're leaving, whoever it is," Drew said. "Probably just finding a spot to turn around." He let the blind shut, and she did the same.

He looked at her for a moment, noticing dark circles tinting the underneath of her eyes. Maybe he'd put her through enough for the night, he thought. He drug her through his emotional turmoil of the past. It wouldn't be right to ask her to dredge up losing her husband on top of it. That guilt that kept returning took a stronghold once more.

It really was the worst case scenario, he realized. He wasn't up against some deadbeat dad or mistake marriage. She lost her husband, Becca's father, and no matter how he felt about her, he wasn't going to be the type to put his longing for her before whatever she was dealing with.

Maybe this was his punishment for being such an asshole back then. He finally owns up to his mistakes, but the best he can have is Josie as his neighbor, and hopefully his friend. But he'd take it. He'd take anything as long as it meant she was in his life, even if it wasn't the way he preferred.

She could see the wheels spinning behind the look he was giving her. She was feeling exhausted from all the information he'd laid on her and still confused about the voicemail. She knew she'd remember a voicemail.

"It's getting late," he said. "Maybe I should go."

He was offering her a way out, a chance to avoid talking about Henry if she wasn't ready for it. She knew it was cowardly of her, stalling and taking her time to make decisions, but she said, "Yeah, I should probably get some sleep in preparation for tomorrow."

His brows raised. "What's tomorrow?"

"I have the internet company coming out to get me all set up for work, and I need to run to the store early to get some craft supplies and stuff to keep Becca entertained and busy while I juggle the roles of mom and employee."

"That's got to be hard," he said.

"It's really not so bad. I have autonomy over my work day, and I only do part-time."

He hesitated, wanting to say more, but knew he needed to see himself out, let her have her space. "Well, good luck. I guess I'll be seeing you in passing this week."

"Yeah. I guess so," she agreed, as they began a slow walk to the front door. He began undoing the locks, remembering how Mindy had the extra security measures installed after Earl passed away, admitting she'd not lived alone in decades. The thought made him sad as he wondered if Josie took comfort in all of the locks since Henry's death, too.

He stepped onto the porch and paused to turn to her, taking in the grown woman in front of him once more. The guardedness was beginning to make sense, considering she'd probably dealt with a lot of grief and hardship now that she was a single mom and having lost someone she loved.

He wasn't sure what all he was feeling, but he hated it. Hated that he missed his chance, hated that she fell in love with someone else, hated that her husband died, hated that the situation didn't stop him from wanting her to be his. From wanting to kiss and hold her tight.

He sighed, but mustered up a smile. "Good night, Josie." He began to turn when she blurted, "Drew?"

His heart paused as he looked at her. She swallowed. "I'd still call you back," she said. "I'm not who I was in college. I've changed, I'm scarred, and there's a lot you don't know, but I would still call you back to at least talk." And she knew it was true, even if she was the one scared shitless of what he would think after knowing her, the real her, the one she'd perfectly hidden from everyone else.

He nodded, unable to stop the grin that parted his lips. He didn't know what all she meant, but he knew she was at least extending a friendship, and he would take it. "Okay, then," he said and headed for the stairs. "I'll be calling."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 12

Monday felt like a blur as Josie dove into her balancing act of working from home and being a mom, and today wasn't even the norm.

Three months before Henry's death, she was surprised to see a familiar contact pop up on her phone. It was her coworker, Grace, from before she quit working to become a stay-at-home mom. Their desks were by each other, and Grace was a brilliant and witty woman who stood well over six feet tall with the kind of confidence other women envied. She also radiated beauty, and Josie would never forget the effect she had on men. It was always one of two reactions. Their jaws on the ground, ready to do as she asked, or an instant dislike that soon turned to intimidation since Grace never backed down under the glowering looks of a lesser man.

Sometimes Josie would find herself wondering if Grace would've ever wound up in Josie's shoes with Henry, or if she would have made him wither in his leather shoes the way she did their coworkers. Either way, she had an instant liking for her, and they became close colleagues.

They tried maintaining their friendship whenever Josie quit, but the truth was, it felt impossible to give to her friends while having to dodge them after each explosion Henry would have, or she'd hesitate at the idea of someone coming over, or what he'd do if she asked to spend a Saturday evening with a friend instead of with him. It just became easier to quit replying to the texts or answering the calls rather than hearing the disappointment and concern in Grace's voice with each excuse.

For whatever reason, Josie answered that day. Probably because Henry was out of town and not due back for another three days. Thankfully, it worked in her favor, because she learned that her old boss retired, which she thought was long past due, and Grace was promoted in his place. However, she was drowning in bad pitches and uninspired ideas as she had put it.

Josie had laughed at that, remembering how they used to roll their eyes when their boss said something similar, but Grace insisted it was the case this time. She had worked at a marketing firm that handled brands and

businesses from both smaller and local companies all the way to larger corporations across the nation and starter businesses.

She loved it, the way a client's eyes would light up during one of her pitches, showing how she could bring their business dreams to life with innovative ideas that never crossed their minds. Josie swore her imagination was formed to speak the language of marketing, because she could come up with new strategies one after another, while some of her coworkers would spend an entire week trying to create a game plan worth presenting to a client. Her and Grace were similar in their abilities to think outside the box, and they were often the top two, but they had no problem proving the stereotype that women can't work together wrong. They loved bouncing ideas off one another and seeing the other get a big win.

So whenever Grace began complaining about the lack of creative minds she was dealing with, Josie could only laugh and hold a mix of pride and envy for her ex-coworker for the well-deserved promotion. It felt good to talk to another adult, too, especially as she was tiptoeing around her house, too scared to load the dishwasher or make any noise, because she had finally gotten Becca down for a nap, and Josie desperately wanted the hour break to decompress. Her shirt was stained in yogurt from breakfast, something that would have disgusted Henry to know that she didn't go change it, and her hair went unbrushed and pulled back into a ponytail. She had no doubt Grace was in a bold colored power suit, an extra espresso shot in her coffee, and nails a perfect bed of fresh paint and cut short enough not to get in the way of typing. Josie had laughed inside her head, remembering how their boss made them stay late for a conference call one night, causing Grace to miss her routine nail appointment, and pissed off didn't begin to cover her fury.

That surprising phone conversation had turned into her listening as Grace discussed all the latest work details happening around the office, then Josie asked about the clients her staff was struggling to generate ideas for. A part of Josie's brain that went unused the past few years lit up with ideas like someone opening the top of an exploding confetti gift box. Another twenty minutes on the phone and Grace was begging her to come back to work, promising not to put her desk near any of the men with big egos that were working there. Josie only laughed and insisted she was happy at home,

thankful even, to be able to not work and raise her daughter – a lie which wasn't really a lie.

She was thankful that she was able to have this opportunity to be home with Becca and oversee that her daughter was receiving the kind of childhood and love that all kids deserved. She also knew it was a privilege that most people didn't have the option for. That didn't mean she didn't miss feeling important, having a career, or wearing one of her killer business outfits.

Following that phone call, Grace had sent a text the next week saying how the clients loved Josie's ideas, and then proceeded to tell her she'd better come back to work there once Becca started school.

After Henry died, there was a lot to deal with, one of which consisted of getting a financial understanding of their situation. Henry had been adamant about not letting Josie partake in their finances, which was something that drove her nuts. She was very proud and capable of efficiently managing her own before marriage and had no debt except for her student loans. However, she'd put together a payment plan that would have them paid off far faster and with less interest than the plans offered by the loan servicer.

With a relief, she discovered they really were well off, which was a godsend since the life insurance company was understandably having her jump through extra hoops before paying out. The police reports and the officer, Michael, who had arrived at the scene were a huge help, making it clear that with the crime scene, there was no way someone would have survived the crash, even if the body wasn't found. The shattered front windshield would have come from either the car's impact on the trees or when it crashed through the metal traffic barrier, designed to deter vehicles from driving over the cliff's edge, dooming them to a deadly drop into the water below.

Officer Michael said it was evident no seat belt was worn, and the scene suggested the impact with the tree line likely threw him forward with enough force to break through the window, but he must've still been on the hood or attached to the car somehow that when the front portion took out the barrier and veered over the edge, he went all the way over, landing in the bottom.

She remembered the man trying to deliver the news gently and with compassion, and she allowed herself to shudder at the horrendous picture he

painted, though behind that reaction was a sense of relief and fitting justice. She figured that probably meant she was going to hell, but at least he beat her there.

Either way, they were fine without the life insurance money, especially since she planned on selling the house anyway and buying something much more affordable, a house that was actually warm, happy, and didn't have the stains of his memory. She knew she could technically get by without working until Becca was in school, but she didn't want to rely solely on Henry's money, even with the knowledge that the life insurance company was going to pay out his policy within the next couple of weeks.

While she was prepping to sell the house he had built, dealing with the aftermath of losing a husband, something she hadn't expected to come with so much paperwork, she reached out to Grace to see if there was still a job for her there.

After joining for lunch, which let Grace and Becca meet for the first time in years, an eye opening realization, they came to an agreement. As long as Josie delivered the quality of work that Grace knew she would, she could work from home, taking on the behind the scenes work, creating pitches and campaigns, along with everything else she used to do, except they would create a task force for her who would handle delivering to the clients.

Josie couldn't have dreamed of a better scenario, especially since, as she told Grace, she wasn't mentally ready to put Becca in daycare. It was the truth, although Grace was under the impression it was because Josie had already lost one loved one and needed to know Becca was nearby. The reality was that Josie had a hard time trusting anyone with her daughter, especially strangers, whenever she knew someone could be an entirely different person than what they lead the world to believe, both herself and Henry included. She even hated letting babysitters watch Becca when she and Henry had gone out, but he wouldn't let her stay behind, so she told herself the babysitter was probably safer than the risk of one of Henry's outbursts.

The working from home setup turned into a lucky break once Josie decided to look at houses elsewhere. She ran the idea by Grace first, not wanting to jeopardize her work relationship, but Grace was understanding and unworried.

Looking back now, Josie realized how that one phone call out of the blue was a blessing in hindsight. She not only regained her old position and feelings of self-worth that were tied up in her ability to prove herself in the career world, but it also brought her back a friendship, one she allowed to go unappreciated before.

It felt great getting the internet set up today and talking to Grace on the phone about her new home, and how she was doing. Originally, the call had been to discuss upcoming timelines, but afterward it turned into two friends chatting, which Josie didn't know how much she needed until they hung up.

Becca had been such a champ, using her new craft supplies to cut out little white squares and glue them to a long gray rectangle, forming her own keyboard to pretend working at. Josie decided to break her work day up into segments that allowed her plenty of time to go walking with Becca, play together, eat lunch together, and even have story time on one of her breaks.

There was a small pang of guilt, knowing she didn't necessarily need to be doing this, starting back to work so soon while her daughter was home, but she assured herself this could be good for Becca to watch her juggle both with a healthy balance. Besides, it was only part-time, so it wasn't as though she was actually ignoring her daughter or sitting her in front of the tv all day.

But she did need this. She wanted to secure her foot in the door for whenever Becca did start school, and she also needed to feel a bit of normalcy again. Even if she wasn't showing up to an office full of competing coworkers, she was at least a part of something.

Plus, she had Grace again. Another adult to talk to, and a friend. She also had Drew now, another friend. At least she thought that's what they'd become last night. She hoped so, because when she crawled into bed, she realized what she'd been missing for so long, creating a dark hole in her chest that she'd learned to ignore. Companionship.

She was so busy living in survival mode that she hadn't realized how lonely her life had become. She'd been too busy keeping everyone at a distant to protect the truth of her life from visibility, that when he broke down some of her walls last night with his confession and apology, he allowed a little light into that part of her heart that had gone forgotten and unnoticed like a new shirt that lost its excitement once it left the shopping bag and hung in the closet.

He also opened the door to a lot more than a sense of friendship, though. She played everything he said over and over in her head, making her lose sleep. If only he knew how many times she thought of him over the years, how many times she allowed the better parts of their relationship to give her a warm place of nostalgia to escape to when things got too bad. She'd let her mind drift to him, the way his arms used to feel around her, when it was late at night and Henry snored next to her, her baby girl in the room across the house, and her heart aching with longing, hurt, and a loss of hope for the chances at a different life.

She sighed as she closed her laptop for the last time. Her first work day was officially over, and she smiled. She was doing it. She had no clue what life was going to look like in a year, let alone a week from now, but she was doing it, carving out a better life for them.

Josie walked over to where Becca was playing pretend with her baby dolls. She bent down and gave her daughter a big hug, smiling at how lucky she felt to have this new life. It may not be perfect, and her past may be murky, but life was bright now and the future promising.

Chapter 13

The sound of her phone vibrating on the dresser had Josie rushing across the room like a woman on fire, hoping to silence the buzzing sound before it woke Becca up. Normally, she would've turned it on silent by now, but whenever they crawled into bed to read stories, she hadn't expected Becca to fall asleep so quickly. They hadn't even done their usual teeth brushing routine, but after her work day, they took a trip to the library to sign up for a card to check out books, and then they came home and made use of the back yard with games of tag, practicing shooting hoops on Becca's kid sized plastic basketball goal, and coloring on a blanket in the grass.

As she swiped her phone from the dresser, she answered it with a whisper before checking the name on the screen. "Give me a moment."

Then she quietly snuck back over to the nightstand, where she turned off the lamp and turned on the white noise machine. She pulled the comforter up to cover her daughter's sleeping body, her heart filling at the precious sight of her laying there, her face free of worries and bothers. She looked so sweet and peaceful, and Josie leaned down, giving her a light kiss on the forehead before leaving the room, closing the door to a crack behind her.

As she descended the stairs, she brought her phone back to her. "Okay, sorry about that. Becca had just drifted off to sleep."

"Yeah, mom told me how she's sleeping with you." Josie cringed as she heard her sister's unmistakable voice on the other end of the phone, especially since it was laced with attitude.

Without reason, she had just assumed it was Drew on the other end of the line. No, she did have reason as he did say he would be calling. Now, she realized how presumptuous she had been in assuming he would be eager to call her tonight. It wasn't like they were dating or anything more than friends, or maybe solely neighbors. Either way, she'd make sure to check who was calling before answering the phone next time.

"I'm sure she did." Josie went into the kitchen to pilfer through the pantry until she found the decaf coffee. If she was going to suffer through a

phone call with Chelsea, then she might as well enjoy a warm drink.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Chelsea shot back.

Josie sighed. “Nothing. What’s up?”

“No, what’s it supposed to mean?”

Jeeze, her sister was looking for a fight. “It means exactly what I said. I wouldn’t doubt that mom told you that bit of information, just like I wouldn’t doubt she told you everything else from her visit.”

Chelsea gave out a huff. “You have some nerve. You know that? Mom drove all that way to see you and check up on you guys, and you all but kicked her out of your house.”

“That’s not quite how that went down.” Unfazed, Josie poured the grounds into the filter.

“So you’re telling me that mom didn’t go out of her way to surprise you at your new home that for God knows why is so far away, and then you didn’t chase her out of the house yelling at her? And for your information, she told me about the little shack you decided to buy. Clearly you’re going through something, which is understandable due to the grief of losing Henry, but you need to start thinking about how your actions are going to affect Rebecca. She sees your decisions and the way you treat people.”

Josie couldn’t help but laugh, because this was her typical sister. She reveled in her mom’s drama, who already exaggerates situations enough, then Chelsea latches on and adds her touches to them.

Whenever she didn’t get this call sooner, she thought maybe she’d lucked out from it. Maybe her mom actually decided not to pick up the phone and gossip the entire way to her hotel, or back home, wherever she decided to go. Obviously she was wrong.

“What’s so funny?” Chelsea snapped.

“Little shack? Our new home may be smaller than the last one, but it’s still bigger than yours.” An immature thing to say, she knew, but it still never stopped shocking her how much she was judged based on her belongings and home. If living in a normal sized house meant she was setting her daughter up for failure, then this world was going to shit. It has three bedrooms for crying out loud, but Josie knew this was her sister’s feeble attempt to... To what?

She never did quite understand why her sister seemed to hate her so much. They were close growing up in the same way most siblings are, but

then it was as though she woke up one day to her sister always on the prowl, looking for the perfect moment to strike, and Josie was always the prey who somehow deserved it.

She'd done her fair share of researching family dynamics online and in books, and she remembered the first time her perspective changed with the understanding that a lot of what people say had nothing to do with her and were the outcomes of their own struggles or insecurities in life. If she was a better person, that might have been enough for her to be kinder to her sister, but it was hard to sit back while someone verbally assaulted her, even if she could muster up some understanding.

Though, a small part of her, whether naive, blind, too selfish, or simply emotionally immature, had a hard time seeing what Chelsea had to be insecure about. She knew there was a lot happening behind everyone's closed doors and polished exteriors. Hell, she was living proof of that, but other than the way her sister treated her, she was actually pretty amazing. She'd always been big into volunteering, and she'd been an animal lover her entire life, so Josie wasn't surprised whenever she started rescuing dogs the moment she moved out on her own.

Chelsea had a handful of close friends, who Josie witnessed her treat with undying loyalty and care, something she hadn't received from her sister since they were kids playing on the playground. She had no doubt her sister would make a fantastic mother, because outside of the way she treated her, Chelsea was kind and loving to everyone else. Unlike their mother, she always put the sharp teeth away when Becca was around and was the type of aunt who got down on the ground to play for hours.

If for nothing else, Josie knew she'd always put up with her sister and could deal with their less than healthy sisterhood as long as the relationship she offered her niece had a positive and beneficial aspect for Becca. It was stunts like her mom pulled the other day that would be the downfall of family get-togethers. She wasn't going to allow her daughter to be the collateral damage of unaddressed issues of the adults around her, especially since it was Josie's job to protect her daughter from that.

"You're such a bitch." Chelsea scoffed into the phone as Josie pulled down a mug. "I'm done talking about it. You and mom can deal with your own issues."

"That would be ideal."

“How’s Rebecca, though? Does she like the new house?”

Was that hesitation in her voice? Maybe nerves? “Yes, she loves it here.”

“Good.” Her sister paused, then said, “I do miss her even though it’s not been long. It’s like knowing you’re farther away, I am pre-missing her.”

A little smile spread across Josie’s face as she poured her coffee. It’s not often she gets to see this softer side of her sister. Normally, she’s all brick wall and tough exterior toward Josie, reserving this kinder and more vulnerable version for everyone else. It gentles Josie’s own tone toward her sister. “That’s understandable. We’ve found ourselves taking walks around our neighborhood, and she loves it. We actually have sidewalks now, so Becca likes to stop and pick out dandelions along the way and look for bugs.”

Chelsea’s laugh is light and loving. “She always knows how to make everything an adventure.”

“She really does. After work, we went to the library today, and then when we got home she wanted to play library, where I had to pretend to check out books while she was the librarian.”

“After work?”

Crap. She didn’t realize the slip she’d made. That was twice now in such a short amount of time, the first being Henry’s name at Drew’s barbecue. But why should she have to worry about the truth? “Just doing some part-time work for my old firm.”

“And what does Josie do while you’re working?” Her voice was full of judgment, waiting for the answer so that she could jump all over it and down Josie’s throat. The nice moment was short-lived.

“She plays, pretends to work alongside me, and everything else normal three-year-olds do.”

“Normal three-year-olds aren’t ignored while their parents work all day. If you’re going to be working, she needs to be in daycare, but what I don’t understand is why you are even working? It’s not like you need to. She’d be better off with your full attention.”

Josie rolled her eyes as she drank the hot coffee. Here they go again, she thought, hating herself for mentioning work. Whenever she first became a stay-at-home mom, Chelsea said she was lazy and it didn’t surprise her that Josie would live off of Henry’s hard work. Now that she’s working again, she is still a bad mom. She shouldn’t have to hide this aspect of her life out

of fear of being shamed for it. Which was ironic considering she'd hidden the majority of her life from her family, and everyone else, up to this point.

"I don't intend on explaining my decisions or life to you, Chelsea. It's none of your business."

"It is my business whenever it concerns my niece. Henry didn't work so hard so that Becca would be raised by a distracted parent."

Oh, the frustration and anger that was building. It was time to get off the phone before she lost it on her unknowing sister. "Yes, yes, and just like mom, I'm sure you believe me incapable of taking care of my daughter and doing what's best for her." She let out a laugh, one that Chelsea would never quite understand since she'd never know the lengths Josie has gone to in order to take care of her daughter. "But you know what? This is none of your business, and I'm not going to sit on the phone while you pass judgment or cross lines that you know nothing about. Have a good night."

She hung up before letting her sister respond. Not the best way to handle a phone call, but it was better than ripping into her, especially since Chelsea would never fully know where Josie's anger was coming from. No one would. Unless, of course, she decided to open up to Drew, but that wasn't what she needed to think about right now on top of that horrible call.

She sat her coffee down to rub her eyes, as though that would release the headache already starting to form in between them. Why did it always come back to Henry being such a saint who worked so hard to give her and Becca everything, while she was always the villain destroying all his efforts? She'd been nothing short of responsible, hard working, and a good person her entire life, and yet she was still the bad guy in any situation whenever it came to her family.

She let out a sigh and took her coffee to the living room, where she curled up in the chair at the corner. There was no sense in dwelling on it. She couldn't change her past or family, and there was no sense in feeling sorry for herself and the life she didn't have.

But she was in charge of her present and future, she reminded herself. A precious knowledge that was her driving force to give her daughter a better life. That's what she would focus on.

She took a sip of her mug, sat it down on the side table, then looked around her living room. This was her home now. This was her life now. Then she smiled, and let some of the tension she was feeling relax.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 14

Drew sat at his kitchen table, twisting his glass of water around in a circle like he was a child waiting to be given permission to play after dinner. He'd already cleared his plate and did the dishes, put away the leftovers from dinner, and was now pondering what to do next.

His phone sat on the wooden surface in front of him and he stared at it as though it might suddenly have the answer he was looking for. It was Thursday night, four nights since he'd told Josie that he'd be calling her.

He'd been on cloud nine with immense relief at that final admission before he left, when she said that she'd call him back. Yet, each night looked a lot like this, questioning if he should call her.

It wasn't that he believed in playing games with women, or at least not anymore since he'd grown up, and especially not with Josie. However, her husband was dead, and he honestly didn't know the correct or respectful way to approach this situation.

Did she mean she'd call back because they'd always be friends and she cared about him enough in a platonic way to call him back? Or did it imply something more? Obviously he preferred the latter idea, but he didn't have a clue what he was up against, or if he even stood a chance. Gosh, he felt like a tool for even thinking about having a chance whenever the man she loves and married was taken from this world.

He let out a big sigh and stopped spinning his glass on the table. "What do you think, boy?" He reached down to give Scout a pat on the head, who was sprawled out with his eyes closed at his feet. At the affection and words, Scout looked at him and let his tongue out in that goofy look that Drew considered his smile.

"Am I a complete asshole if my intentions for calling are based on more than friendship?" He looked at his dog. "You're right. I am better than that."

He leaned back in the wooden dining chair and let out another breath. "I at least need to call, because I did tell her I would. Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm just sticking to my word," he insisted as he gave Scout a good

scratching behind the ear. Then he grabbed his phone and found her contact information.

After all this time he'd never deleted it, but it never occurred to him she may have a new number now. She might've not wanted to carry her old number over throughout the years, and maybe that's why she never got his voicemail. As the phone rang, he began half-expecting a stranger to pick up questioning who the hell he was. Instead, it went to voicemail after several rings, and it was Josie's beautiful and authoritative voice instructing him to leave a message.

He hesitated, unsure if he should just hang up or not, but then the beep sounded and he fumbled for what to say. "Hey, uh, hey it's me. It's Drew, in case you don't have my number. Just thought I'd give you a call, uh, that's all. Have a good night, bye."

He hung up, wincing at the painful delivery. "I have no clue what that was," he said to Scout, who was staring at him. "But at least I tried. Now come on, time to go outside before we turn our show on."

Scout was up and running for the door as though he wasn't just lazing about on the floor without a care in the world a second ago. Drew smiled, going to the back door to let him out. Normally, he'd leave his phone on the counter or plug it in about this time of night, but he decided to slide it in his back pocket just in case.

After a couple of episodes too many, Drew sat up from where he'd been laying on the couch, Scout doing the same on the floor in front of him. He knew he should probably go to bed. He had a lot of work on his plate tomorrow before the weekend.

He was ready for the time off since him and Scout were headed to the lake house for some downtime. A part of him wanted to stay home, take advantage of chances to run into Josie and Becca this weekend, but he knew even the thought of that made him sound ridiculous like a teenage boy crushing hard on a senior girl out of his league.

Instead, he assured himself he had plenty of time to run into her in the driveway in the upcoming years. At least, he hoped she wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. He shook the thought off, again feeling pathetic. About that time, his phone gave off a ping, and all he could do was hope it

wasn't one of his techs on an emergency call needing help with a tricky issue.

He liked that they offered an emergency line for after business hours, giving his employees a chance to make extra money by volunteering to sign up for rotating weeks. But sometimes they needed input or help, especially the ones still getting experience under their belts, which meant the occasional calls to him after hours.

He didn't overly mind, since he found himself fortunate to have such a good team, but he liked trying to leave work at work as much as possible.

Looking at his screen, he saw a text from Josie, whose name was still *Babe* in his phone. He never did get around to changing that after they broke up. He did so now, knowing it'd make him look crazy if she ever saw it.

Josie: Sorry, my phone was on silent while we did the dinner, bath, and bedtime routine. I learned that reminder the hard way earlier this week whenever I accidentally answered my sister's call when I just got Becca to bed.

He smiled at the phone, not that the text was sweet or anything, but was just happy to be talking to her at all. He responded immediately.

Drew: How do you accidentally answer a phone call?

Josie: Lol. Becca had fallen asleep and then my phone started going off. I rushed to answer it before it woke her up, and when I heard my sister's voice...*cringe*

He chuckled. He remembered Chelsea having that effect on people. For a younger sister, she definitely fit the stereotype of being the coddled, annoying, attention-seeking, baby of the family. He could only imagine what eight more years had added to that unfortunate blend.

Drew: Yikes. I'm not sure if you're aware, but there's this cool feature that tells you who is calling so you can hit ignore if you don't want to answer.

Josie: Smartass. Maybe I was expecting a call from someone else.

Did she mean him? Or was that too presumptuous? He tapped his phone against his palm as he considered what to respond. Then it pinged again.

Josie: Normally, I'd call back, but I'm actually already cozied up in bed next to her. It's been a long week and I have no desire to get up and go downstairs.

Drew: Why a long week? Everything okay? And dang, talk about killing an ego knowing I'm not enough motivation to get out of bed.

He hesitated before hitting send. It was harmless fun, he assured himself. It didn't make him a total self-conceited ass by flirting a little. Besides, he could read a room, and if she shut him down, then he would keep it strictly neighborly.

Josie: Just getting into the swing of things is all. The rain the past two days gave Becca cabin fever I think. I'm ready to get her out of the house this weekend.

Shit. She completely ignored it. He started typing in his next reply.

Josie: Call me old, but I'd always thought it was the other way around. Men wanted to motivate women into bed, not out of it. No wonder you never got married.

Relief flooded him, but then she sent another.

Josie: Unless you did?

Drew: Got plans this weekend? And nope, never married. But don't you worry, women tend to prefer to stay in my bed than out of it.

Too far? He hoped not.

Josie: Couldn't convince anyone to take your ring?

Josie: I told my parents we would drive up to visit this weekend. We'll head out tomorrow afternoon so Becca can have some time with them this weekend.

Drew: None worth offering it to once I got my head on straight. I won't say I envy those plans.

Josie: You're a man in his thirties... You have at least another decade before your head will be on straight. :) What are you doing this weekend?

Drew: Ha! I'd say I'm doing pretty good at my age. Got my own business, taking care of a dog, and I even know how to feed myself. Not too shabby if you ask me. Some women might even say I'm a catch. And Scout and I are headed to the lake house for the weekend. A little R&R. You're welcome to ditch your parents and bring Becca to the water instead.

He found himself laying back down, waiting on his phone to signal another text like he really was back in high school. He couldn't help but smile each time he opened her messages, eager to see what she replied.

The waiting and back and forth texting was like gambling, pulling down the lever of a slot machine and watching the columns spin, the dopamine exploding each time. Then he'd think of his best reply, hoping she'd like it and keep the conversation going.

Josie: Some women must not know you. Although the food was pretty good. That actually sounds really nice, but we wouldn't want to impose. Plus I already told my parents we'd come.

Drew: Ouch. I don't think I'm that bad. Maybe some women should spend some more time with me to learn otherwise.

Drew: You and Becca would never be imposing, Josie.

Drew sighed after five minutes passed without a reply. Maybe he did take it too far this time, though he thought they might've been flirting just a tad.

He should've backed off, but he was enjoying it too much.

"Come on, boy. Bed time." Him and Scout headed up the stairs, where he stopped in the bathroom along the way to brush his teeth before bed. Walking into the room, he stripped off his t-shirt and jeans and crawled into bed.

He'd just plugged his phone in and rolled over when he heard it go off.

Josie: Make sure they park in your drive and don't block mine. I'd hate to have to key all your ladies' cars. Thanks for the invite.

He felt relief at the reply, even if he knew her enough to know the humor was to lighten the conversation rather than flirt. Either way, he couldn't help his response.

Drew: Tsk, tsk. I'd hate for them to think I have a jealous neighbor. How on earth will I keep all of my "ladies" around with a crazy woman next door?

Josie: By keeping their cars out of the way of my drive. :) I'm pretty simple to keep happy.

Drew: I'll keep that in mind. Lol.

Josie: I need sleep. Have to mentally prepare myself for this weekend.

Drew: Then go to sleep. Or am I too distracting?

Josie: Too annoying is more like it.

Drew: You're still texting me though.

Josie: Good night.

Drew: Good night Josie. Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite.

Josie: You're ridiculous.

Drew: You're the one still replying. ;)

Josie: Goodbye.

Drew: Really good night. But the offer still stands if you change your mind this weekend. You two are always welcome out.

Drew was smiling as he plugged his phone back in. He folded his hands behind his head while he stared up at the ceiling. Maybe he still had a shot. Even if he had to wait years, a lifetime, he would. Because Josie was worth it. Josie and Becca.

His phone that was now on silent lit up again a few moments later. He reached over for it.

Josie: I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, Drew.

Drew: Always.

He decided he'd turn it back on ring, just in case she decided to reply again. Then he rolled over, letting his mind run through those familiar daydreams of Josie, except this time they felt a little more possible as he drifted off to sleep.

As Josie neared her parents' house Friday afternoon, the windows cracked enough for a breeze, which was Becca's latest obsession, and the music turned on with kids' songs, she peered into the rearview mirror and smiled at her daughter who was swaying to the music and singing. It was impressive how much of the lyrics she knew and adorable the way she made up her own for the rest.

Flipping on her blinker to make a right turn, her eyes caught sight of the beautiful pink rose in her passenger seat. A warm flutter spread through her, much like butterflies to her dismay. She smiled to herself, setting her eyes back on the road. She'd found it on her front doormat when they were leaving and instantly turned toward Drew's house. It was silly, of course, because she knew he was still at work for the day, but she still had this strange sensation that he might be watching, seeing her pick up the delicate and obviously hand-selected rose. She could see where the thorns had been

removed from the stem and remembered precisely where his back yard boasted vibrant pink roses.

The giddiness returned as she continued to drive, remembering the way it felt to text him last night. She'd been so tired whenever she finally grabbed her phone to put it on the charger, but then she saw his name on the screen and the missed call. She'd contemplated waiting and just calling him back today, but the truth was, she'd been hoping to hear from him all week.

She'd not run into him at all, noting he'd gotten home later than usual from work a couple nights, and then she watched him carry in a load of groceries on Wednesday as she played a board game with Becca in the dining room. It hadn't been her business, but when she heard the sound of tires next door, she found herself peeking through the windows. Did he ever do that, she had wondered. Probably not, considering he was the type to leave his open all the time anyway. He wouldn't need to peek, merely look out and see what was going on.

Either way, it had felt good to carry on a conversation with him, even if she did entertain the flirting more than she should have. She knew she was supposed to carry the traits of the brokenhearted widow, but it was hard to do that with Drew. Hell, it was hard to keep her walls up with him at all, even knowing how badly he destroyed her heart so long ago. But he apologized, and he seemed to genuinely regret it.

She let out a sigh as she pulled into the drive of her parents' cookie-cutter home. Not cookie cutter in the way they built rows of identical houses in new neighborhoods today, but rather the same mid-century style that was sprinkled in every fourth house down through their streets, just like the other styles mixed in. There were a solid four different types of homes built in the neighborhood she grew up in, with only a handful of custom-designed ones throughout. She never noticed until she got older and returned for visits, though. As a kid, she'd never paid attention to that kind of thing. Not that she particularly cared now, either.

Each homeowner had made their house unique with paint color palettes on the exteriors, varying gardening styles, and even additions of porches, garages, or extra rooms and sheds. Over the years, the neighborhood only became more beautiful as it aged, and the cookie-cutter homes never felt redundant or boring. They felt like a collective community of childhood

memories, basketball goals, kids walking home from school with friends, and toddlers learning how to ride a bike.

“We’re here, sweetie.” Josie looked in the mirror at Becca who was just beginning to get heavy-eyed. She perked up instantly forgetting the sleep that threatened to set in. “And here comes Nana and Papa.”

“Nana! Papa! I want out!” Becca’s voice was pure three-year-old excitement as Josie opened her door, but Eleanor beat her to the back and let Becca out, embracing her in a giant hug. Her dad gave Becca a gentle pat on the cheek as he told her how glad he was to see her, then he pulled Josie into a big hug.

“I’m glad you could come over,” he said, releasing her. “How’ve you been?”

“Good,” she said.

“Where’re your bags? I’ll take them inside.”

“I can do that, Dad,” she insisted.

“No, ma’am. You go on in and relax. It’s what dads are meant to do.” He smiled at her.

She returned it, telling him her purse was up front and their suitcase in the trunk. Despite his shortcomings, she’d never questioned whether he loved her or not. It was little things like this that she knew showcased his love, even if he never got emotional, rarely spoke the words, and spent more time offering condescending opinions than anything else to her.

Inside, she found her mom and Becca already diving into the freshly baked cookies her mom still had out on cooling racks. “Mmm, smells good.”

“They’re yummy,” Becca said through a mouthful of oatmeal raisins. “Eat one, Mommy.”

“I made them fresh.” Eleanor’s voice was matter-of-fact toward Josie, not the soft and loving one she used with Becca.

“Thanks.” She reached over, grabbed the closest one to her, and bit into it.

“Be careful,” Eleanor warned, and at Josie’s confused look, she continued. “If you always choose the biggest one, you’ll find yourself blowing up and that doesn’t help any bit with grief. Be mindful. Don’t eat your feelings.”

For the love of God. Was she serious? It was one damn cookie, and besides, her weight was no one else's business. Sure as hell not her mom's. "Mmhm." She wasn't going to offer real words, because none of them were going to start this weekend off any good.

Thankfully, her dad entered the kitchen carrying their luggage, which he placed on the breakfast nook off to the side. "Your car is really clean out there," he offered, which she believed was supposed to be a proud observation.

"Uh, yeah, I try to clean it out at least once a week."

"If you'd keep it clean as you go, you wouldn't have to spend so much time on it once a week," her mother remarked.

It took everything in her not to roll her eyes, especially since she didn't say it took a lot of time. She wasn't even the one who brought it up. Then her mom asked, "Are you going to the gravesite today?"

"What?" She nearly choked on the bite of cookie she just took. It wasn't that shocking of a question, considering that she did move away and normal widows would probably want to stop by their late husband's headstone if they were in town.

"The rose," Eleanor said, nodding her head toward the pink petaled flower her dad laid on her purse. When she continued, her voice had gentled. "I'll never see a pink rose or baby's breath without remembering your wedding day. Gosh, you looked so beautiful, and the way Henry looked at you made us all tear up."

She sniffled, making Josie feel very awkward. It was crazy to her that Eleanor could be that emotional over him, The truth was, they didn't even know him that well. Yeah, of course, that was partially her fault, but she wasn't just thinking about the abuse. For the amount of time they were together, her parents only saw bits of Henry, the parts he wanted them to see, but he was also away a lot for work.

Knowing she couldn't say anything else, Josie replied slowly, "Yeah, I wanted to get over there sometime this weekend."

Actually, she couldn't care less about going to the cemetery. In fact, it never crossed her mind, and Henry's face wasn't the one she'd thought of when she found the rose on her porch earlier. How bad was that? She literally walked down an aisle holding a bouquet of these roses, ready to marry that dark-haired, handsome man, and yet all she could think about

was how good, relaxing, and even normal it felt to lounge in Drew's back yard, admire his landscaping, and sip her cold water while her daughter filled the neighborhood with giggles and screams, chasing Scout and that frisbee.

"Don't wait. There's no need to put something that important off," her dad interjected.

"We've got Becca. You go ahead and do your thing. Take some time." Josie was shocked by the sincerity in her mom's voice. Was this the only way she reaped the kind of caring mom her sister received every day? By losing someone they believed she loved? Normally, she'd take Becca with her, not wanting to let her out of sight, but she knew her daughter was well-loved and cared for here. In fact, she'd probably be upset if her mom dragged her along and away from her grandparents.

Besides, if she took Becca, then she really would have to go to Henry's empty gravesite, and she knew for damn sure that wasn't something she'd be wasting her time on. So instead, she offered them her best expression of gratitude and a gracious smile, then the practiced emotions spread across her face. Ones of sorrow, heartache, and relief for their understanding.

With a guilty pang in her chest, she took Becca from her Nana's arms and gave her a big hug, whispering how much she loved her and explaining where she was going to go. Her daughter didn't even ask to go along with her, which she felt both relieved and also heartbroken over. Not for herself, but because with each passing year and more understanding, going to the cemetery would play a bigger and more impactful role on her sweet-natured baby. She didn't know what kind of emotional struggles Becca would bear, but she prayed that she'd be able to help her learn to navigate and live through them.

With more words of thanks, her purse and rose in hand, Josie headed back outside and started her car. Once more, she looked into her passenger seat at the simple, yet joyous, flower next to her. Yeah, there was no way in hell she was going to give something that beautiful from this world to a piece of shit.

She backed her car out, deciding on a drive to clear her head and waste time, knowing she would be hiding that kind, pink gesture under her seat before returning. It'd likely wilt and die before she returned home, but at

least it would be hers. She'd given Henry enough of her. He wasn't taking any more of the good in her life.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 15

The twisting of the road had Josie pressing on the breaks with each curve, slowly climbing one hill only to descend another a little farther along. She remembered wondering why on earth people wanted to pay so much money to live way out here if this would be their drive every day.

The trees lining the road on one side were beautiful, though it felt too dangerous to look at them, in case another car was hugging the middle line around a corner. She had admired them plenty in the past whenever Henry would drive.

It felt like she was always the passenger whenever he was alive, both in the cars and in her actual life. Many times over the years she had tried picking out all of the red flags that she should have seen, but it was a hard task. Before Henry, she'd have never thought she would be a woman in an abusive relationship. For the most part, outside of her family when she was younger, she had a pretty strong backbone. She'd never been a pushover.

Sometimes she wondered if it was her desperation for security, comfort, and a relationship that would actually go somewhere that made her blind to his lesser qualities. Because at first, she was like everyone else. She only saw the good.

She was twenty-five when they met, two years post-graduation, and she felt like she knew what she wanted – the same things that she and Drew fought over, broke up over. She wanted the wedding in her future, to start a family, settle down, and make a home. Looking back now, she had no doubt she was still struggling with their unexpected breakup and the lack of closure by its surprise ending, oftentimes still thinking about him.

So whenever Henry came into her life, knowing exactly what he wanted and deciding he wanted it with her, she fell for the facade. She believed he was the smiling man who took care of his health, worked hard, cared about his friends and family, would be the amazing dad he talked about being, and above all, loved her unconditionally and loyally like he showed her.

But that wasn't the case, as she learned time and time again as his fist, sometimes an open palm, other times the closest object on a shelf or dresser,

came crashing down on her, making her question how the human body could handle so much pain. One night, he even took off the button-down she'd surprised him with for Valentine's Day and used it around her neck until she thought she'd surely die. Only then did he let it fall to the floor, leaving her gasping for air and wearing turtlenecks on warm autumn days.

They moved fast, getting married roughly two years later, making her twenty-eight by the time Becca was born. She remembers that day vividly, too. Wishing she could've stayed in that cocoon of joy and happiness of her hospital room, or at least her and Becca stay, for the rest of their lives. She could've been content as just the two of them there.

"One new message from Andrew Warren," her car's bluetooth system announced, pulling Josie from her thoughts and scaring her as she crept down another slope. She'd been unaware just how deep she'd drifted off into her mind and out of the present moment. That couldn't be good when a person is driving, she thought.

"Read it," she replied.

"Andrew Warren says, *'If you need an excuse to bail you can always blame your annoying neighbor. Lol.'* Do you want to reply?"

"Yes. Say, *'How dare you speak of Ellen that way? She's always been kind and caring to us.'*"

"Are you ready to send?"

"Yes, send."

"Your message to Andrew Warren has been sent."

She laughed to herself, appreciating his humor out of the blue. Not that he'd ever know, but he just saved her from a dark loop of thoughts that would have sent her spiraling into a bad mood, which would've only made this weekend's visit even harder.

She smiled as she thought of him, still unsure how fate twisted it so that they'd run into each other again. She knew she hadn't been fair, withholding so many details, but it'd been really tough letting him back in even a little, reopening and feeling the stings of that old wound.

It wasn't right of her, but she'd spent too much time blaming and resenting him, but not for the breakup as much as for her actions afterward. She told herself time and time again that she would've never jumped in too soon and too fast with Henry if her heart hadn't been shattered by Drew. She would toss and turn late at night when she couldn't sleep, which was

most nights, and fantasize about him regretting he'd ever let her go. Then he'd burst into her life, saving her from the nightmare that she lived, and she'd finally get that happy ending.

But that was never the case, and it hadn't been his responsibility to save her. Nor was it his fault she married a monster.

As she approached the spot she came to see, Josie decided it was time to stop blaming Drew for something that wasn't his fault. She could either spend her life still resenting him, and miss out on a future friendship, or she could let him in, move on, and see where the road took her.

She let out a sigh, feeling as though a weight had been lifted as she remembered the past and future are two very different paths, and then she pushed down further on the brake, double-checking her mirrors to make sure no one was coming up behind her.

As she rolled through the section of the road where the metal barrier had already been patched up, not fully replaced but somewhat put back together, and the looming trees overhead on the other side, she felt the unannounced tears stream down her cheeks and land on her pants. She imagined the scene, a dark night, the roads slick and wet, the red and blue lights blinding in the night sky, starting a mile from the crash to avoid further accidents from other drivers approaching the bend in the road.

She didn't know when they started or how long they'd been going without her noticing, but now they fell freely as her car crawled around the edge of the road where fate decided to help her out. A little part of her may always hate herself for not being able to save herself, save her daughter, from the life she'd had, but she would never let that interfere with the knowledge that she'd been given a second chance, a miracle that she wasn't sure she even deserved, to carve out a better life for them.

She let up on the brake and continued driving the twisting road, knowing there was only about five more minutes of this winding path. As she caught one last glimpse of the spot where Henry took his final breaths, she could have sworn a little part inside of her began to heal.

She may not have received closure after her college breakup, but maybe this was the closure she needed from her traumatic marriage.

She continued on, fully back in the present, ready to make the most of this weekend and her life, knowing she would leave her past where it belonged. This time when her car voiced another text message, she didn't

jump in surprise from her thoughts or feel as though the distraction was a saving grace. She was aware of her life, the surroundings, and she smiled as she listened to Drew's joking response.

Josie felt different as she turned the knob on her parents' front door and stepped across the threshold. It wasn't so much that she was relieved, but somehow she felt lighter, maybe a little more free.

The moment she walked into the back yard where she'd spotted her family drawing with chalk on the patio, she felt the familiar shift in the air, a tightness in her chest, and the anxiety creeping in at the edges. The moment her mom and dad looked at her, their eyes said everything. She had done something wrong.

Could they know she didn't go to his grave? Did they have a friend who worked at the cemetery or something? What could it be?

She tried to plaster on a smile and force her shoulders down into a relaxed state, but she could feel the tension, the one she knew all too well, and this time it was her body's automatic response to the confrontation she knew was coming. Her parents never got physical, but it was always just as draining.

She knew those looks. They were unhappy with her or some choice that she had made, and they felt it their right to make their opinions evident.

As Becca saw her, a bright smile appeared. "Mommy!" She jumped up to give Josie a hug. The part of her that had been wavering snapped back into place, as though all she needed to remember who she was and her own strength was this little girl of hers. The best thing to ever happen to her.

It didn't matter what her parents had deemed she'd done to disappoint them now. She was living her life for her and Becca, not for them. They didn't get to decide when she was a success or failure, make her feel small when they wanted to judge her, or any of the other crap they liked to dish out. She was ready now, ready for what was coming, as she knelt down and wrapped her arms around Becca, followed by a shower of kisses to her daughter's head and the consequential giggles she knew it'd cause.

"We need to have a talk." Her mom's voice was stern, treating Josie like she was a child inconveniencing them again.

Meeting her gaze, Josie replied, "Go on inside, and I'll be in there in a few minutes." She saw the way that lit a fire in her mother. The woman

despised anyone telling her what to do. Josie continued to hold on to Becca, lifting her up so that she could walk over to the pictures she was drawing. A pink cow, blue chicken, purple and yellow treehouse. She smiled even bigger, loving her daughter's imagination.

Her dad cleared his throat. "Now Josephine, I think it'd be best if you went on inside and spoke to your mother." Josephine? Mother? Clearly they were treating her like a little kid, even though she was a grown woman. Yet here her dad was acting like using her full name and a proper title for her mom was going to set the tone he intended her to fear.

That was always their parenting technique: fear. If her and Chelsea weren't listening or were playing too loud, like most kids did, they thought screaming at them would do the trick. When that didn't work they threatened pain, a good belting to the butt, and when spanking stopped working, they basically just lost it. Her parents would become a morph of rage and anger all directed at their children, as though the only thing that mattered was if they badgered them until they transformed into the perfect little soldiers that never misbehaved or acted out. Kids who had zero personality but always followed their parents' rules. They demand they always listen, then proudly shared stories of their ornery sides like they were bragging. Her parents expected them to be popular and confident in the public eye, be the leaders of their friend groups, yet they were punished anytime they showed they had a backbone or differing opinion and personality at home.

It was exhausting growing up in their house. Now, at thirty-one years old, Josie had a better understanding of her parents, though she still disagreed with their parenting style. Inside, they were still the young kids who'd never received the type of love, attention, or other neglected needs during their childhoods, and rather than provide a better experience for their own kids, they had likely replicated the same home atmosphere they grew up in, where they had realized it or not. Of course, she didn't know this for a fact, considering they'd never divulge in those types of conversations, but she'd bet that generally covered it. They never gathered the self-awareness or emotional maturity to be better parents than what they'd experienced themselves.

"Like I said, go on in Mom. I'll be in after I've gotten time with Becca." With that, she began asking her daughter about her drawings. Let them be

pissed, she thought. She wasn't a kid anymore, and she wasn't stuck here. Her visit was out of respect and if they wanted to ruin her respect for them by the way they treated her, then she'd leave. She wasn't some teen or kid who was stuck living in a house that she had no choice of being born into. She had her own home and life waiting for her.

Her mother said something under her breath as she rose and walked inside, which was her typical immature reaction when something didn't go her way. Her father on the other hand shook his head as though Josie was the world's biggest disappointment by choosing her daughter over falling in line to take her verbal beating like a good little minion of theirs.

Whatever, she thought. Just another example of her having that backbone they'd always told her she needed, but hated when she actually used it.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 16

The house was quiet whenever Josie stepped inside. She told Becca she was going to chat with Nana for a bit but she could continue her chalk drawings. As she made her way further inside, she took a slow breath, giving herself a mental reminder to keep calm no matter the tension or escalation on her mother's end. There would be no point in losing her self-control.

She found her mom in the living room reading a book in the upholstered chair, warm sunlight cascading from the front window. The scene looked peaceful, Josie thought, noticing how relaxed her mom looked at that moment. Then she heard the footsteps, and Eleanor looked up, her eyes becoming slightly hooded as her brows bore down over them.

"Nice of you to join me," Eleanor remarked, as she snapped the book shut, which contradicted the careful way she placed it on the round end table next to her chair.

"What'd you want to talk about?" Josie asked, making her way into the room and taking a seat on the couch opposite her mom. She did her best to keep her voice bright and hide the weariness she'd grown accustomed to.

"I understand it's none of our business," oh boy, where was this headed, Josie wondered, "but Becca mentioned how you two have been spending an awful lot of time with your new neighbor, and in doing so, it's evident that neighbor is a man."

For a moment, Josie was overcome with anxiety, not ready to deal with her parents knowing that Drew lived next door, not that she could hide that detail forever, but she didn't want to deal with it yet. For this reason exactly. They believed they had a right to input even when they knew it wasn't their business. She was relieved when it became evident they didn't realize who this neighbor was.

"What's my neighbor being a man have anything to do with this?"

Eleanor huffed out a sigh as she leaned forward, her hands clasped together and her eyes narrowing in an accusatory manner. She didn't have

to use words to get her point across. She never did. She was all nonverbal, and it was always negatively directed at Josie.

“I’m serious,” Josie counteracted the silent response. “So what that we have good neighbors?”

“It’s not about having good neighbors. It’s the fact that your husband has hardly been dead and you’re off pissing on his family name while you canoodle with the guy next door. I don’t care if it’s grief or—”

“Excuse me?!” Stay calm, she reminded herself, lowering her voice back down. “I’m not ‘*canoodling*’ with anyone, thank you very much, and you know nothing of my daily life. Do not insinuate something nasty of my character, especially in regards to Henry, when you do not live in my house, nor do you know what you’re talking about. I’m allowed to hang out with people and let my daughter play with the neighbor’s dog.”

Eleanor’s vein was beginning to bulge at the top of her forehead, as it always did when she was getting frustrated. “Do not have that tone with me, little girl. I’m only looking out for you, and you don’t want other people perceiving you in the wrong manner.”

“I am not a little girl. Do not try to belittle me, and what other people? You guys?” She scoffed a laugh. “You’re the only ones judging me as far as I can tell, and to be honest, I don’t care what people think. I may have lost my husband, but I’m still allowed to have friends and a life. Heaven forbid.”

“Don’t be ugly.”

“I’m not. I don’t hear you scolding me for joining our neighbor Ellen on her morning walk this week or going to her house for cookies. You’re not talking to me because I let her read a story to Becca after she told me about her life story.”

Her mom stood, nostrils flaring. “Because there is a difference and you know that! Besides, Becca wasn’t going on about how her mom and *Ellen* taught her to swing a bat. No, that memory is shared with another man.”

Josie stood too. She wasn’t going to let her mom’s intimidation tactics work, and as she stood, she took a deep breath, intentionally relaxing her shoulders and body as she dispelled it. There was no need to be defensive. This was her life, and she would not feel guilty for giving her daughter a fun day at the park and ball fields, nor would she explain herself. She was doing her best. Every damn thing she did was her attempt at doing what was

best for her daughter, even if she knew she wasn't perfect and was bound to make mistakes.

"Mom," she began, "I do appreciate you caring about our overall well-being, but I'm going to ask that you mind your own business. I am doing—"

"Do not dismiss me! I'm not some child!" Josie's eyes involuntarily widened at the angry outburst.

"I'm not dismissing you," she said to her mom. "I'm merely asking you to leave it be. The friendships we foster with our neighbors is none of your concern."

"It is my concern when my daughter is acting like an uncaring and selfish brat, doing whatever she pleases no matter what the consequences are." Eleanor's eyes were blazing.

But Josie stood her ground. She'd hoped to avoid this side of her mom, but deep down, she knew it was inevitable. "That doesn't even make sense. How am I being selfish?"

"How would you feel if that were you in the grave and Henry was out taking your daughter to women's houses? Huh? Wouldn't you give a shit then?"

Josie shook her head, not at the questions, but at the nasty direction her mom was taking this. "You're insinuating I'm taking Becca to a string of men's homes. You realize that, right? You're twisting this entire scenario."

"How do I know that's not what you're doing? For all I know you aren't dealing with any of this at all and are actually pawning your kid off on anyone who'll take her."

"What?"

"It's not like we can know anything when you move so far away and then we only get these fragments of information from a three-year-old."

Josie's head was still reeling from the previous insult and the ugliness it carried. She was sliding deep into her mind and thoughts, unknowing of whatever else her mother was saying. Then her incessant remarks came to an end, the silence feeling like a welcomed friend she hadn't seen in decades.

"I'm not doing this."

"Excuse me?" Eleanor asked.

As she slowly shook her head, the movement began to take more shape, as though the physical action was helping her mind put its feet in the

ground. “I said I’m not doing this.” She waved a hand back and forth between them for emphasis. “I brought Becca here for a fun weekend to be spent with her grandparents, not to play outside by herself while I get railroaded with insults.”

Her mom threw her arms up in the air. “For fuck’s sake, Josephine. Not everything needs to be about you!”

She ignored the comment. “This isn’t the atmosphere I want her in.”

“Then don’t be dramatic. Stop turning this into something bigger.”

She sighed. “I’m not being dramatic, mom. I’m being honest with the situation.”

“No, you’re being sensitive. Do you know how much shit I’ve had to deal with over the years? And I’ve never gone off acting like the victim because someone called me out on my bullshit growing up.”

It was statements like that which irked her to the core, being labeled with what her mother deemed to be lesser and insulting attributes. Not that standing up for herself made her dramatic or sensitive. She actually did have a sensitive side, and she liked that about herself. She credited it for making her human and compassionate for others, and she was happy to have empathy accompany it as well.

Her mom’s words may be intended to shame her, beat her down until she crawled back into the little box they preferred her to live in, the one they could control and tell her what to do. But that wasn’t going to happen.

“Well I’m sorry that was your reality, but it’s not mine. If you want to say goodbye to Becca, I’d do it now. I’m going to grab our things and put them in the car. I’ll find dad to say bye and then we’re going.”

Eleanor’s face filled with shock before saying, “You will not. You’ll suck it up and go out there and pretend all is good so that your daughter can have quality time with us.”

Josie didn’t miss a beat. “No, I won’t, because I’m not going to pretend or teach Becca to live a fake life. Nor am I going to teach her she has to put up with bullshit or stick around in toxic environments.”

Her mom let out an ugly laugh. “Toxic environments? Are you kidding me? Now we are toxic? I don’t believe we were toxic when we were clothing you and feeding you, buying you a car when you got your license, and dropping our own lives to go to your school events. Does that make us toxic to you?”

Yet she held all those things over her head, Josie thought. She wasn't going to engage in round two of a new argument that this would surely start. "I've made up my mind. We are going."

She began to turn and walk away when she felt her mom's hand around her wrist, a light grasp that became a firm grip whenever Josie didn't stop immediately. Eleanor roughly pulled her back to where she stood.

"Jos—" But she stopped short as Josie shoved her wrist toward her mom's direction, twisted her hand within the hold, and yanked it free, taking multiple steps back as she kept her eyes on her mother. Eyes that were filled with a steel hatred.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Eleanor demanded, half out of surprise and the other half sounding offended.

"Don't you ever lay a fucking hand on Becca like that if you want to be a part of her life," she warned. "Say your goodbyes, I'm loading my car." And then she stormed out of the room, because she couldn't stand to be enclosed in this house for another moment.

The fact that her mom's face quickly transitioned from shock to anger only fueled her fury even more.

After Henry died, she'd spent a lot of time looking into how to defend herself, not wanting to ever end up in another violent situation. She'd always been too scared he'd find out if she researched it when he was still alive, but she hadn't dreamed of ever needing to use the information, especially with her own mom. Not that she believed her mom was trying to do anything but get her attention and exert her belief of parental hierarchy by establishing a sense of dominance over Josie.

Still, it wasn't okay and it lit a raging spark deep within her. She was surprised that she was able to do the move successfully and get herself free of the grip. As soon as they got back home, she was going to find self-defense classes to enroll in. She wondered if they had anything for toddlers, too. If not she'd begin teaching Becca. It'd be good for her daughter to know how to defend herself, even if it was with small subtle things so as not to scare her or take away the precious innocence of childhood.

She decided to take a few moments outside after putting their suitcase in the car. It'd be best to blow off some steam before having to go back in there and face both parents, who would of course, unite against her. She was tired of being the bad guy, but she didn't care.

It didn't matter what she did, they'd still place that role's hat on her head to bear, so she might as well stand up for herself and have some dignity doing it.

She leaned back against the car, feeling the heat of the summer day seeping in through her clothes. Gosh, it was going to be a nice and sunny weekend. She had really been hoping to give Becca a fun one.

Looking up toward the sky, she noticed not a cloud in sight. The kind of weather that made a person want to spend the day in the water. She shook her head at the irony and dug her phone out of her back pocket anyway.

Now that her adrenaline from the exchange with her mom had subsided, her fingers weren't as shaky. They flew over the touch screen keyboard before she hit send, deciding it was time to go in and face the aftermath so they could leave.

She tucked the phone with her text back into her pocket.

Josie: Becca and I call dibs on the tv remote and make sure there are clean towels, unless you want a soaked kid running straight from the dock to the fridge for more lemonade and watermelon. Want me to pick anything up on our way?

Chapter 17

Drew walked his path treading from the small kitchen island to the windows that overlooked the narrow road leading to the driveway and back again. He knew it'd be late before they arrived, their drive was much longer than his and he'd already been headed here when he received Josie's text, but he was still checking for them every five minutes or so.

Scout had already become bored of Drew's repetitive anticipation and took up his usual spot on the loveseat by the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the back deck and lake.

The lake house was nothing fancy by any means, rather a quaint and cozy home. His dad had built it when he was still running around in diapers, and then gave it a bit of a face lift about two decades ago.

It was a simple one story house that had all of the essentials to be someone's permanent residence if they wanted to live by the water. Since there was no garage, the driveway was a gravel section wide enough for multiple cars and led up to the side of the house, where his dad designed a small, covered overhang to welcome people into what they called the front door. Technically speaking, it was like a side door, but it was the main one used when someone arrived.

The door allowed guests to walk right into the open concept living, dining, and kitchen area, where the back of the house facing the dock and lake was a wall of windows, and the living room was filled with the kind of broken-in and comfortable pin-striped furniture that you'd find at a beach condo. Then there was a comfortable leather chair in the corner, a bookcase behind it, lined with all types of titles, a wooden coffee table in the middle, his crayon markings still visible from childhood, and a stone fireplace to tie it all together.

Between the living room and kitchen stood a wooden dining table with six chairs gathered around the rectangular shape, and in the renovations to update the house, his dad turned the kitchen's peninsula into a small island with enough of an overhanging countertop to allow two barstools on the

back and one on each side. The front had open shelving where extra mixing bowls and cooking supplies were stored.

The kitchen itself was pretty standard, with cabinets lining the upper and lower portions, all the normal appliances, and everything sporting a deep blue color.

There was a hallway between the living room and kitchen, its opening lined up with the dining area, that led to all of the bedrooms and bathrooms. Down it on the left, sharing a wall with the kitchen was the actual front entry to the lake house, though his dad built this home knowing it'd rarely be used. Instead of a traditional entryway hall with a coat closet, he expanded the space to house the exterior door, washer and dryer, extra cabinets for storage, and a wall-mounted coat rack. Further down the left side of the hall was a guest bathroom and his bedroom. Across the way was the primary suite, and another, smaller, spare bedroom.

Over the years, this house had seen many celebrations, memories, family get-togethers, and likely hangovers, too. It had always been his home away from home. He remembered the first time he brought Josie here, the way her eyes took everything in, as though he was showing her some fancy mansion on the water.

She always said it was the most welcoming and comforting place to be on earth, and her favorite thing to do was go out the sliding glass doors onto the back deck in the early mornings and take in the sunrise while sipping on coffee and reading a book.

The back deck went the length of the living room, and it sat deep enough to host a conversation set for lounging, as well as a dining table at the other end. The back of the home was south facing, so the sun shined over it all day long as it rose and set, giving the best views during the mornings and evenings. There was a well-worn path leading down to the water, where they had a dock with two slips. One of which sat empty, making a great spot for fishing, and the other held a boat.

He and Josie had spent many summer days jumping off that dock, drinking cheap beer with their feet in the water, and even lounging on the deck to watch the sun go down. She often drifted off to sleep in the hammock that swung in an old shade tree halfway to the lake.

Drew made the trek to the window again, peering outside in hopes of seeing headlights coming his way, but none yet.

He was glad she changed her mind and was coming to spend the weekend here. Even if the reason likely had less to do with him and more to do with those hateful people she called parents.

He knew Becca would love it here, and he even stopped at the little grocery store in town to pick up a new pack of crayons and coloring books, having noticed she loved to color, as well as some books for her age range, a soccer ball, because he knew the one here had gone missing, probably into the lake, and a few other items that she may enjoy having here or using in the water.

The lake house had seen many children over the years. His cousins had plenty of kids to keep the family reunions filled with little giggles and lots of popsicles, which meant it normally had plenty of items for kids. However, things like crayons, toys, and books took a beating as they believed in letting the kids be kids and have fun. After all, it was supposed to be a space for relaxing and unwinding, not strict parenting where no one was allowed to get dirty or take toys outside.

The cashier told him he was bound to spoil whoever he was buying it all for, and he only smiled, hoping he may one day get the chance. He'd enjoy getting to know her better, building that friendship that he had with some of the adults in his life back when he was a kid. One where he felt like there was always someone watching out for him, adults he could trust, and ones he could turn to if he ever needed help. He thought that was good for any kid to have, and knowing she'd lost her dad, he could only imagine how beneficial it might be for a young child to know that lots of people cared about her and that she was surrounded with friends.

Not seeing any lights, Drew finally decided to take a seat on the couch, well aware that he'd hear the sound of tires crunching on gravel whenever they did arrive. In the meantime, he needed to relax and stop getting in his head about having Josie back in this house with him for an entire weekend.

It was strictly two friends hanging out at the lake, just like old times, minus the obvious steamy nights in the bedroom, and on the couch, and dock, and about everywhere else. But the friendship was still there, or at least coming back. He could be a gentleman and keep the other memories and primal thoughts at bay.

They were simply two old friends having a lake weekend, he told himself.

The rain had turned from a subtle pattering on the windshield to a full downpour in a matter of minutes, and as Josie navigated the final loop of Lakewood Drive, she knew Drew's driveway was about to appear.

She hadn't been out here in years, almost a decade, and yet even with the rain making it nearly impossible to see through her wipers, the path felt as sure and familiar as the back of her hand.

Whenever she pulled into the drive, it was already dark, but the house was lit up. She slowed to park next to his truck, thankful he took the far side of the drive, meaning she wouldn't have to carry Becca very far into the house. At first, she thought the rain might wake her up, but it didn't so much as stir her daughter who had been sleeping in the back for the past hour.

She knew she'd get here late driving from her parents' at the time she'd left, but it didn't help that she still ended up stopping at the store on her way.

As if he'd been waiting on her, she noticed the door began opening and out came Drew running up to her car. She opened the door and hopped out quickly.

"Becca's asleep. I'll grab her if you grab bags from my trunk." She had to shout over the sound of the sky pouring buckets of water on them, but he nodded that he heard. She hadn't thought to check the radar for here, so she didn't pack them any rain jackets. Jogging to Becca's door, she quickly opened it, maneuvered the buckles, and did her best to cover her daughter as she beelined it for the house.

Besides a little stirring and trying to snuggle in closer to her mom, Becca remained asleep. Drew came in with the grocery bags and headed for the island to sit them on.

"Is she out?"

Josie gave Becca a peck on the forehead. "Yeah, I didn't know if that rain would wake her or not, but she'll be out for the night."

"The spare room is all made up if you want to lay her down." He saw the way her eyes cascaded over the kitchen behind him, noticing the light smile that touched her lips. She still liked it here, he realized, and for whatever reason, that brought him immense satisfaction.

"Okay, I'll be back in a second. Then I need to grab our suitcase and my purse."

“I’ll get them. Where are they?”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to make you get drenched.”

He gestured down at his already soaked t-shirt, the top half a much darker gray than the bottom. “I think I’ll live.”

She laughed. “Thanks. Passenger seat.” Then Josie took Becca down the hall to the room she knew was the spare and opened the door to find it looked exactly as it had the last time she was here. Although, back then, she’d never slept in here. In fact, she’d only been in here to steal extra pillows a time or two. She had always stayed in Drew’s room with him, unless they crashed on the couch or a picnic blanket out back under the stars.

This home really did have a lot of good memories from her college days, even if they were all jammed into such few years.

She pulled back the cream and blue patterned quilt and laid Becca in the bed, positioning pillows on each side so that she wouldn’t fall off if she rolled around. Thankfully, she’d blocked the majority of the rain, leaving her mostly dry minus a few sprinkles.

Josie on the other hand was freezing now that she was inside and the entire back of her shirt was wet. She pulled the quilt up over her daughter and then left the bedroom door open a crack so that she could listen for her. She stopped by the bathroom where she peeled off her wet shirt and tossed it over the shower rack to dry. Thankfully she wore layers today.

As she entered the family area, she saw her purse on the dining table, their suitcase on the floor next to it. The living room and kitchen were deserted, except for a snoozing Scout by the fireplace, which made her think how nice it’d be if it was turned on.

“Want me to ma—” Drew stopped when Josie startled at the sound of his voice entering the room. She turned around, hand to her chest, clearly caught off guard. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” he laughed. “I was just going to see if you wanted me to put on a pot of coffee or boil some water for hot chocolate. There’s decaf in the pantry.” He had to train his eyes to stay on her face, because like him, she’d taken off her wet t-shirt already, but whereas he’d replaced his with another one, she was wearing a white camisole now, and the dainty straps over her shoulders and thin, silky material made his mind go to dark places.

“Oh, yeah, that’d be really nice. The coffee.” She breathed deeply, letting her heart rate slow down. She hadn’t heard him come in, but she noticed the blue hockey shirt now, so he’d probably come from his room. She didn’t doubt he still slept in his childhood bedroom, knowing his dad still came here from time to time. It must be nice to feel like this house was still his and that he could come here anytime he wanted, even though he’d grown up.

The moment she went to college, her parents told her to ask before coming home. It wasn’t too surprising. It’d always felt like their house, and her and Chelsea were just living in it. Doing their best not to inconvenience or upset their parents. It was still so strange to see Chelsea act like best friends with her mom now, even though she dealt with the same crap Josie did growing up. It wasn’t that their mom had changed, so maybe it was the whole “if you can’t beat them, join them” concept.

“You got it.” Drew headed for the kitchen, pulling the decaf from the pantry and began filling the carafe with water.

“I’m sorry we’re so late.” She joined him in the kitchen, taking the items she’d bought at the store from the bag. “I forgot how long of a drive it is from my parents’, and I thought I should stop and grab a few things even though you said you had it covered.”

He peaked over his shoulder at her, noticing she was starting to get a tan from being outside already, likely all the walks they’d been going on. He wasn’t always home to see them, but his neighbor Ellen had told him they joined her the other morning.

“It’s no biggie. It’ll be nice having company this weekend. What’d you pick up?”

“I had to get watermelon,” she said, indicating the giant green striped oval. “And some bagels, sandwich stuff, chips, snacks, fresh fruit, a veggie tray, lemonade mix, waters,” her eyes trailed off in search of the last item.

“They’re on the floor by the door,” Drew said, knowing what she was looking for.

“Thank you,” she gave him a smile that made him feel like carrying water was the equivalent of being a superhero. He was probably just dreaming it, because the moment he saw her pull in the drive, all the thoughts of being a decent guy with good intentions went forgotten. She was back here in this kitchen with him, and like a horny teenager all he

could think about was the amount of skin exposed on her arms and how he'd like to trail kisses up one of them, across her collarbone, and down the other arm. Who would've thought a tank top could do that to him?

"No problem."

"I also needed to grab Becca and I some swimsuits," she said, pulling them from a bag to hold up. "We didn't pack any for my parents' house, and I knew it'd be too far out of the way to head back home to get them."

He nodded as if he would've thought about that in advance too, but he knew she was much more prepared than he would've ever been. He'd likely have woken up tomorrow and found himself swimming in shorts if he were in her shoes.

As the coffee maker hummed to life, gurgling down drips of coffee into the pot, they both began putting away the food she'd bought. Josie tossed the swimwear and her purse onto the dining table and then she went to the cupboard where the coffee mugs were stored and brought two down. "Black?"

"Yeah, thanks."

She laughed. "It's the least I can do, pour you a cup of the coffee you made whenever you're letting us crash your weekend getaway. I had no idea it was supposed to rain."

"It's only for tonight. The rest of the weekend is going to be sunny and hot. And you're not crashing, you were invited." He leaned back against the counter as she poured him his mug and handed it to him. Then she walked over to the fridge for creamer and made herself a cup.

She caught a glimpse of him. "What?"

"What?" He straightened up a little.

She smiled. "You're looking at me funny."

Not funny, more like remembering all the other times they've shared this kitchen, and how many of those times ended up with more stimulating events than sharing conversation over coffee, he thought. "I just like how you're making yourself at home."

She hadn't considered she was doing that, but then again, it was all so familiar. Not much had changed since she'd been here last. "Oh," was all she said before taking a seat on one of the barstools at the island.

Drew was watching her, noticing she still wore her simple black flip-flops, admiring the way the bottom portion of her calf was exposed from

her denim capris, how she had to keep tucking her hair behind her ears to keep it from falling forward when she took a drink, and oh, the way she drank her coffee. Little sips, delicately placing her lips on the cup. He needed a distraction. His mind was getting away from him.

“How was Donny and Eleanor?” he asked, knowing no one killed the mood like them.

She responded with an eye roll.

“That good, huh?”

He was smiling at her, probably well aware that her visit to her parents was as disastrous as it always was. “Let’s just say that in the short amount of time that I had to run an errand, a toddler can share a lot of details, and whenever I got back, I was due a stern talking to.”

Her voice had turned to mockery at the last part, but he could tell she was bothered by it. “What happened?”

“Becca was likely sharing about the fun she’s been having, I’m not totally sure, but she was probably excited to talk about her time at the park, hitting balls, our walks, the worms we found out back this week, and everything else. But of course my parents managed to ignore all of it, even the parts that she likely included with us spending time with Ellen, and focussed on the fact that we have a male neighbor who is nice to us.” She rolled her eyes fully this time.

“She told them about me?”

“They didn’t realize it’s you. Becca didn’t say your name, or if she did, they didn’t put it together, but it didn’t matter.” She took a slow drink of her coffee, as if the warmth from it could fill the coldness in her memories that was her parents’ impact. “I need to be worried about how it looks to be around another man, apparently. And who knows how many guys I’m bringing around my daughter. I’m just the absolute worst widow, whether acting out of grief or not. A total disgrace.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Shit.” She leaned forward on the counter, letting her chin rest in her hand.

Somehow she looked both depleted and adorable, Drew thought, vividly remembering she’d always come back to campus with the same worn out look after being around her family. They always sucked the life right out of her, and he’d spend the next couple days making sure it came back, and

then the cycle would happen again the next time she felt obligated to visit them. No wonder it began causing fights, he hated seeing what it did to her. Even now.

“Anyway,” she said. “I more or less told my mom I was too old to deal with that crap, and I didn’t want to pretend to be a happy family and raise Becca in that environment. So I decided it’d be best if we left, which obviously they were even more pissed about.”

“You go Mama,” he said. “That is the kind of mom she needs, rather than the drama-loving one you were given. They probably just hate that they can’t control you and dictate what you do anymore.”

“I think you’re right.” She sat there silent for a moment and then said, “I just couldn’t handle her insulting what kind of mom I am, especially insinuating things that are so far from the truth. Everything I do is for Becca, more than she’ll ever know, and yet my mom can’t help herself but to try and degrade me as a mother.”

“Probably because she knows what shit job she did in the role.”

“Yeah, who knows.” She waved her hand like she could actually wave the thoughts away. “Anyhow, I’m the usual disappointment, so I figured spending time at the lake with my neighbor, who was already getting me into trouble, sounded more fun than being scolded all weekend.”

He laughed. “I haven’t even begun to get you into trouble yet.” He gave her a wink.

Her insides tightened, even though it was such a small gesture, that wink reminded her who she was sitting in this room babbling away to. It didn’t help that his voice had turned deeper and this home held a lot of memories that she suddenly remembered vividly, each more exciting and pleasurable than the last.

He saw the way she looked down, and the slight blushing that rose to her cheeks. Another distraction, he thought. He needed another distraction before he made an ass out of himself.

“What’s it matter if you hang out with your neighbor, though? I don’t get it.”

She was relieved Drew said something, because she had no clue how to respond to his comment. “You’re a man.”

“So?” He was obviously missing something.

She sighed. “You’re a man, and my husband just died a few months ago. As far as my parents are concerned, my life should now look a certain way, filled with sadness and grief, and I should be hypervigilant about the way others perceive me.”

“Oh,” he said, as if he got it now. Although he didn’t understand expecting someone to live the rest of their life in misery after losing a loved one. Didn’t family want to see them happy again one day? But he did understand the fact that maybe he was encroaching on her space at a vulnerable time. That hit him right in the gut where he needed it.

“Yeah, it’s a bunch of bullshit,” she said.

“Is it?” He looked at her, and she quickly found his gaze and held it.

“You agree with them?” She sounded appalled.

“No, of course not. I don’t think you should ever worry about what other people think, and you shouldn’t let grief swallow up the rest of your life.” He hesitated. “But if I’m crossing the line in any way...”

“What are you talking about?”

He sat his coffee down, hands combing through his hair before resting on his head as he thought his next words through carefully. She tried not to look at where his torso showed underneath his raised shirt, but she couldn’t help herself. It was nothing she hadn’t already seen when he was mowing, but her eyes were still curious and drawn there.

His next words brought her back to the moment.

“I guess what I’m trying to ask, er, say, is that I don’t really know how to handle something like this. I mean, I’ve never dealt with someone losing their husband, and I don’t want to cross the line by inviting you here or popping over when we’re back home...” He let out a sigh. “And I guess I just don’t know what I’m doing or what’s too much or okay. I don’t want to take advantage of you if you’re in a bad place, Josie.”

His eyes were soft when he spoke that last sentence, bringing to life a part of her heart that’s gone unused for so long. Someone actually cared about her in a genuine, honest way. Someone besides her daughter. And here she was leaving him in the dark, unsure of how to act toward her, because she wasn’t honest with him.

“Look,” he began again, “I don’t want to push you, or ask you to talk about things you aren’t ready to, and that’s why I’ve not asked about Henry,

but I also don't want to make a misstep and ruin something because I don't really know anything, too. Does that even make sense?"

"It does make sense." She let out a breath, straightening back up in her seat and leaving her coffee on the counter. "I think it's time we talk about Henry."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 18

“He’s lucky he’s dead or I’d kill him myself.”

Josie winced at the blood thirsty anger radiating through Drew. His voice was stone and she believed he would do it.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s over.”

“It does matter, Josie.” Drew could feel the stinging where he’d bit down to keep from bursting out many times, and in doing so he grazed his cheek. He didn’t care. That was nothing compared to the pain this woman before him had endured. “Are you okay?”

She looked at him in stunned silence. Was she okay? Of all the responses and comments that had cycled through her mind when she thought about telling him, this question was never one of them. “It’s over.”

“But are you okay?” He refrained from touching her, which had been really hard this entire time. All he wanted to do was reach out, wrap his arms around her, and pull her in, promising to never let this world be so cruel to her again. He knew he didn’t have that kind of control, but he’d sure do everything he could to protect her and Becca no matter what.

“Yeah.”

He looked at her, trying to decipher what was going on, but her face was devoid of all emotions. She remained cool and matter of fact in her explanation of her marriage, something he hadn’t expected. If anything, he assumed she would be sad and heartbroken going over the details of Henry, but as she became serious and recounted the details, her eyes lost their spark, looking as though they went to some far off and dark place, her voice became flat, and her face turned passive.

He wasn’t sure what exactly to say and knew there was probably a delicate line to walk in a situation like this, but he didn’t know what that was. All Drew could do was be himself and be here for her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Shocked silent again, Josie’s eyebrow burrowed down in question.

“What?”

“Why are *you* sorry?” she asked.

“I know you don’t need my pity, and that’s not even what I’m doing. In fact, I think you’re the strongest damn woman I’ll ever know. But I also know you didn’t deserve to go through that, and sure as hell shouldn’t have had to endure it alone. Or quietly.” He ran a hand through his hair, finding himself speaking from the heart. “I guess I just wish I would’ve been there for you. I know this isn’t about me, but I wish I’d made different decisions so that even if we still broke up, that maybe we could’ve been friends and you could have told me.”

She saw the sadness and anger swirling in his eyes before they drifted down to the table. She was surprised by it, even though she was beginning to realize she shouldn’t be. But after so long of being surrounded by people, a family, who managed to turn anything she said or did against her, as if adopting a puppy would be her way of trying to get attention for being a good person, she began to believe everyone was like that. That everyone would see her through the same lenses that she developed from her toxic relationships.

She swallowed, still trying to remain distant from the memories. She had to acknowledge them enough for their details, but she didn’t want to remember the humiliating sting after a slap and the way her skin would burn beneath her hand as she held herself.

She hadn’t wanted to revert back to that kitchen the night Henry used her long yellow dishwashing gloves from where they hung over the faucet, something he despised looking at, saying it made the kitchen feel like a germ field, and she didn’t want to recall the way the rubber felt pulled around her throat as her eyes bulged, or the whipping to her face before he used them around her neck. The lingering smell of dish soap stayed with her before she lost all access to air for what felt like might be the last time, then finally she was gasping for it again on the floor, half-scared she might go unconscious, half-praying she’d never wake back up.

“Trust me,” her voice held more assurance than she would have expected. “There’s no point in thinking like that. Besides, it’s no one’s fault but my own.” At the look of dispute and outrage on his face, she held up her hand to silence whatever he was going to say.

“I stayed,” she said. “I still loved him the first time he hit me. And through many of the times after. I used to wonder why the hell women stayed in relationships like that. Why didn’t they just bail and get out?” She

blinked a couple times to refrain the tears, surprised they weren't winning. "But the truth is, we started off happy. Although I jumped in with two feet entirely too soon, all I could see was that he wanted all the things that I had so desperately seen for myself in the future. I just never paused to ask myself if having them with him was the same as wanting them, and like I said earlier, he was good to me throughout the beginning. Sure, he got angry when life was getting to him or when he was stressed out from work, but I'd seen angry people before and he acted no different.

"I truly can't pinpoint all the red flags, even now, with the ability to look back over it all. Sure there were some, and now I can see how my life slowly became secluded from others and he began showing more and more signs of being controlling. Yet somehow, it was as if it came out of nowhere, and maybe that's what made it worse, because the first time he hit me, I believed every tear that came from his eyes afterward and every apology that he spewed. His eyes didn't become the cold fury I'd grown to know later in our marriage, but they started out with remorse, guilt, and shock.

"So whenever he promised it'd never happen again, and I stood there in my own bewilderment as to what just happened, I found myself somehow consoling this grown man who was scared to death of losing me instead of me being the one sobbing and needing assurance."

Drew had felt a lot of things hearing Josie retell the kind of man Henry was, the way he'd shoved her into the car, leaving a dent, the time she thought he might've broken her wrist but she couldn't see a doctor in fear of what he'd do next, which thankfully it turned out not to be broken, and even the time he got home from a work trip and pulled her out of the bed by her ankles from a deep sleep because he was pissed she didn't wait up for him.

Yeah, he'd been feeling a lot of things, most of them ironically violent and deadly toward a man who was no longer breathing, yet that still felt too easy for the piece of shit.

But as he listened to her now, heard the fluctuation of her voice as she tried to keep it steady, then recounted being the one to comfort the man who would go on to cover almost every part of her beautiful skin with bruises by his doings, his heart cracked in several places. At that moment, he hated himself. Even though the logical and more rational part of his brain knew it

wasn't his fault, he also knew damn well that he would never live another day without blaming himself for letting her end up with Henry.

He loved this woman from the beginning, and each day after they broke up, and while he was sitting on his ass in self-pity over the years, daydreaming of seeing her again, yet never doing anything about it, she was silently living in hell to protect herself and her daughter from far worse outcomes.

He bit down again, not even noticing the sting in his mouth anymore. His jaw turned stiff and his stomach did revolting flips as Josie kept going.

"At some point I found myself justifying the abuse, as stupid as that sounds." She sighed. "But after a while, I think I just got used to the cycle. Life was fine, great even, and I was crazy for him, still believing I loved him. Then like a flip of the switch, he wasn't the same man who I first got to know, and I would be nursing a bruised jaw, black eye, green and purple ribcage, or whatever else took the brunt of it the next time.

"I think the simple fact that he didn't always use his hands to deliver the blows, and sometimes there was pushing or other acts to mix it up, I think I let myself believe this wasn't a regular type of abusive marriage. It had to be different, he wasn't solely punching or slapping me, so mine wasn't the same as all the others."

She shook her head, but her eyes were far off in the past. "But it was the same, one sense or another. I was still taking the beatings and he was still delivering them, and I had gotten so good at doing the clean up job, making sure the damage to our home was addressed, the shattered vase cleaned up, my bruises covered in concealer, and patching together this perfect life to the onlooker so that no one would know. I think I was so busy with that aspect of it that I couldn't pinpoint the moment he quit apologizing. I don't recall when the guilt and shame left his eyes, and in its place stood power and relief like the way you'd feel after finally getting to go to the bathroom after having to hold it for a two hour car ride. It was like he felt better."

"Anyhow," she continued, because she knew if she stopped it'd never come out, and she wasn't ready for the silence or to face whatever else Drew might say. "One day I found myself hating him, but I'd gotten entirely too good at being in a marriage like that. Too comfortable that it felt harder to explain to everyone else why I would be leaving it, leaving him, and it wasn't until I discovered I was pregnant that I finally had the

willpower and strength to do it, and yet that same newfound need to leave, that amazing baby I was going to shower in love and protection, it also became the same reason I couldn't leave and felt stuck, truly stuck, because there was no way in hell Henry would let me leave and take our child with me.

“So I endured and did my best job to protect my daughter in the best way I could. The more I could take, the easier I could make life on him, the quieter I could gasp out when the pain was unbearable, those were the only tools I had to keep her from experiencing the monster her dad was, and I'm not naive enough to think he might not have tried as she got older or to even know how those things work, but I do know one thing, I would never have left that home a divorced woman to have to send my daughter over there alone with that man every other week or however the hell it would've ended up. I'd let him kill me before I'd willingly allow that.”

A tear won, breaking free in a trickle down her face, and as Drew went to wipe it, the way she automatically tensed had an entirely new meaning to him now. He paused with his hand barely hovering from her face. “I promise to never hurt you or lay a hand on you like that.”

His voice was low and hushed, but filled with comfort and truth and she knew it. She leaned into his palm, allowing him to brush the wet streak away with a gentle stroke of his thumb.

“I'm glad he's dead. My only grief is that it didn't happen sooner,” she admitted.

He looked her in the eyes, lowering his hand back down. “I'm glad, too.”

For the first time in a long time, Josie felt seen. She felt unjudged. It was like her thoughts about this moment, whether with Drew or anyone, thoughts about exposing Henry and telling the truth, all of them frantic, filled with people calling her dramatic, a liar, not believing her, were crashing into her reality now, the real version that was playing out and someone listened and more importantly, someone believed her. It was only her version now, he was dead, and yet there was no pity for the dead here.

“Whatever happens, I want you to know I'm here for you and I'm here for Becca. No matter what.”

She gave him a small smile, the first one she'd had since they broached the subject of Henry, and with it came this sense of lightness about her, like an unseen burden she'd worn like a coat as heavy as bricks was finally

coming off. The air felt a little softer, the light brighter, and even this lake house that she'd always known to be a loving home felt better somehow. Life was feeling better. She was living again.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 19

Whenever Josie crawled into bed with Becca that night, the room felt welcoming and the blankets warm around her. She snuggled up next to her daughter, gently stroking the hair from Becca's face. To be able to fall asleep so easily was a blessing she'd never known. For as long as Josie could remember, her mind kept her from being able to close her eyes and drift off to that place of relaxation that taunted her.

She knew she'd get there eventually, but most nights she lay there with her eyes closed while her thoughts burst wide open like a dam, flooding her head with the day's experiences, conversation replays, ideas of the future, tasks to do, contemplations, and a constant plan of how could she be a better mom tomorrow.

Tonight felt a little different. Sure, her mind was already buzzing to life, filled with new aspects to ponder and ruminate over, but now her heart joined the conversation, and it felt freedom.

She'd been so worried that the truth would cause Drew to look at her with pity, to only see her as a victim from now on, or to see her as a bad mom, but instead he saw her for her strength, and now he knew she held no heartache for her dead husband, no lost hopes or dreams.

She saw that information become clear to him, and that was why she knew they needed to have that conversation, why she needed to tell him the truth. He deserved it, and he was right, he'd been having to tiptoe around the subject in the dark, and she'd let him.

She wasn't sure exactly what was running through Drew's mind, but for the first time in a long time, she felt like a bud of hope was sprouting up within her. Because she finally had a friend again. She had at least one honest relationship with another adult once more, and it felt good.

After everything to be said had been put out there, Drew had stood up, catching her off guard. The rain was still coming down ever so lightly, the lights shining bright inside compared to the pitch blackness of the world beyond, and as she sat on the worn wood of her stool, she watched as he

went to the freezer and pulled out ice cream and then grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet above the fridge.

He'd turned to her. "The hard stuff or the sweet stuff?"

She'd laughed in response. "Do you even know me?"

"Both it is."

The weight of her truth was still evident on him, his eyes a bit darker, shoulders lower, like he was carrying her burdens stacked up brick by brick on both sides, one for each blow she took over the years, but his hands were sturdy and his voice kind.

A part of her ached to have caused him any sympathy pain. It was a consequence she hadn't considered in the constant versions of how it would all play out in her head. It was like seeing someone wait at a restaurant's entrance not realizing it was a seat yourself joint. She couldn't help but feel their embarrassment, the twinge of it crashing into her as though she had switched places with them.

She now realized that's what she'd done to Drew, laid her life out raw for him to pick up some of it to carry himself.

He sat a bowl of cookies and cream ice cream down in front of her, then poured them both two fingers of the strong stuff. Sliding hers toward her, he lifted his before taking a drink.

"To you," he said, then took a swig.

She smiled at him, and as they sat there at the island, nursing their whiskies and downing the ice cream, she saw the man across from her.

He was still the same guy who walked her to classes in college, the same one who would spend his Saturday watching tv in her tiny twin bed at the dorms, and he was the same one who broke her heart at the dock just out the back door behind her.

But he'd grown up. Had his own life experiences just like she did, and now he sat here letting her rain on his Friday night, much like the weather outside, and yet he did it by lightening the mood over ice cream. He'd only gotten better with age, she'd decided, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why he'd never gotten married or started a family of his own.

That was a question for a different time, she'd told herself in the kitchen, and now she told herself again as she lay in the spare room at the end of the hall. There would be time to ask, time to get to know each other now, because she no longer had to hide who she was or what she'd gone through.

“Good morning.” Drew was already in the kitchen stirring a batter of pancakes Saturday morning whenever Becca came running in.

“Good morning. We play outside today.” She was all smiles, unbrushed hair, and had an abundance of energy swarming around her like bees to a flower patch. It was contagious, he decided.

“You bet we will. No more rain for the rest of the weekend. Now I have a serious question.”

She looked at him and nodded in response.

“Do you like pancakes?”

“Yes, yes! And strawberries and milk and bacon and bananas and toast!”

He chuckled. “I’ll see what all we have in there, but I’m glad you woke up hungry.”

“That makes two of us,” Josie said, catching the tail end of the conversation as she walked in. She smelled the bacon that was already cooking the moment she walked out of her bedroom. “It smells delicious.”

“Good morning. There’s a fresh pot of coffee on.” She looked well-rested, he told himself, noting the pep in her step, much like her daughter’s. The dark circles that normally lingered under her eyes seemed to have lightened up a bit, or maybe he was just telling himself that because he tossed and turned all night processing all the ways he could make her life better if she would only let him.

“Thanks.” She scooped Becca up off the ground saying, “Someone ran out before we brushed her teeth or hair. Let’s go do that and then we’ll set the table.”

“Mom, my teeth aren’t dirty. See?” She gave a big toothy grin earnestly, but Josie only laughed and hugged her tightly as they headed back down the hall.

Not even an hour later, Becca was asking to be done eating and to go play outside, which her mom agreed to. Picking up their plates, she gave them a quick scrub at the sink, rinsed, dried, and put them back in the cabinets.

“Thanks for breakfast. I’m going to sit out back with a coffee and watch her play if you want to join me.”

“No problem. It’s nice having more than just me and Scout at the table for a change.”

“Nothing keeps meals as entertaining as whatever Becca might come up with to talk about.” She retrieved her mug from the table and took it to the kitchen for a refill.

“Oh, I heard you encouraging her with your talk of hippos and crocodiles.” It was true, Josie could carry on about all the animals, pretending and making up crazy stories just as much as her three-year-old.

She laughed and shrugged. “What can I say? I still have a good imagination.”

He joined her at the coffee maker, topping off his cup. “Is that another way of saying you never grew up?”

She mocked being appalled at the question as she bumped into him playfully with her hip. “You’re one to talk, Mister Bachelor Pad. I did grow up, while you continued with your life of fun and freedom.”

For such a small gesture, he found himself immensely enjoying it, so he gave her a grin as he lifted his cup to take a drink. “You seem awfully concerned with the happenings of my life.”

“Is that right?” She raised a brow.

“Mhmm.” He headed to the back door, looking over at her as he said, “Almost as if you’ve been thinking about me.”

She would’ve withheld the smile that spread across her face, but she couldn’t. “Don’t you wish.” Joining him out back, she was hit with a brutal heat wave that the early summer morning already bestowed.

“Come play! I found a worm!” Becca was squatted down in the grass looking at something.

“Worm duty calls,” Josie said, sitting down her mug and descending the stairs. She knew it’d be cold by the time she got back to it.

She was almost to the grass whenever Drew said, “Maybe I do, Josie. Maybe I do.” She didn’t turn back to look at him as what he was saying kicked in, and it didn’t help that it gave her a warmth different from the sun and much deeper than the surface of her skin.

She was enjoying the light banter in the kitchen, but she wouldn’t count it as flirting. Would she? No, they were just two old friends hanging out again, reconnecting. But the way he said that statement didn’t feel like harmless banter, or flirting. It felt like more, much *much* more, and the sound of her name rolling off his lips was as comforting and seductive as a piece of chocolate when the sun went down.

“It’s right here.” Becca was pointing at the long dullish-pink and brown creature, which was writhing around looking to head back underground.

“Cool,” Josie commented.

“Super cool,” her daughter replied before reaching out to dig a hole with her finger beside it. “There, worm. I made you a hole. Go over there.”

Josie admired her daughter’s kindness and instinct to help. She hoped she never lost it.

“The worms not going in the hole.” She looked to her mom for commentary.

“That’s okay. It’s there if he wants it.”

“I want him to go in it.”

“Well, baby girl, we can’t always control the way the world works. Sometimes all we can do is make our impact on it and let others make their own decisions.”

Becca looked at her with slight confusion then shook her head and got up, moving on to the next activity. “Let’s play tag,” then she set off in a run without waiting for a response. Josie laughed before taking off after her.

Drew watched the two of them as Scout joined him to lay at his feet. He reached down and gave a loving scratch behind his ears. “Hey, boy.” He returned to watching the mother-daughter combo of chase happening in front of him, chuckling at how many times Josie remained “It” even after tagging Becca.

He felt content to be sitting here, the lake in the background, a woman he cared about more than she would ever know, her daughter who was already making her own mark in his heart, Scout at his side, and a sense of inner peace sprouting within him.

It felt good like this was the lifestyle people held out for, the one they daydreamed about and refused to settle until they found it.

Now all he had to do was not scare them off, meaning Josie. He knew he should’ve kept his mouth shut and enjoyed the playfulness between them, but he couldn’t help himself. He did wish she thought about him, lost sleep over their memories the way he did. Nowadays, he was spending more time thinking about how he could be around her again, spend more time together, because the moment they separated, he felt a small part of him drift off too.

His home didn’t feel quite as homey ever since they left it after the barbecue, and even his drive felt empty when he’d get home from work and

didn't see Josie's vehicle next door. It was a pathetic way to feel, he was sure of it, to be so aware of a woman's presence, but he was smart enough to know he'd never let a good thing go twice. If given the chance.

Drew stood up, causing Scout to open his eyes and raise his head, but the moment his dog realized all was good, he went back to his summertime slumber on the warm wooden planks.

"Who wants to take the boat out before lunch?" Josie had always loved feeling the breeze in her hair and the light spray of water over the sides of the boat. He wanted to see that carefree smile grace her face again and give her daughter a chance to fall in love with the lake as much as they did.

Drew was lifting Becca over the side of the boat whenever she announced that she was hungry, about the same time his own stomach began to grumble. "Yeah, sorry, I think we were out there longer than I planned."

Handing him her bag of sunscreen, empty water bottles, and other miscellaneous items, Josie stepped over the side, taking his hand as he offered it for support. It felt strong and rough, and the familiarity of it brought back a rush of memories along with some wakening of goosebumps which felt impossible in this summer heat. In her defense, the dock was shaded and a rare breeze could have blown through.

"I like the boat," Becca piped up with a sleepy smile.

"Me too," Josie agreed, extending her arm to take her bag, but Drew shook her off and hoisted it onto his shoulder as they headed for the house.

Her soft smile made the simple act of kindness feel like he'd rescued kittens from a rabid dog versus carry her bag, but he'd take it. He'd been eating up every look and smile she gave him the last couple of hours, especially as the wind from the speeding boat kept a look of joy on her face. He'd caught her stealing small glances his way over the top of Becca's head who sat next to her during the ride.

Every time he gazed at her to find that she was already looking at him, a small burst went off like a firework inside of him. The boat was a good idea, for more reasons than he'd intended. He liked making Josie happy, even if it was something as simple as a boat ride. He also liked that Becca had a blast, too.

"Let's make some lunch and eat it under the shade tree," Josie suggested.

“That sounds like a good idea.” As long as it meant additional time with her. He’d already lost more than he’d ever wanted to.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 20

Drew took the final bite of his ham and cheese sandwich as he gazed around the back yard of the lake house. The back deck looked much bigger from this low angle on the grass, the water was shimmering across the lake, and the grass appeared greener as though it drank down the rain last night like a fresh coat of paint.

“She’s out,” Josie said, catching his attention. He turned to see Becca sprawled out on the picnic blanket, which was really just an oversized quilt they kept in a basket by the back door for as long as he could remember.

“I thought she might fall asleep eating her sandwich.” He chuckled. Her eyes had been heavy since they were in the kitchen prepping the food.

“She’s actually fallen asleep many times with her hand in a bag of chips or full of crackers in the car.”

“No kidding?”

“When she’s out, she’s out.”

He laughed, imagining Becca falling asleep with a chip halfway to her mouth. He could see it. She played hard, full of energy, and even Scout wore out before she did. He’d already given up and was snoozing beside Drew since they’d first rolled out the blanket.

“What do you normally do up here by yourself?” Josie asked.

“Eh, really, I just come here to get away from it all for a bit.”

“Is there a lot to get away from?” She looked at him in earnest, and he could see the care and sincerity.

“Sometimes,” he answered honestly. “The thing I’d never expected about what I do is that I spend a lot of time juggling people and situations rather than jobs.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when I’m dealing with those who have deep pockets, some of them anyway, they expect to be treated with a certain air of superiority. They want to feel like they’re hiring the best, yet they don’t want to feel inferior like they don’t know as much, which is kind of silly considering you can’t know about something you don’t have experience with.”

“So they want you to fix their heaters and air conditioners without them having to ask for explanations or sound clueless.”

He smiled at her. “Pretty much.”

“Even though if they weren’t clueless then they could likely fix it themselves?”

“Oftentimes.”

“Sounds as bad as politics.”

He laughed louder this time. “Now you’re catching on. I thought busting my ass and owning my own business meant I could put my head down, do the job good and right, work to be the best in the area, and have a place of employment that would offer others stability and good pay. Instead, I’ve learned most people would rather my head up their ass since they are paying us for a job, and it turns out nothing is worse in business than when people get offended. And wow, do they ever. Some days it feels as if a tech could simply tell someone their issue isn’t a big deal, they just need to change their air filters more often because it’s dirty. Next thing you know they’re calling to speak with me over a rude employee. It’s like they’d prefer to have been told they need a new unit.”

“Wow.” She was smiling at him as she reached for her glass of water. “I could see wanting to escape those headaches from time to time. It sounds like you deal with a lot of pains in the ass.”

Drew brushed his hands on his shorts then leaned back on the blanket, letting his legs lay in the grass as he propped himself up on an elbow. “Some of them are, but truthfully, the majority are great everyday people who I’m lucky to work with. It’s the opposite of the spectrum that really sends me out here.”

She raised an eyebrow in question.

“I get a lot of calls from homes and families who can’t always afford to fix the big issues, so we bandage it up the best we can, oftentimes undercharging them even for that. You see, the ones with money, who can’t wait to wave it in your face, you have to tiptoe around hoping not to offend. The ones without it, you do everything in your power to try and not offend, not because they’ll make your life hell, but because you don’t want to make theirs any worse.”

She nodded in understanding.

“It’s a generalization, but for the most part, they’re the ones who treat us best and don’t follow us around like we might steal something. But at the end of the day, they can’t always afford to fix or replace their units, so we try to do what we can to see that it’s working one way or another and remains safe.”

He was picking at a thread on the blanket as he talked, and Josie could tell he was reliving some of those home settings he was referring to. She could imagine him wanting to give everyone free work and repairs if he could afford to, but Drew didn’t have that kind of luxury either, and it probably ate him up having to take their money, or what he’d allow them to give, at the end of the day.

“The biggest assholes, or at least the ones that really grind my gears are the slumlords, though.”

“The who?” She looked at him with interest and confusion.

“It’s what we call the landlords of properties who only care about turning a profit and don’t give a rat’s ass about the people living in their residences.”

“Ohhh, like my first landlord when Amanda and I moved in together. He was a piece of shit. We would always report maintenance repairs needed, and he would say he was calling someone and then quit taking our calls and no one ever came. It was awful.” She shuddered in memory. The house they rented was also much nicer in photos than reality, but they were desperate to stay close to campus and work, plus their options and budget were limited.

“I remember that.” Drew’s eyes lit up with humor. “He was a piece of work. I remember you two had been taking cold showers for weeks because the upper thermostat went out in the hot water heater and he never had anyone fix it.”

“Oh my gosh, yes,” she started laughing at the memory. “And you never wanted to stay there with me, because you didn’t want to have to shower there in the mornings.”

“Hell no, I didn’t want to freeze my balls off to start the day.”

Her hand went to her mouth trying to stifle her laughter.

“But hey, I did end up fixing it for you when it was evident he never would. I even called my dad to make sure I was doing it right and that’s when he told me I must’ve had it bad if I was already doing free labor.”

She laughed, easily hearing the words come out of his dad's mouth. It wasn't hard to imagine, and they'd be coated with pride and love although there'd be a bite to them. "It was the best birthday gift one could get," she said.

"Hey now, I'd say I gave many more good gifts following that one. I even stayed the night that night."

"I think that was because my place was a cheaper ride back from the bar." She was laughing just thinking about all of the good times she had in that house, even with the crappy landlord and everything broken. Even their dishwasher never ran, leaving them to hand wash everything. She'd never been a fan of scrubbing each dish, not even now as an adult.

"Nah, I knew what I was doing."

"Mmhmm. Sure you did."

"All those times you said I could stay there, I knew you really wanted to come over to my place. We had the closer walk to campus and you were always going on about how you could live in my bed and never get out."

She shrugged. "What can I say? That was my first time experiencing such a soft bed. Who knew that foam mattress toppers were a thing?"

He laughed. "And I had two, so you were basically putty in my hands."

"Damn, I was a goner. Maybe that's what you should've gotten me for my birthday."

"Absolutely not, woman. I knew how to keep you in my bed, and I wasn't giving up that upper hand."

She rolled her eyes, but the smile gracing her lips didn't waver. He'd always been good at putting it there. She looked over at him, the way he was stretched out across the blanket, his feet in a pair of old, mud-stained tennis shoes, he'd never been one to keep up with trendy shoes, but that was probably because he wore through them so fast. His khaki shorts had a few nicks in them, probably from hooks and projects he enjoyed, and he wore another faded gray t-shirt, this one housing some holes around the lettering up front. It was a company shirt, and he'd clearly gotten his wear out of it.

He looked relaxed laying there, his head in his hand, the other hand still on the blanket, and even with the evidence of wear and tear, stains, and age, she still thought he looked as alive, vibrant, and young as ever. Not the kind of young where he didn't sport wrinkles or show signs of grays peaking through, no. She could see both of those. Rather, he was still full of life and

energy, somebody ready to laugh at the next joke, tell a good story, and hop in his truck with nothing but a fishing pole and his dog at any moment.

The way his hair was tousled from the wind on their boat ride had her imagining running a hand through it to comb it back down, but she knew better. If she found herself touching Drew Warren again, she didn't think she'd be able to stop.

And she didn't know if she was ready for that. Or if he was.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Nothing." She looked down. "It's just turning out to be a really nice weekend."

"I couldn't agree more."

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Josie took in her reflection staring back at her. Her face was already getting some sun, likely an accumulation from her and Becca playing outside at home and spending most of today outside. She ran some tap water over her hands and splashed it on her face. Watching Becca sleep outside had looked refreshing, and if she hadn't been enjoying the time with Drew so much, she'd have joined her daughter in the nap.

However, she did enjoy her conversations with Drew, the way he could easily make her laugh, and she realized he was the only one who could bring up moments of her past that didn't make her cringe or want to change subjects. She'd always been that person who hated listening to people retell old tales, thinking it was overrated. With Drew, it was different. She liked revisiting the silly stories of their past, the way they got lost trying to drive overnight to their spring break spot, how Amanda and Connor were always bouncing between too much PDA to at each other's throats over something. That entire portion of her life held some of her best times, and it'd been nice reliving some of them.

Now that Becca was awake and fully energized, she couldn't wait to swim in the lake, and the thought had sounded great to Josie, until she slipped on the only swimsuit she could find in her size at the store last night. The kids' section had been wonderful, but the adults' was pretty picked over. If she would've gone home, she'd have grabbed her beautiful blue and white pinstriped set. The top was longer and fit her chest perfectly, while the bottom was in a slight shorts design, giving her full coverage. It

was perfect for when she was goofing off with Becca or chasing her around, because she never had to worry about anything showing.

Now that she stood in front of the mirror in this bright green halter bikini, the top with extra padding that felt like it wanted to push her boobs up to her chin, and the bottoms barely covering her backside, she felt entirely too exposed. She hadn't worn something like this in a decade.

It didn't help that when she looked at her reflection, her eyes traveled over her stretch marks, the evidence that her belly button had once been pierced, and where she'd long ago been flat and toned, she now carried more curves and meat on her bones.

She'd tried really hard after Becca was born to bounce back like she read about the celebrities online and watched her friends do on social media, always posting their postpartum pictures. They looked like they'd never had a baby to begin with. They didn't even look as though they'd lost any sleep, whereas she didn't believe she ever slept that first year, and no matter how hard she worked out after Becca went to bed, she couldn't get her pre-baby abs back.

It didn't help that Henry always asked her if she was sure she wanted seconds or should be eating a muffin for breakfast each time he was around. He knew she was trying hard, and he'd remind her constantly how much better she'd feel if she traded her lunch for a salad or went on a juice cleanse. Nothing worked.

She even opened the door to a delivery man who spent an hour setting up and going over a new spin bike as a surprise from Henry one week while he was gone for work. At the time she told herself it was a thoughtful gesture, but each day it only escorted her through a miserable cycle of thoughts whenever she'd see it and wonder when in the hell she was supposed to have time to ride that thing for an hour while managing the house and raising a baby. Because heaven forbid he come home to a dirty house, especially since he was already being graceful regarding letting herself go as he often reminded her.

Now, she stood in front of her imperfect image, the green practically burning her eyes through the mirror, and with a deep breath she nodded at herself. This was who she was now, and if it was good enough for her and Becca to have fun in the water on their own, then it would have to be good enough for the public and for the lake.

And for Drew. The thought snuck in there, and she couldn't deny she was worried he'd look at her with disgust the same way Henry did every time he saw her naked, which truthfully, she tried to avoid as much as possible. Drew knew what she used to look like, especially when she was in her prime. Gosh, she used to be so involved with intramural leagues and going to pilates classes in college. She didn't think she ever sat still much back then, but now it was a different story.

She was different, and so were her priorities. Rec leagues, gym memberships, and runs took a backseat when she had an incredible daughter to raise. Besides, she loved spending time with Becca, and she wouldn't give up their quality time together for vanity anyways. So if Drew was as offended by her mom body as much as Henry, then who was she to care. It's not like they were anything besides friends anyhow.

Although, she knew she wasn't kidding herself. She couldn't stop looking at him all day, and she'd never stopped thinking about him, even when they broke up years ago.

But if she stayed in this bathroom any longer, then her insecurities were going to be written all over her, so she turned from the reflection and forced herself out the door.

Back in the spare bedroom, Becca was sitting on the edge of the bed, her legs dangling over the side. She was wearing her purple swimsuit with polka dots that they found at the store.

"Mommy! You ready to swim?" Her excitement was in full swing.

As Josie went to respond, her phone began to ring from where she had tossed it on the bed earlier. "Yes, baby. Mama can't wait to swim." She walked to the bed and glanced at the phone. It was an unknown number but it looked familiar and the area code was local. "Let me answer this and then we'll go down there."

Becca nodded as her mom answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Josephine?"

She immediately recognized the voice. "Yes, but call me Josie. How are you, Officer Michael?"

"I'm good, and hey, I'm sorry to call on a weekend. I was actually going to do it yesterday, but it was one of those days I was drowning in paperwork."

“It’s no biggie. How may I help you?” He’d always been a big and friendly help during the aftermath of Henry’s death and the life insurance investigation, but she was a little surprised to be hearing from him now.

He cleared his throat. “Joseph—, er, Josie, I had something brought to my attention yesterday, and well, it’s something I’d like to ask you about.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to maintain a steadiness in her voice, acutely aware of the pitch change in that one word. She took a slow, deep breath in, held it, and then just as slow let it back out.

“I’m sorry to bring up Henry out of the blue, ma’am, but can you remind me what he did for a living?”

What he did for a living? What did that have to do with anything? She was sure he’d somehow found out about the abuse, and her mind had reflexively worried they could take Becca from her, even now after Henry was long gone.

“He was a financial consultant, or advisor, whichever it’s called. I guess I’m a bit ashamed to admit I’m not the most informed on what his job consisted of, but he was gone a lot on business and whenever he came home, work was the last thing he wanted to babble about.”

“I see. He was gone a lot you said?”

“That’s right.” This was beginning to feel strange.

“Did you ever find that a bit odd?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in our area, most financial advisors don’t have a lot of traveling on their schedules. They can, of course, but even then it’s very seldom, or it’s only to take business-awarded trips and vacations.”

Her head began spinning, aware that he was getting at something, but very unsure of what it was. Instantly, she was trying to piece it together. Was he going to tell her Henry had been cheating on her? Wouldn’t that be the icing on the cake. Did he hit the other woman, too? Or did he only save that for her. Were there other children? Did he have an entirely separate life?

“Officer Michael, can you give me just a moment?”

“Yes, of course.”

She brought the phone down and put it on mute. “Becca, Mommy’s going to be a couple minutes. Let’s go find Drew and Scout so I don’t bore you with this phone call.” She didn’t know where this was headed, but she

didn't want Becca overhearing anything or to be affected by Josie's reaction.

Quickly sliding on a t-shirt and shorts, she led her daughter down the hall to find Drew sprawled out over the couch watching the tv. He looked up when they entered. "You ladies ready for some water time?" Then he noticed the strain on Josie's face and sat up. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, yes. Everything's great, and I can't wait to swim. I just need to take this call real quick and was hoping Becca could hang out with you two for a few minutes."

He nodded, forming a smile on his face to ease whatever was going on. "Absolutely. I was just telling Scout he's had enough tv and we needed to go play fetch out back. What do you say Becca? You in?"

"Yes!" She was already running to the door, Scout following behind her.

Drew reached out and placed his hand on Josie's elbow. It was a gentle and comforting gesture, she realized. "Are you okay?" he asked her, his voice serious and filled with concern.

"Yeah, just an unexpected call. I'll fill you in later. It should only take a moment."

"I'll be outside if you need anything."

"Thank you."

She watched them go outside, then headed back to the spare room. Whatever Officer Michael was dancing around, she wanted to know.

Chapter 21

The spare bedroom felt colder as Josie returned to it. The comforting atmosphere it offered before now felt sterile and uninviting, much like her previous home. Henry had a way of doing that, apparently dead or alive. Just the thought of him could steal the joy from any atmosphere.

She closed the door behind her and took a seat at the edge of the bed. As she looked at her phone's screen, she saw the way her knuckles were turning white, holding the device tighter than necessary. She hadn't realized how hard she'd been gripping it. Loosening that grasp, she tapped the unmute button and brought her phone back to her ear.

"I'm sorry about that. I had my daughter next to me, and I didn't want to risk upsetting or confusing her."

Officer Michael cleared his throat. "I understand. No big deal."

"I hope you'll excuse my bluntness, Officer Michael, but I feel as though there's something going on here that I don't know about, and I'd like to know what that something is. Your questions seem odd in regards to his accident, and other than when the life insurance questioned a possible suicide attempt of reckless driving due to stress or something, which I thought we had taken care of everything for them, I don't understand what his job would have to do with anything now." She didn't speak unkindly, but she also didn't like being left in the dark and she wanted that understood.

There was a brief moment of silence on the other end of the line. "Truthfully, I don't want to cause you any more pain or burden, ma'am."

"What does that mean?" She could feel her heart beating throughout her entire body. What more could he add to her plate?

He let out an exhale that she wondered to be a sigh regretting making this call or in preparation for whatever he was about to say. "Josie, we believe your husband was involved with more than an honest living as a financial advisor and loving husband and father."

She didn't say anything in fear of where this was going. She knew damn well he wasn't some loving husband and father. Maybe a loving partner, in

the beginning, but that had long disappeared.

How would they know, though? Did somebody else pick up on it and tip them off? Was it a neighbor and because she moved they thought they should finally speak up? Could they take her daughter away? It was over now, he was gone. There was no risk to Becca anymore, and she did her best to keep her from it. Could she really be punished for taking it if that's the only option she saw for herself and the only way she could protect her daughter?

"I know this might come as a shock, but if the investigation makes headlines, which I'm sure it will, I didn't want you first hearing about it on the news or from a stranger."

It took her a moment to process what he was saying. "The news? Why would this go to the news?"

"These types of situations always do. The public takes satisfaction in knowing those with money are not as untouchable as they like to act, especially whenever innocent people are taken advantage of."

"Oh, uh, yeah." She didn't know what else to say. The room was closing in on her, the sun felt too bright coming from the open blinds, and she found herself hunched forward, her hand pressed against her forehead. She thought she might be sick.

"I'm sorry, Josie. I know we don't know each other well, but I felt some sense of responsibility to be the one to tell you after handling your husband's accident. The last thing I thought I'd be having to do was also inform you of his hand in white collar crime."

Her head snapped up. "What? White collar crime?"

"Oh," he said. "I thought you understood."

"Understood what?"

"Josie, your husband wasn't on the up and up with his clients' money. His employer realized something was going on when they had his previous clients taken over by other employees after the accident. Whenever they began combing through each account to understand the investment goals and financial paths that Henry was guiding them on, his transgressions began slowly unraveling. He wasn't stealing from every client, but enough here and there to make the overall amount jaw-dropping."

"Henry was stealing money?" The question was a near shout.

“I’m afraid so. I have a feeling that the extra traveling and the increasing number of long distance clients may of had something to do with needing to find more people who weren’t quite as familiar with the investing process. Maybe he was strategizing ways to find more clients that wouldn’t notice or know the proper handlings of a financial advisor. And in today’s world, with how easy it is to network online with social media and virtual calls, I doubt it would have been too hard, especially since he worked for a reputable company and had a successful background in it. I can’t share too much, but as more is uncovered, I’m sure a journalist will catch wind of it and the news will be on every media outlet out there.”

“Oh my God.” A small part of her was relieved that her life with Becca was safe, but the rest of her mind was running over the information he had just provided her with while also trying to pick up on any little details from her marriage that maybe she’d missed.

“I know this is a lot to learn,” he said.

“What about me and my daughter? Will we be okay? We had no clue what he was doing.” The desperation and panic in her voice was audible to her own ears, but she didn’t feel the smallest bit embarrassed by it. Fuck Henry and his mess. She needed to make sure Becca would be safe and not taken to be put in some home while her mom paid for her dad’s crimes.

“We might not be handling everything, as sometimes the FBI steps in with these kinds of crimes, but it’s my first experience where the one who committed the embezzlement is deceased. I just felt I should be the one to let you know.”

“Will we lose everything? They can have it all, I just want to be able to keep a roof over my daughter’s head and food in her mouth.”

He swallowed, probably hating that he was the one having to bear this burden. “It all just depends. Typically, they’d comb through everything, and whatever was obtained through his illegal profits will be taken, if not more.”

“Oh my God.” She didn’t know what else to say.

She took a deep breath, noticing how shaky it was leaving her mouth on the exhale. She didn’t know when she started crying, but she wiped the tears away with her free hand anyways. “Okay,” she said. “Alright, yeah, okay. I have no idea what to do or think or anything. I feel like my life is just starting to find its new normalcy and a bomb has just erupted in the

middle of it.” She started crying harder. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I’m rambling about it to you. I know you’re just trying to warn me and help us. Thank you.”

His voice softened. “You’re fine, Josie. I knew I was delivering bad news today, and I’m sorry that I had to. I can’t imagine what it must feel like to hear this after losing your husband.”

She sniffled, not daring to comment, because at this point she couldn’t pretend to give a shit about her deceased husband.

“If you need anything at all, you can call me. In the meantime, know that we will be reaching out again with future questions and the FBI might contact you. But you have my office number and my cell, don’t hesitate to call. I’ll answer any questions and be of any help that I can.”

“Thank you, Officer Michael. You’ve been such a big help through this mess already.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“Have a good rest of your weekend,” she said.

“You too, ma’am. Bye.”

“Bye.”

She hung up the phone and sat there on the bed, letting the waterworks stream down her face and onto the t-shirt she’d thrown on.

She had thought she’d done it. She thought she’d survived Henry, but here she sat not knowing what her future held, how she was going to protect her daughter from it, or what they’d do if everything they had was taken from them. How didn’t she know this? How did she not see through his bullshit from the beginning?

Even when his mask fell and she saw the angry, tortured, and violent man that he was, she still hadn’t questioned what else he could be capable of. Maybe that’s what happens when a person becomes used to curling up in a ball, praying the impacts of his punches, or whatever object he chose that night, would stop. That small dark place she went to, somewhere in between her knees and arms, wrapped up to protect herself, sacrificing any hope of it ever stopping just to salvage her energy to survive it, maybe that became all she could see or deal with. Maybe she ignored the rest or was too involved with the cycle of nurturing her wounds to see anything more.

Josie stood up, pacing the room. She was still crying but no longer cared. She was allowed to cry, allowed to feel the nauseating pain that man was

still causing her. Her anger was overflowing like lava down a volcano. It flooded her. She wanted to scream, slam her fist through the wall, throw everything in sight.

But none of that would fix anything. It wouldn't protect her daughter or herself from what was to come. As she slumped down against the wall, her knees bent and head slouching forward onto them, she found herself wondering what her parents would think of it all, learning their precious Henry was actually a lying, stealing, criminal. They'd probably still find a way to blame her, insist that he did what he had to do so that she could be a stay-at-home mom or something ridiculous.

Well, fuck them, she thought. Fuck all of this. She was tired of her life beating her down, and she wasn't going to let another one of her dead husband's bad qualities ruin this new future she was setting out for Becca.

She stood back up, brushing her t-shirt out smooth and headed for the bathroom, where she splashed some water on her face. She raised her head and looked in the mirror.

The woman who stared back was still her, but this time she had a fire in her eyes that Josie had long ago let burn out. Not anymore. So what if Henry's decisions were about to blow up her life. She'd survive them, too. She'd do whatever she had to, and her and Becca would come out on the other end just fine because they had each other.

If they lost all their money, who cares. It's not like she didn't already get herself a job. It's not like she was living in a luxury home or spending loads of money. She could make ends meet on her own, and she'd teach her daughter that they were strong and capable. She'd even change their last names so that they wouldn't have to spend the rest of their lives attached to the news stories that were sure to cause gossip, though no one in their new town had a clue as to who she was or who her husband had been. In all honesty, no one might make the connection at all if she kept it to herself. She still didn't even know many people, except a few neighbors.

For anyone who did know and did use the juicy information to look down on her, then good. They probably wouldn't have been her type of person anyhow, because she of all people knew not to judge others. She of all people knew that no one really knows anyone else, their lives, or what was happening behind closed doors. There was no sense in judging when a person would never know the full story anyhow.

She dried her hands, flung the bathroom door open, and went to the back doors. As she stepped onto the back porch, the enchanting sound of her daughter's giggles as she kicked a soccer ball with Drew was the medicine Josie's heart needed in that moment. This was why she would be strong. This was why she would endure whatever came, because that little girl down there deserved a mom who would never give up, one who would never stop trying to give her the best damn childhood and start to life that she could.

Then she put on a smile that was mustered from her love for Becca, her gratitude for Drew, and an appreciation for her beautiful surroundings, and she ran down the steps to join in on the life that was happening amidst that green lawn.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 22

“Can we swim now?” Becca had just flung herself to the ground, catching her breath after finally tagging her mom. “I’m hot.”

Josie laughed. “Probably because you’re so fast!”

“I know,” Drew said. “Who knew three-year-olds could be so quick. I’m actually worn out.”

“Mama, can we swim? I want to swim. Can we swim?”

“Yes, baby girl. We can swim. Let me grab the towels and more sunscreen.”

“I’ll get them. You two relax.” Drew smiled at them, both laying on the grass, arms and legs sprawled out around them.

It was evident that something happened on that phone call, Drew thought, as he walked to the house. That silent tension that always seemed to cling to Josie had returned. He’d been selfishly happy to notice it disappeared this morning, hoping he had helped with that, but now it was back.

He could tell she was trying to hide it, stuff it down into the back of her mind so that she could be present with Becca, probably something she’d spent the last several years learning how to do. The thought only raised his heart rate. He hated knowing how much she suffered and all by herself at that. He didn’t feel an ounce of remorse for being glad that Henry was dead. He couldn’t sleep last night, wanting to wrap her in his arms and promise he’d never let another bad thing happen to her, if only she’d let him.

He’d love nothing more than to spend the rest of his life making sure Josie knew she was safe and loved, and that no one would ever put their hands on her again. Ease her worries about Becca and the cruelty of this world, offer them both a home and sanctuary where they could always turn to for comfort, safety, and peace of mind.

He wanted to be there for her, but he didn’t want to overstep. So he spent another night tossing and turning, the same woman on his mind that had been for years now, though this time all he could think about was relieving some of the hardships she’d faced, taking some of the weight off her shoulders from all that she’d carried silently and alone.

He grabbed the towels, sunscreen, and three bottles of water. He'd have to wait to ask her about the call. The last thing she would want is him bringing attention to it in front of Becca, but he knew it was something serious.

For the short amount of time they'd been neighbors, he'd already seen enough to know that Josie never let Becca out of her sight. The fact that she needed him to keep an eye on her while she took a phone call inside spoke volumes, not only to how much she trusted him, which meant a lot, but also about the nature of the call.

For now, he'd do what she was doing – live in the present, enjoy this afternoon at the lake, and let life's lesser parts wait until later.

"I grabbed you both a water." He tossed one to Josie and handed Becca hers.

"You're the best," Becca said.

"I like to think so," he laughed.

"Hey now, what about me?" Josie mocked hurt.

"You're the best, Mommy. You're my best friend." The look of seriousness and love on Becca's face was enough to melt even the largest of icebergs.

"And you're mine, kiddo. I love you. Let's go swim!" Josie smiled at her daughter, knowing Becca didn't comprehend just how much she loved her. "I'll race you. One, two, three...Go!" Becca had already jumped up from the grass and took off. Josie pretended to struggle at keeping up, redirecting her to the dock, before acknowledging her defeat.

"Good job!" She stuck her hand out and Becca high-fived it.

"I'm really fast."

"Yes you are." Josie returned the smile, loving the confidence. Then she looked over her shoulder at Drew and Scout approaching. "Come on, slow pokes."

"Yeah, yeah. Not all of us have that kind of energy," Drew joked, then tossed the towels at her, satisfied with the smile he received in return. Man, how he loved seeing that smile. "Alright, who am I throwing in first?"

Becca squealed in response, dodging behind Josie's legs. "No, no, no. I want in with Mommy. Mommy hold me!"

Josie laughed, picking her up. "I have a better idea," she said with a wink. "How about us girls push Drew in?"

The delight that sparked in Becca's eye was enough for Drew. He realized he'd do anything to keep that twinkle in either of these ladies' eyes. He thought making Josie happy was the highlight of his day until the way his heart melted at Becca's joy. Was that what it was like for parents? They felt true happiness when they knew their kids were happy?

"I'm in for it, aren't I?" And he knew he was by the way they nodded their head in unison and giggled at his upcoming misfortune.

"We'll be nice enough to let you take your shirt off first." The quick flash of his brows made Josie's heart do a little flip. His nonverbals were as impactful as any words he could've chosen to suggest that she might like the thought of him stripping out of his t-shirt.

Josie only gave him a roll of the eyes, though the gesture didn't match the smirk on her lips. Drew knew they had an extra set of eyes and that meant he needed to be on his best behavior, but he could still have fun with some harmless flirting. Right? Either way, he wasn't going to shy away from slipping out of his shirt if it meant keeping Josie's beautiful brown eyes on him. He knew she didn't miss a thing, and that was just fine with him.

He walked to the edge of the dock where he sat down his water bottle, slipped out of his shoes, then made a point to face Josie as he raised his shirt above his head, watching her gaze as it traveled up over his torso and chest. When he caught her eyes with his, he may or may not have stood a little taller, because come on, he was still a man trying to impress a woman after all.

Unwilling to break eye contact, knowing it was a challenge, and Josie was not the type to give in easily, she only stared before commenting. "Are you ready for this?"

"I've always been ready. Are you ready, Josie?"

The sounds of the water lapping at the dock's edge faded in the background, the movement of her daughter becoming less noticeable, and the cool air in the shade of the dock didn't feel as cool. Everything fell to the background as she became very aware of the sound of her own breath and the true meaning of his response.

"I'm ready! Let's push Drew. Push him in!" Becca clapped to her own rhythm at the idea and the outburst was enough to bring Josie back to her senses.

She ignored his question. "I agree. Let's push him in." She smiled at Becca as Drew took his spot next to the edge.

Being a good sport, he pretended to ponder the scenario in front of him. "Now, I've been thinking. I'm not sure if this is a good idea anymore."

"Too late, huh kiddo?"

"Too late! Time to swim!" Becca leaned forward and Josie assisted as they both pushed a smiling Drew into the water. "Yay! We did it!"

Drew heard Josie's laughter as he broke through the surface, and he yelled, "Alright ladies, your turn! Time to get in."

"Sweetie, here's a lesson to remember, men are so impatient. They sure stink at waiting on women." Josie said it playfully and then stuck her tongue out at Drew, causing Becca to giggle and do the same.

"Don't fool yourself, darling. I'll wait a lifetime for the two of you." He spoke to Becca. "Your mom is the impatient one."

Becca, not understanding or caring, just wanted to swim and began slipping off her slides and swimsuit cover. Josie on the other hand was trying really hard not to look at Drew. Did he realize what he was doing to her, making her heart do all sorts of jumping around in her chest? Was he just being his goofy self, having fun as friends like the same old Drew he used to be? Then again, they'd never spent too much time being friends. There was the phase where he tried avoiding her, but they didn't hang out just the two of them, and even then when he flirted it made sense whenever they started dating later on.

Yeah, she'd opened up to him, and honestly, she'd been thinking about this man for years, but did that mean there could be something there again? Did he want that? She had too much on her plate to dive into it at this moment. Her daughter was ready to swim and apparently, she married an abusive thief.

"Don't get too close to the edge," she said to Becca. "Let Mom get ready and we'll get in together."

"I want to jump," Becca announced with enthusiasm.

"Okay, one moment."

"No. I want to jump. Drew will catch me." She pointed to him treading water.

Josie hesitated.

"I don't mind," he offered.

“Yes! I want to jump!”

Josie let out a breath. “Okay, let him get over here first, and I still have to put your life jacket on.”

“We left it in the boat.” Drew was at the edge now, ready in case Becca didn’t listen to her mom’s instructions.

“Don’t jump yet. I’m getting the life jacket.” Becca let out a huff but listened. Josie decided to unstrap a couple of the floats Drew had bungee corded to the metal columns as well. She sat them next to Scout who was again napping. She didn’t know a dog could sleep so much. Then she buckled Becca into her life jacket and took a step back as her daughter lunged through the air to Drew’s outstretched hands.

She wasn’t even in the air but maybe a second between her feet leaving the dock and Drew having her in his grasp, but it still made Josie nervous. It always did whenever they swam. There was nothing Becca loved more than jumping into the water.

“Did you see me?”

“I saw you, baby! Good job! You’re incredibly brave.”

“Your turn,” Becca said to her mom as she stayed contently in Drew’s arms.

“Yeah, slowpoke. Your turn.” Drew grinned at her, receiving another eye roll. “You’ll be in trouble when someone grows up learning that.”

Josie’s laughter was more like a cackle. He was right. She was doomed as Becca picked up on her lesser qualities. She already felt like she was three going on a teenager.

“Here, take these floats in case you get tired of treading water.” She pushed them over the edge and Drew grabbed one in the shape of a chair, somehow managing to climb in without falling off like she normally did, and he was even able to do it while keeping Becca held tight above water.

“You coming?” he asked, and somehow it made her feel slightly nervous.

There he was, the man she’d envisioned spending a lifetime with only eight years ago, and now he was lounged in a floaty, holding her daughter, and they looked like two peas in a pod waiting on her to join them in the water. It felt surreal.

“Hold your horses,” she replied, hoping to sound put off and not like she had butterflies desperate to escape her stomach.

Josie looked down at the flip-flops she was wearing and slowly slid each one off and nudged them away from the edge. She reminded herself of the talk she had in the bathroom and might have shaken her head a little at it.

It wasn't like she was getting naked, although it felt pretty damn close. Outside of Henry, no one had seen her undressed in almost a decade, especially after having Becca. She wanted to be that confident woman that she used to be, largely because she was setting an example for her daughter. She didn't want to raise Becca to think that her own body was merely something for others to judge her by. She wanted her to have a positive body image.

So why was it so damn difficult to strip down into her bikini right now?

Drew, that's why, and she knew it. Even if she knew she wasn't a piece of meat to be objectified, she found herself wanting Drew to do just that. She wanted him to look and like what he saw, and that scared the shit out of her.

She tucked her thumbs into the waistband of her shorts and slid them down. It didn't matter what she wanted or the response she received, though. She had a toddler waiting for her mom to get in the water and she wasn't going to let any insecurities get in the way of that.

Easier said than done as she tossed the shorts onto her shoes and grabbed her shirt to lift it over her head. She didn't wait before tossing it on the ground, turning toward the water, and jumping in.

"Yay, Mommy!" Becca was yelling as Josie's head broached the water's surface. She swam up next to their raft and leaned in to give Becca a kiss.

"Mom jumped just like you. I learned from the best." She snuck a peak at Drew, whose eyes she'd been avoiding from the moment her shoes came off. He met her gaze with an intensity that did nothing for those poor butterflies trapped in her stomach. They only flapped more vigorously.

There was so much Drew wanted to say, from holy fucking hell at the sight of her to blaming his need to stare at her with a joke about that neon green bikini. Somehow she even made that look good. She was the sexiest woman he'd laid his eyes on. Always was and always will be.

She was simply beautiful.

"I want to swim," Becca said, already moving and twisting about to get off the float.

"Hold on there, tiger. Let me help you," Drew said. Josie grabbed a couple of noodles and sat on them to float, then she pulled a smaller tube

over for Becca.

“Drew’s going to lift you into this one okay.”

“No, I want to swim.”

“You can. You’ll hang on to this and kick your feet. The lake is a lot deeper than a pool, so I can’t just stand up to help you.”

“Okay,” Becca said as Drew lifted her over to the float. Then he slid off his own and swam next to her as she kicked and splashed her feet, laughing at the noise it made. She was ecstatic as she slowly made her way through the water, Drew on one side, secretly helping to guide the float forward, and her mom cheering from the other.

This was Josie’s why. No matter what life threw at her, Becca would always be her biggest reason to keep standing back up and fighting her way to the other side, to give her daughter moments like these.

The sun felt good over the large body of water, Scout was the epitome of a dog living the life as he still snoozed on the dock, Becca’s smile was big enough to take over her entire face, and Drew... She looked at him. Even Drew looked to be having the best day of his life.

His hair was darker from where he’d gotten it wet in the water, his eyes bright and full of life. He smiled about as big as Becca, and she couldn’t stop staring at the way his neck looked above the water. When did she ever notice a neck? It didn’t stop there though. Whenever he’d take off to swim, she couldn’t stop herself from following the muscles of his traps, gazing at his shoulders, and even admiring his forearms as they cut above the water.

Every inch of him that came above the water’s surface was like another piece of mouthwatering pie. Each one was delicious on its own, but she wanted to indulge in the whole damn thing.

He’d catch her staring, taking him in, and as much as Drew liked to think he’d grown since their days in college, he knew he was swimming in the excitement it gave him. He liked that she couldn’t stop looking at him, even when she’d focus on Becca again, only for her eyes to drift back his way. He’d waited years for those beautiful brown eyes to land on him again, and he may or may not have been doing his best to appeal to her as much as a man can when treading water in the lake.

Once Becca wanted to go back to jumping off the dock, he’d been happy to assist in her fun. There was nothing better than the infectious laughter that sounded through the air as her feet left the comfort of the dock and he

caught her, gently gliding her down into the water partway. Even though he watched as Josie stiffened each time, and he was pretty sure she didn't breathe until Becca was securely in his hands, it was safe to say she was enjoying watching Becca love the lake as much as she did.

He didn't want this day to end, let alone the weekend. He wished he could convince the world to pause, allow him this time to soak up every moment that he could.

He also knew that wasn't how it worked. So he continued to swim, catch, splash, and do everything else he could to keep this amazing time going. If Drew knew anything, it was that the weekends always came to an end and eventually real life caught back up.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 23

Josie tip-toed out of the bedroom, grabbing her wet towel as she went. She hung it up in the bathroom on her way to the kitchen, where she found it empty and quiet. Drew had been kind enough to tackle the clean-up duties after dinner, considering Becca's tired eyes were giving her away. He assured her that he didn't mind as she did bath and bedtime with Becca.

They'd had such a great afternoon in the lake, finally getting out to play outside and eat popsicles until they were dry. Becca found herself fascinated with the amount of worms she could find and that quickly transitioned into searching for butterflies. Josie always found it amazing how quickly kids became curious outdoors, finding one thing after another to do or play, their imaginations running free and fully inspired by the nature around them.

She half wondered if Becca might fall asleep before they finished grilling dinner. They kept it simple with hot dogs and hamburgers, and while Drew grilled, Josie prepped a fresh salad and shucked the corn on the cob. After eating on the back porch, they'd just laid everything in the kitchen because the first of many fireflies made their appearance, and she didn't know a single child or adult who didn't delight in their magic.

They'd chased one after another, trying to spy them in the dark without the glowing light until another would appear somewhere nearby or behind them. Finally, Becca tugged on Josie's arms wanting to be held, and she knew her little girl was going to be out soon.

After giving her a quick bath and tucking her in, Josie decided to take a fast shower herself, wanting to rinse off the rest of the lake and remnants of the summer heat. The water had felt amazing, light and cool on her sun-soaked skin. She snuck back into the bedroom to slip on pajamas and gave her sleeping girl another quick peck on the forehead before quietly exiting.

As she looked around, no Drew or Scout in sight, she decided to rummage the fridge for the wine bottle she'd spotted earlier. Drew said he'd picked one up, remembering she liked a Moscato, and she laughed while grabbing the cheap bottle of wine. It never failed to amaze her how much money people spend on wine when she thought the cheap stuff tasted better

anyhow. Then again, she never claimed herself a wine connoisseur and was more than happy to drink the same stuff they used to buy in college.

She liked that Drew never gave in to pretentious ways. He could have easily, considering how successful his dad's business had always been and the money his mom came from. Even Drew had built himself a successful business, but in all the time she knew him, he'd always been a humble man. She hoped that never changed.

"Ah, I see you found ole faithful."

His voice made her jump, sending goosebumps down her arms.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Drew said, walking further into the kitchen.

"I just didn't hear you come in." She set the bottle on the counter and closed the fridge.

"I was trying to be quiet. I wasn't sure if Becca's a light sleeper or not."

"Depends on how tired she is. Where's Scout? I think I've grown used to hearing his nails on the hardwood."

Drew opened a cabinet and brought down two wine glasses. "Out back. He wasn't ready to call it quits for the night. He thinks he makes the rules. To be honest, he probably does."

She laughed at that. She doubted Scout had a hard time getting what he wanted from Drew. He was pretty loyal to his dog. "Where's the opener?"

He opened a drawer and handed it to her. "Want to sit out back?"

"I'd love that. I forgot how peaceful it is out here. And the weather is perfect tonight." He held the glasses as she poured the Moscato into each. Josie noticed he was watching her, his head tilted and mouth slightly ajar, a look she knew meant he was thinking about something. "What is it? What are you thinking about?"

Drew hesitated before answering. "I guess I was imagining you probably had plenty of peaceful places to retreat to, or at least would have thought that based on your furniture and the expensive undertones that don't look like they belong in the house you bought. It makes me wonder when your last peaceful moment was."

He handed her a glass and followed her lead as she headed to the back door, his question running through her mind. "I had lots of peaceful moments over the years, even if the bad ones felt like they might cripple me. Honestly, I think it was the ugly stuff that made me learn to appreciate

and acknowledge just how many good moments life did give me. Like Becca.”

She took a seat on the outdoor sofa, noticing Drew sat right next to her instead of any of the other open chairs.

“But did you ever have somewhere you could retreat to? Somewhere comforting, safe even?”

She thought about it. “No, I guess not. Of course, when Henry was away on business that alleviated a lot of the ugly, or maybe just postponed it, but I would take the anticipatory anxiety of his return over the actual reality of it any day.” She let out a little laugh thinking about that. “Isn’t it funny how most of the stuff we dread is really just us creating bad scenarios in our head? It’s the leading up to it that’s worse than the actual event itself.” She shook her head. “That was definitely not the case, though.”

“Sounds more like fear than anxiety.” He took a drink of his wine without ever looking away from her. He didn’t understand how she could speak so matter-of-factly about what she’d been through. All he knew was that no matter what she did to survive, how many times she may have wanted to give up, or even the amount of tears she shed over the years, this woman was stronger than he’d ever been and would always be more than he deserved. Than anyone deserved.

She shrugged, not caring about labeling it right. It was over. He was dead. Although he might still be trying to screw up her life from the grave with his greed and criminal activity.

“Now what are *you* thinking about?” Drew asked, noticing her demeanor shift.

Josie let out a sigh. “You really want to know?”

He sat up taller, reaching over to take one of her hands. “Josie, I want to know everything you’re willing to tell me. I want all you’re willing to give me.”

She saw the honesty in his eyes, along with something else. Something that made her heart spin circles and do twirls. She saw hope, something she rarely saw in her own eyes the past several years. But here it was in his, and about her. “Do you realize what you’re saying?”

“I know exactly what I’m saying,” he insisted, his voice low, serious, assured.

“My life isn’t what it used to be, Drew. I’m not who I used to be. What goes on in my head and what I deal with is a lot darker than what you might be bargaining for.” Even as she tried to warn him, she didn’t want him to care. She wanted him to still want her, to still have hope.

“I don’t need who you used to be. I want to know who you are. I want to know everything in between, the years I lost from my foolishness, the shit my stupid decisions put you through—”

“Oh, Drew,” she squeezed his hand. “You aren’t to blame for my experiences. I jumped in too fast and too soon with Henry. I missed the red flags.”

“But if it wasn’t for me letting you go... Hell, pushing you away, then I would’ve never sent you right into his arms. I’ll never forgive myself.”

She blinked back the tears that threatened to come. “You can’t think that way. I may have been heartbroken, but I made my own decisions. And at the end of the day, I wasn’t the one hitting myself. I wasn’t the one throwing things, shoving, kicking, or destroying the chance at a beautiful future. There’s only one person responsible for those actions, and he is dead. There’s no use in dwelling on it. It’s not your fault, and as much time as I’ve spent blaming myself, there’s no point in that either. I have an amazing daughter, a fresh new start, and hopefully, a bright new future to look forward to,” she said, giving him a small smile.

“I don’t know how you’ve done it all,” Drew responded. He let go of her hand and found her cheek with his palm, then thumb, lightly brushing it back and forth. “But I want to know everything. If you’ll let me, I want in. I want to help carry any burdens, any unresolved issues, and help you get that beautiful life you deserve.” He gently wiped away a tear that escaped down her cheek, a part of him proud that she didn’t feel the need to apologize for it.

Josie took a deep breath. “I think I want all of that, too.” He smiled at her. A smile that spoke years of relief and happiness, causing her to smile back, allowing her own years of yearning and emotions to break free. This could really happen. She could have her happy ending. But it wouldn’t be that easy.

“But there’s something you should know,” Josie said.

“What?” He felt his chest rise a little faster with anticipation, waiting for what he knew was the reality that he was dreading earlier in the lake. It

always set in, and it wasn't always pretty. But she was here. She wanted to try again with him, so whatever she said next would never outweigh the possibility of them.

"Earlier, the phone call I had to take, it was Officer Michael. He was the one on scene and who helped with a lot of things after Henry's accident." He nodded as she spoke. "He called to warn me."

"About what?" He could've sworn his heart stopped, waiting.

"I guess Henry was involved in some sort of embezzling or something. I don't know. I was under the impression he helped people invest their money. To be honest, he didn't talk about work a lot. He would rather brag about how much money he made or how good we had it compared to other people. But apparently, he wasn't honest, which isn't all that surprising considering I've learned no one is who you think they are."

Drew looked at her with concern in her eyes. "What does this mean? Did he tell you what's going to happen?"

"No, he just wanted to give me a warning in case it made the news or if I'm contacted." She looked up at him, and he could see the worry and fear in her eyes. He could also see the anger and hate taking up residence. "They could take everything from us. Becca and I could lose it all."

He sat his wine glass down on the coffee table and put an arm around her while pulling her into him. "You don't know that," he offered.

"I don't know anything. I don't know if it matters that he's dead. I don't know if everything we own was bought with money that didn't belong to us. I don't know to what extent this will affect us, but I do remember seeing things like this on the news before and families tend to lose it all. While one parent would sit in prison, the other would lose their money, home, and everything else, all the while having to find a way to protect their children. How do you protect your child from the ugliness of that?" She felt the tears start streaming down and she didn't care. She didn't care that after all these years without Drew, she was now sitting here crying into his chest. She felt like she could finally let it all go. Share it with someone.

"Maybe you don't," he said, and feeling her pull back, he kept talking. "Maybe it's not your job to protect her from it all. You've already protected her and the rest of your family and friends from who Henry really was, and that's your call. But maybe this is something you don't need to protect Becca from. She's being raised by a loving and good mom, a strong

woman, and I have no doubt she will be strong enough to handle the truth. Maybe the best way to protect her is to give her honesty.”

She didn't speak as she thought about his words.

“There will always be ugliness and pain in the world, Josie. You won't be able to shield her from it all, but you of all people will be able to teach her that there can still be beauty in life amid the cruelty.”

Her tears grew to sobs. She wept all over him as his words sunk in. He was right, she could never hide everything from her daughter and it wouldn't even be fair to Becca even if she could. If she did that, then the first bad thing to happen might cripple her daughter. She wanted to shower her in love and introduce her to the better parts of the world, but it didn't mean she needed to pretend the rest of it didn't exist. It wasn't fair to her to be raised with such blindness.

Drew was still holding her and stroking her back when she finally began to collect herself. He didn't say anything further, allowing her time to be inside her head. He knew she'd speak whenever she was ready. He wasn't sure what the right way to be here for her was, so he continued to hold her, hoping he was offering the comfort he knew she needed.

Finally, Josie lifted her head, her red eyes meeting his. “Thank you,” she said.

“I didn't do anything.”

“But you did. Your honesty might have just changed the way I raise my daughter. I want her to have that, too”

He smiled at her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “She's lucky to have you, Josie. And no matter what happens, I'm here for you. Both of you. I don't care if the Feds take everything down to your socks. I am here to help you as much as you'll allow. Hell, you two can have my room and I'll take the guest bedroom if you let me. I won't let that prick ruin the beautiful life you both deserve.”

Her tears broke free again.

Chapter 24

Josie felt lighter sitting there on the back porch, the moon full and bright overhead, shining its glow down on the back yard of the lake house, down on her, as though it were looking out for her. She felt a sense of calm wash over her as she took in her surroundings. Her legs were stretched out, her bare feet crossed on the coffee table and Scout snoozing underneath. She smiled at the sight. To think, she'd been worried when he first came running up their stairs. Now he was one of Becca's favorite parts about living in their new home.

She looked out at the lake, its water dark except for the bright streak from the moon's reflection. The air was cooler than this afternoon, but still warm in its summer glory. They hadn't bothered to turn on a porch light, but Drew had already lit some torches surrounding the deck rails. It was a serene environment, one she hoped to revisit many more times in the future.

Of course, that'd largely depend on Becca and Drew. He would have to keep wanting them around, and hopefully, her daughter would like the idea of them coming back. Josie had been so happy to realize he still cared about her, but this would all be new territory. She'd want to take it slow.

In the past, it'd solely been Drew and Josie. They never had to think about anyone else's input, because frankly, they didn't care. She cared now. She cared a lot, and she'd have to figure it out as she went along.

The back door opened and Drew stepped out. He had gone inside to refill their glasses, which they slowly emptied after she regathered herself from the tears. He smiled as he took a seat next to her again, and she returned the expression.

"Thank you," Josie said as he handed her the glass.

"Well, it's the least I could do after making you cry." He winked, sending a bolt of lightning down her spine.

How was it that such a small action could have an enormous impact on her? Probably because the air was finally clear between them and she no longer had to hide behind her lies and worries. There were no more distractions standing between them.

“Nah, you didn’t make me cry. It was definitely allergies,” she said playfully.

“Allergies my ass. You were just so thankful to have my arms wrapped around you again that you couldn’t hold back the tears of joy.”

Just like that, they were back to their old selves. Teasing. Flirting. Fun banter that she had missed. The world didn’t seem as cruel anymore. In fact, it didn’t seem as bad at all the moment she realized she had someone to confide in. The moment she realized Drew was there for her.

“Mmhmm. I think you might have these roles reversed, my friend.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Friend, huh? Is that what we are?”

She could see the humor mixing with something more serious in his eyes, and that look of hope had returned as well. She wasn’t sure how to answer this though, because she didn’t know what they were or what they would turn into. But she knew he wanted something, and she wanted that something too. But what does it look like in this scenario? They weren’t two single, carefree people meeting for the first time. They had their own baggage along with a history. She also had Becca who was her world, and she didn’t know what it was like to love someone as much as she loved her daughter or to actually share her time and heart with someone else. She never had to figure that out with Henry. Was there room in her heart for something more with Drew? Would it be enough for him?

“I’d like to think we’re at least friends,” she said.

Drew didn’t know how he felt about her answer. Of course, he couldn’t expect them to pick things up where they left off. Too much time had passed and a lot had changed. Not to mention, Josie was a mom now and Becca was her priority. Yet he was too scared of losing her again to breeze past her response.

“Is that enough for you?” His voice was low.

She wanted to meet his eyes, but she couldn’t. She knew what he was asking, but she also remembered the way it felt to have her heart broken. Shattered. She didn’t want to put herself out there unless she knew that he wanted it too and understood that she didn’t have it all figured out. That Becca came first. “Is it enough for you?”

Drew scooted closer on the wicker sofa, though it was hard to think there was any room left. He practically sat on top of her when he came back with their glasses. He wanted to be right next to her, as close as he could get. She

finally looked at him again, and he could see she was scared. Scared of what the future might hold, likely scared of the past repeating itself. He wouldn't do that. He'd never be so stupid to let her go again.

He sat his wine down, still full, and took Josie's from her to do the same. She never said a word, only watched him.

"Anything you're willing to give me is enough for me," he said. "But I was serious earlier when I said I wanted it all. I want all of you, Josie." They were turned toward each other now and he grabbed her hands with his own, his thumbs softly caressing her knuckles. "If you only want to be friends, then I'll live the rest of my days out as the very best friend anyone could ask for. But..." The way he looked at her made her heart swell. "If you want something more with me, I am all yours. I always have been and I always will be. Whatever you want, that's what I want to be."

She was quiet, her heart screaming at her to say something, to say yes to it all, to say she wanted all of that and more, but she couldn't open her mouth. It was like she didn't know how to accept anything good after being given so much bad for so long.

Drew swallowed, fearing what was going on in her head. She wanted this too, he was sure of it. Or at least he thought she was, but she wasn't saying anything. He heard the way her breath would catch when he flirted with her. He'd seen how she couldn't take her eyes off him. Hell, he'd even caught glimpses of her in the window at home, watching as he'd get back from work. A love like theirs doesn't just die, even if it'd been eight years. He knew in his heart, now more than ever, that it didn't just go away.

She wanted it too. He hoped she wanted it too.

Drew lifted his hands to her cheeks, his voice growing deep, as he leaned his forehead to hers. "Just tell me what you want, Josie. Please. Tell me."

Why is it that the scariest and most painful things are those that can't be seen, she wondered. The idea of having her heart broken again was a kind of torture that she didn't know if she could endure again, yet she survived years of physical abuse.

She wanted a life with Drew, but she was scared to death of it not having that happy ending she used to believe in. But what if it did? What if there was still hope?

"Josie..." he prompted.

"You," she whispered. "I want you. All of you."

Relief and joy hit him as fast as the adrenaline and wind that rushed in when a roller coaster finally dipped over its peak.

He was smiling so big as he looked into those brown eyes, his brown eyes again, she was his again, and he knew this would forever be one of the greatest days of his life. She laughed a little, the feelings contagious and overwhelming and exciting. She knew the world was shifting at this very moment. She saw the way he lit up and she felt it, too. It was like magic, floating in the air, through them and around them, encompassing them together like they were one and the same. Drew and Josie again.

His eyes drifted down to her lips, then back up. "I want to be clear about something," he said, without ever letting go of her face.

"What's that?" She was still grinning, feeling giddy and on top of the world.

"I'm about to kiss you, and it's going to be the first of many kisses to come, Josie. It's going to be the first of many things to come because I plan to erase Henry from your memory. This kiss will be the start of a new life."

She laughed. "Are you sure you want to do that? I'm pretty sure you already have a good life for yourself."

"It's the only thing I'm sure about. Kissing you is all I want to do." A wicked look crossed his face. "Among other things," he added.

She rolled her eyes, though his comment affected her more than he might have intended. Drew leaned in closer to her, their lips barely apart. She could feel his words across her skin. "I'm serious, Josie. I don't care how complicated you might think your life is, I want it all. Even if it's about to flip upside down, I want to be here to help you turn it right side up. For you. For Becca. And for me, because I need you. I've wanted you from the moment I met you, and I've thought about you every day since I lost you. I ache for you, Josie. All I want is a lifetime with you. That's all I've ever wanted."

"Then kiss me," she whispered, leaning into him, closing the breath between their lips. It was everything she remembered it to be, having Drew's lips on hers, but so much more. This wasn't just two people kissing, it was two people reconnecting, getting back something they'd lost, a life reblooming.

His mouth was covering hers and he couldn't get enough. He needed more, needed her. He parted her lips with his tongue and dove in further,

reexploring the terrain he thought he'd never get back. Her hands went to his hair and she was pressing into him and he was pressing right back. His tongue drove further into her mouth, claiming her, as one hand wrapped around the back of her neck to bring her closer.

The way she pulled on his hair, opening her mouth further, sent a fire through him. She hadn't experienced this in years, and she didn't want it to stop. As he held onto her with one hand, his other one began making its way down her neck, then shoulder, and then back. He lifted her shirt, needing to feel her, touch her.

Her entire body was thrumming to the same loud and fast beat of her heart. It felt so good to have his hands on her, so damn good, and when he lifted her into his lap, she quickly straddled him as his mouth left hers and trailed kisses down her jaw and onto her neck. She could feel him, how much he was affected beneath her. He missed this. He missed her. Every inch of her. He kissed and nipped and licked, causing a moan to escape her mouth as she pulled him into her even more, not wanting his hands or lips to stop.

Josie grabbed his head in her hands, tilting it back to kiss him again.

"I missed you so much," he said. "So fucking much."

"I missed you too, Drew," she said between kisses.

"You'll never have to miss me again. I promise."

She let her lips guide her to his chin as his hands felt every part of her backside, massaging, grabbing, and holding. As she ventured to his ear, a sound left the back of his throat and it awakened that spot between her legs.

"Mmm..." His voice was a pant. "Josie, I won't be able to stop if you keep kissing my ear." Another groan came out. "I already don't want to stop."

She didn't want to stop either. Her body was screaming for him. Her heart was screaming for him. She wanted to be screaming under him.

"I know," she whispered, the sound desperate with need. It only turned him on more knowing she wanted him as badly as he did. It was sexy to hear it in her voice, to know he was doing this to her.

But she slowly pulled away, laying her forehead on his, where he leaned up to plant another kiss on her lips. A long, slow kiss. Then another. And another. His tongue found hers this time as they danced with one another in a language of their own.

He finally found his control again, pulling back and showering her face and mouth with little kisses.

She let out a sigh into his mouth as he ran his fingers through her hair. She lifted to find him smiling at her, a genuine smile of delight. "This might just be one of the best nights of my life," he said.

"Wow. Then I'm happy to inform you that you have many more amazing ones to come."

He let out a laugh, but his palm went to her cheek and his eyes grew serious. "I don't want to rush you, Josie. God knows I want every last part of you, but I don't want to ruin anything by moving too quickly. I just got you back and I don't want to ever lose you again."

"You're telling me that if I asked you to take me to your bed right now that you wouldn't do it?" She gave him a teasing look.

"Now I'm not perfect," he replied laughing.

She looked down at him, her heart feeling a happiness it had long ago given up on. She traced a line around his eyebrows, down his nose, and slowly caressed the stubble along his jaw as she thought. "You're a good man, Drew." She bent down to wrap her arms around him, and he did the same. They sat like that, holding one another without saying a word.

"This is all new to me," she finally said.

"Me too."

"We're adults and whatever happens, happens. But I do want to talk to Becca about it, even if she doesn't fully understand. My decisions affect us both."

He kissed her on the cheek. "I'm on board," he said.

Josie smiled into his neck, not wanting to leave the warmth of his arms. It wasn't even cold out, yet it felt cooler as she raised, slowly climbing off of his lap. "I guess I should probably call it a night and get some sleep."

"Yeah. Me too." They continued to sit there side by side.

She sighed and stood up, extending her hand for him to grab. He intertwined his fingers with hers, loving how perfectly they fit together. They grabbed their glasses and took them inside, where they poured the remaining contents down the sink. Reluctant to let go of her hand he walked her down to the closed door of the spare bedroom.

They paused outside of it. Josie looked at him, and she blushed at the way he was looking back like there was nothing more satiable to him than

her. It made her feel sexier than she had in her entire life.

Drew walked toward her, causing her to lean against the wall. He grabbed her chin with his thumb and tilted it up as his mouth came down on hers. Just like last time, a fire rolled through him. It felt like a volcano erupting through his body, sending heat to every part of him.

She opened her mouth, welcoming his tongue, and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into her. Her shoulders leaned further back into the wall as her pelvis pressed into him where she was greeted by an old friend.

His cock pulsed. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me.” His voice was a low growl. It sent her soaring as she pressed further into him, her mouth traveling down to his neck, her tongue and teeth tasting his skin.

“Mmm” was all she could get out, all she could put together as her mind demanded more. Her body begged for more.

His hand found the wall beside her head as the other one lifted her in one easy scoop so that her legs wrapped around him. “Kiss me,” he growled, and she did. Her mouth found his, and he deepened the kiss. All of his feelings melted into her. The years he spent thinking about her, wanting her, missing her, loving her. It all came out through that kiss, and she returned the need, the wants, the missing, the everything back to him. All that her heart had harbored since she met him.

Their interlocked tongues were saying everything that they didn’t get to over the years, until there was no more to say, no more to give.

Josie smiled into his lips. Drew smiled into hers. And he held her around his waist against the wall like that, neither of them saying anything as they caught their breaths. Only grinning and holding on to one another.

“I think that’s my new favorite way to say good night,” he said, once his heart slowed back down.

She smiled even bigger. “Mine too.”

He let her legs go, gently putting her back on the ground. As he tucked her hair behind her ears, he leaned forward and gave her a slow, simple, but heart-melting kiss. “Good night, Josie.”

“Good night, Drew.”

Chapter 25

Josie leaned back in her chair, arms lifted above her head. She tried stretching her back to shake off the stiffness from working in the same position the last couple of hours. Becca was still napping on the couch, meaning she could take a few minutes of quiet for herself.

Surprisingly, she felt pretty energized for a Monday, but who wouldn't after the amazing weekend they had? Whenever she woke up Sunday morning, she knew they wouldn't be able to stay all day because there was a lot to get done in preparation for the new week. They had breakfast with Drew on the back porch and then she let Becca play with Scout while she packed up their belongings.

After she buckled Becca into the car and walked around the back of it, Drew snuck his arms around her waist and stole a kiss that she would be thinking about all week. It felt good to have his lips back on hers, especially since she spent all night laying in bed thinking about it.

She was thankful he'd been his normal self all morning in front of Becca. She was serious about wanting to talk to her daughter about the possibility before taking things between them further. It didn't matter that she was only three, her opinion and feelings were important to Josie. But that kiss. It'd been popping in her head all day as she got her work done.

Josie quietly stood after powering down her laptop. She walked over and looked at her little girl for a moment, smiling at the peacefulness that was spread across her face. Then she walked to the kitchen where she reheated some old coffee and took it back into the living room. As she passed the window, she saw a sleek black SUV driving down their road at a snail's speed. The windows were all tinted, the wheels and tires as fancy as the rest of it. The shiny chrome accents made it look as expensive as she knew it probably was.

Henry used to point out vehicles all the time, talking about their price as though it was impressive. She never understood it. She always saw a vehicle, no matter its make or model, as a mode of transportation from one place to the next. She could appreciate a beautiful one as much as the next

person, but she never did daydream about driving anything outside of her budget.

The one that just passed her house was very similar to the kind Henry said she'd look good in, but she would have preferred a silver color. Whenever she'd first become pregnant with Becca, she'd fantasize about loading her up, along with food and baby toys, to picnic in the park with her little family. Of course, that was before reality set in that Henry would never change and she was still trying to believe the delusional lie that he'd never lay a hand on her again.

She sighed, continuing into the living room where she curled up in a chair and reached for her book. Josie smiled one more time at her sleeping daughter and then she took a sip of her coffee before divulging in her downtime.

After work on Wednesday evening, Drew was finishing up the dishes whenever his phone pinged. He grabbed it off the counter and felt his disappointment whenever it was work-related rather than Josie.

Ever since Saturday, hell, ever since she bought that house, he'd been trying not to bombard her. Thankfully, she and Becca had been finishing up a walk on Monday whenever he pulled into the drive from work, so he was able to steal glances at her, catch up with Becca, and let Scout burn some energy as she chased him. He liked to think it wasn't a coincidence they'd been walking at that time, especially since they had never taken an evening walk before, or at least not that he was aware of.

He'd tried being respectful of her space and not overstepping, but he found himself needing to stand closer, learn about their day, and whenever the back of his hand lightly grazed hers, he felt like he'd just won the lottery from the sweet smile she gave him, her eyes bright and sparkling through her lashes.

Whenever he invited them over for dinner, he'd be lying to say that he wasn't bummed when Josie declined, though Becca was all for it. However, she mentioned that there was something she wanted to talk to her about, which he knew meant him, so it was still a win.

He'd called her later that night when he knew Becca would be asleep because he wanted to hear her voice and find out how it went. As it turned out, Becca loved the idea of Drew and Scout, especially Scout, being

around more. She'd even said he could join them for their pizza nights if he wanted to, which was a big deal he'd learned. He knew she likely didn't comprehend what her mom was discussing, but the fact that she liked the idea of being around him and Scout still meant the world to Drew.

He and Josie talked on the phone way into the night like they were kids all over again, and unfortunately, whenever he had to work late Tuesday evening, he was exhausted from the lack of sleep whenever he got home after dark.

Today, their car wasn't in the drive when he arrived home, and it made him realize how much he looked forward to the chance of running into them every day. It was just like it used to be, where Josie ran through his mind nonstop, except this time there was also room for Becca. He would find himself thinking that they should have a game night with some of the best board games, or that they should plan a day to go out for ice cream or hit balls at the park again.

When he was younger, he always thought that having kids was the end of having fun, but now he knew it was only the beginning. Her excitement and enthusiasm for life were contagious and made even the smallest things more fun.

As Drew stood there in the kitchen, still holding his phone, he decided to shoot Josie a text.

Drew: Hi beautiful. Would you and Becca be interested in getting ice cream and hitting the swings this weekend?

He slid his phone into his back pocket as he went upstairs to change. He planned to throw on ball shorts, start a load of laundry, then be a couch potato for the rest of the night. As he went into his room, he noticed the light was on in the window of the house next to his. Josie's house.

Normally, she had her blinds closed by now. He laughed to himself. She even had them closed by the time he got home from work sometimes. He couldn't blame her though, considering he could see directly into her bedroom.

As he opened his dresser to pull out a t-shirt, his phone pinged again.

Josie: I have a better idea. ;)

Drew: I like the sound of that. What you got?

Josie: Oh, hi, handsome.

Drew read the text and then looked up. He saw the movement in his peripheral and looked toward the window. There was something about seeing the woman he never stopped loving looking at him from her bedroom window that made him question every movement he made. He normally sidled on the side of arrogant and cocky, but suddenly with her standing there taking him in, he was questioning even the way he stood at the dresser.

She was wearing a sundress with thin straps and a flower pattern. Drew had no doubt she looked sexy as hell in it. She looked good in everything she wore and now he wished he could've seen her when he got home from work. How is it she could torment him from all the way over there, fully clothed, with a cute smile and wave?

He gave her a wicked grin, then made sure he didn't spot Becca anywhere in the background before lifting his shirt up and over his head. Whenever he caught her eyes again, now standing there shirtless, she was shaking her head at him but the smirk on her lips only sent encouragement.

Instead of putting on the shirt he'd pulled out of the dresser, he slowly unbuttoned his jeans, sliding down the zipper, and began pushing them down. He noticed her head had quit moving and her eyes dropped from his face, down the length of his body to where his waist and then legs became exposed. He should probably be embarrassed about how much he was enjoying this. Their houses weren't that far apart, so he didn't doubt she could see just how exciting he found this.

With a little more confidence back, thanks to the way her eyes were eating him up like a cat about to pounce on a mouse, he stood tall, his shoulders back, and grabbed his t-shirt from the top of the dresser. Excruciatingly slow, he pulled it over his head, then stuck one arm through, then another, until he'd pulled it down.

Then he gave her one last sly grin before turning to pull open his drawer of shorts and picked a pair out and slid them on. When he looked back over,

he caught the end of her blinds shutting, then the light seeping out from behind them vanished a moment later. His phone went off again.

Josie: Mmm. I'm going to have to leave my windows open more often now.

He laughed, turning to find Scout laying on the ground looking at him. "Don't give me those judging eyes," he said before heading downstairs.

Drew: I don't know what you're talking about.

Josie: Oh I think you know alright. Every last part of you knows.

He knew she noticed, and he didn't have one ounce of shame about it. The woman drove him crazy with desire, but she always had so that was nothing new. But it wasn't just her looks, it was every damn thing about her. The way her mind worked, how amazing she was as a mom, the way she treated people with kindness, how strong she was, and the way she never gave up. She made him dream about a life of peace and happiness, her laugh sent him to heaven, and he wanted to spend the rest of his days with her.

Drew: Hmm, weird. Maybe you'll have to come over and explain it to me.

Josie: Maybe I can this weekend.

Drew: Oh really?

Josie: My mom called this morning to bury the hatchet. Although she never actually apologized but did that thing where she acted like everything was normal, which is her way of saying she's ready to move on.

Drew: Yup. Bringing up Eleanor ruined the mood.

Josie: Hahaha. ANYWAY. Maybe I could see if she'd like to watch Becca for a sleepover or something?

Drew: Scratch that last text. Now we're talking. I'd like to take you out to dinner.

Josie: I'll ask her and let you know. I think she'd like some one on one time with her, but only if Becca is up for it.

Drew: Either way, I'm game. No promises I'll be able to keep my hands to myself if it's just the two of us.

Josie: Promise?

Drew smiled. This weekend couldn't come soon enough.

Drew: You betcha.

Josie: Good. I have story time to do. Good night Drew. Try not to think about me too much.

Drew: Impossible. Good night Josie.

Josie sat her phone down on the coffee table as she pulled Becca onto her lap for the books she'd gone upstairs for. Little did she know she was going to get some entertainment while she was up there. She smiled as she thought about it. It was funny how life could go from one extreme to another so quickly. She'd spent years feeling like she'd never experience love again, that the possibilities of a happy family and home life weren't going to happen for her.

Yet here she sat with her world on her lap and an amazing man next door who wanted to give her everything she could ever want.

"Hey sweetie, would you be interested in spending the night with Nana and Papa this weekend if they're not busy?"

Becca's eyes lit up as she turned in her mom's lap. "Yes! Can I bring my dolly? I want to show Nana her clothes."

"Of course you can, but I need to check with Nana first. I'll give her a call tomorrow and ask."

“Okay. Let’s read this one. This one’s my favorite,” Becca said, her attention already jumping back to the books in front of them.

“Ooh, I like that one too,” Josie said. She opened the book to begin reading, and while the story unfolded with each page, Josie found herself smiling and feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude for her life.

It didn’t matter what Henry had done to her or what was to come from his bad decisions. She’d found her happiness and he couldn’t take that away. She’d face whatever came head-on, then it’d be done. She wouldn’t have to worry about anything to do with him ever again.

“Let’s read another one.” Becca reached for a book from the stack.

“We can read as many as you want, sweetie. I love you.”

“I love you, Mommy.”

Chapter 26

The rest of the week flew by in Josie's opinion and she blamed it on her cocktail of nerves. She was excited to spend an evening with Drew, and even though they'd done everything two people could possibly do together in their past, she found herself eager and nervous to jump back in. There was also the fact that her mom picked Becca up this afternoon to stay with them this weekend.

She'd offered to drive Becca to their home, but her mom insisted. She'd been thrilled at the idea of Becca staying with them all weekend, which truthfully, eased Josie's guilt over the idea sparking from a chance to spend alone time with Drew. She knew she had nothing to feel guilty over, but it didn't make it any easier.

She decided to swing by the grocery store before Drew got off work, and as she walked down the aisles, it felt weird to shop by herself. She'd become so used to having Becca with her everywhere, those quick hands trying to grab any and everything off the shelves, that even though she should be thankful for how much easier this trip was, it now felt strange and quiet.

She turned down the pasta aisle and looked at her options. Drew had initially asked to take her out to dinner, but she texted him last night about a change of plans. She thought it would be fun to cook dinner together in his kitchen. It sounded more intimate, and she didn't feel like surrounding herself with a crowd tonight. She wanted it to be just the two of them, something special.

He quickly agreed and offered to shop for it, but Josie assured him she had the time. As she reached for a package of noodles, she heard her name behind her.

"Hi there, Josie. Where's your mini?" Ellen was smiling at her, a cart full of groceries and dressed like a woman headed to meet her friends for lunch rather than a trip to the store. Josie found herself inspired by this woman for the hundredth time since she first met her.

She tossed the pasta in her cart and smiled at her neighbor. “She’s with her Nana this weekend. I was just thinking how weird it is to grocery shop without her.”

“Oh yes. We get so used to our babies being a part of everything, but one day they grow up on us, get their own homes, own life, and we end up with an empty house and too much time on our hands.” Only Ellen could speak so frankly of the reality of parenthood and it still sound sentimental and heartfelt.

Josie looked forward to watching Becca grow up, but she also knew that she’d want less to do with her mom through some of the years, especially as she began hanging out with friends. She planned to soak up these early years as much as she could. “That saying, ‘it all happens in a blink of an eye’ really is true no matter how cliché it may be,” Josie replied.

Ellen chuckled. “Yes, it is. What are you going to do with your free time this weekend? Any big plans?”

Josie hesitated before remembering that this woman was a stranger who didn’t know her or her life, didn’t have the faintest idea of who Henry was, or hold a candle to him, and there was no need to shy away from the truth. “I’m going to have dinner with Drew next door.”

Ellen’s face lit up. “Well if that isn’t a joyful surprise,” she beamed. “I had been curious you know, but of course, I’ve always been told I’m one to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong so I’ve done good to keep my thoughts to myself. However, now that it seems the two of you might be getting cozy, I just have to say I’ve been enjoying seeing you youngins out in the front yard.”

Ellen laughed, her face still filled with joy. “I miss those days, dear. My Paul left this world about three years ago and not a day goes by that I don’t think about him. We all deserve that kind of love, and the first time I met you, I just knew you could bring some of that light into that young man’s life. He’s always been so kind to me and I used to be friends with the woman who lived next door to him. He was so sweet to her and always helped them out, even when they were too proud to ask for it, even more so once her husband passed away.” Ellen shook her head, likely recalling memories.

“I tell you what, we lose them too soon. Life is too short.”

“Yes it is,” Josie agreed, though she wondered what Ellen would think if she knew Josie’s first husband also died, though she didn’t cherish his memory as this woman did hers.

“You two have fun and soak up every moment of it. It’ll pass by in the blink of an eye,” she said with a little wink.

Josie smiled in return.

“I guess I should let you get to it, though. Otherwise, I’ll talk your ear off.” Ellen laughed, as did Josie.

“It was great running into you,” Josie said.

“You too, dear.” She began to turn then stopped. “By the way, did that gentleman finally catch up with you?”

Josie looked at her confused. “What gentleman?”

“I saw him at your house again last weekend. I knew you weren’t home but honestly, my feet were so sore from walking and my back was aching from pulling weeds all day that I didn’t have it in me to go over and talk to him. I figured he’d catch on when you didn’t come out. Sometimes I feel bad not helping another soul out, but I realized my age is catching up with me and I’ve just gotta accept it.”

Josie smiled as Ellen laughed at her last statement, though it didn’t meet her eyes. What man was she talking about? A chill went down her spine as she remembered what Officer Michael told her. She wondered if the FBI or someone was trying to get ahold of her, or maybe they were watching her. Both thoughts only added goosebumps to her arms as she remembered that black SUV driving extra slow down the road. Was it there to spy on her? Did they purposely keep going to her house when she was gone?

“Are you okay?” Ellen’s question cut through her thoughts.

“Oh, yes. I was just wondering who it could be. I don’t know anyone here besides you and Drew. Probably someone just trying to sell me something,” she decided.

“Most likely,” Ellen agreed. “Everyone is always trying to sell something.”

Josie nodded her head in agreement, though it was really because she was getting lost in thoughts again. “Well, I better be getting the rest of my list so that I can get home and get myself fancied up,” Josie said with a forced smile.

“Have fun tonight. If you want someone to share all the good details with, you feel free to stop over anytime. I’ll make us a pot of tea. And bring that little one of yours. I miss the beautiful sound of laughter filling a home.”

Josie smiled for real this time. “I will definitely do that. Have a good weekend, Ellen.”

“Bye, dear.”

Josie finished up her shopping and then headed home. She kept trying to shake the last part of the conversation she’d had with Ellen, but she found herself feeling off about it. It wasn’t surprising that someone would want to talk to her about Henry’s work dealings, but why couldn’t they just call her and schedule a time to meet? The idea of someone lurking around or watching her made her mad. She was finally starting to feel like she had a sense of safety and freedom back in her life, but now she felt like they were stepping on that a little bit.

As she swiped blush on her cheeks, she decided she wasn’t going to let anything to do with Henry ruin tonight for her. Or for Drew. She wanted to be fully present, allow herself the chance to enjoy whatever tonight held, and she was hoping it held something good because she picked out one of her favorite black lace panties and a bra to match it. Instead of opting for a pushup or semi-coverage, she went with an unpadded, partially see-through one. She liked the way it made her feel sexy.

She stood in front of the mirror, finalizing her makeup in a camisole and denim shorts. She didn’t want to get any residue from the powder onto her white button-down. As she applied the last flick of mascara, she looked at herself.

She’d been noticing a difference in the mirror lately, and it showed through tonight as clear as a freshly cleaned window. In the past, all she would see were the gray hairs making an appearance or the way her skin seemed to sag and wrinkle at every angle. She always felt too young to be noticing those things, but as she saw herself lately, a new kind of youth reflected back at her. Or maybe it was just a vibrancy she hadn’t seen in so long.

She smiled at this new version of herself. It was as though the mirror showed her not how she looked but how she felt, and lately, she felt damn good. That’s what she saw tonight. No grays or wrinkles, though both were

still there. She saw a woman who felt good and sexy, who believed in life again, and who never gave up. She saw a good mom, caring neighbor, hard worker, understanding friend, and determined eyes looking back at her. Determined to create a life filled with joy, beauty, and love.

Josie smiled at herself in the mirror and then went to her bedroom where she slipped into her white button down. The fabric felt cool on her skin, crisp, and she knew it was a smart choice if they ended up sitting out back after dinner. Sometimes the cooler air set in when the sun dropped, making it ideal to have some sleeves about. She had considered wearing a tank and borrowing a jacket from Drew, but she told herself she wanted to look and feel prepared. Sure, he could see her in his hoodies for years to come if all things went well between them, but tonight, she wanted to be ready for anything and feel good in her clothes.

She checked the time on the silver watch she put on, noting Drew would be expecting her in the next few minutes. Josie felt the giddy joy of anticipation seep through her like the warmth of water whenever she first stepped into the shower. She quickly made her way through the house, closing all of the blinds and curtains. She had no plans of coming back here tonight.

Whenever her house was dark and quiet, she grabbed her keys and the bags of groceries for dinner, excitement coursing through her, and stepped out onto the front porch, locking her door before she made the short walk next door.

It was the perfect night. The air was still warm but not muggy. The sun was beginning its slow descent, allowing the moon to make its debut. She saw some neighbors walking, kids riding bikes, could hear birds singing, and Josie thought to herself, this was it. This was what she'd wanted for her daughter, a home and neighborhood that vibrated with life, community, and happiness.

As she knocked on the screen door of the house next to hers, she smiled at the sound of paws running toward it, then the sight of the furry friend she'd come to love.

"Coming! Let yourself in." She heard Drew yell from somewhere at the back of the house. She laughed, thinking about how different they are. It would stress her out to pieces having the main door wide open while being

nowhere in sight. His screen door could be locked, but what good was that kind of security when someone could punch their hand right through?

She gave her head a little shake as if to dismiss the train of thoughts she was about to board. Who knows, she thought, maybe she could be as trusting and comfortable in this world to give Becca a home where the only thing that separated her from the outside world was a flimsy screen door. She'd love to create a sense of safety like that for her daughter.

She opened the door, not surprised it was indeed not locked, gave Scout a good scratching behind the ears, then headed toward the kitchen, where she sat the bags on top of the counter and began unloading the supplies.

Whenever Drew walked into the kitchen, her breath hitched in her throat, her words completely stuck alongside it. He looked devastatingly handsome, freshly showered, and wearing the nicest jeans she'd seen on him yet. A part of her was suspicious that they might be new because she'd never seen him in something not completely worn and broken in. His black t-shirt was well-fitted through his chest and arms, showcasing those hard muscles she'd imagined running her fingertips along, and his hair was still a little wet from a recent shower.

Thinking about him in the shower didn't help with her breathing.

"Hi, Drew," she said in a whisper, a smile playing on her lips.

A primal smile crossed his face as he replied. "Hi, Josie."

Chapter 27

Drew stirred the red sauce as Josie slid the meatballs into the oven. She grabbed her glass of wine and leaned against the counter watching him.

“I didn’t imagine cooking spaghetti could be such a treat,” he said, cocking his head sideways at her. “It might turn into my favorite meal now.”

She laughed. “I figured homemade sauce and meatballs would be more fun.”

“I’m not against it.” He laid the spatula down and walked over to her. “I’m glad we’re doing this.” He reached up and tucked her hair behind both ears.

Josie blushed. “Me too. Though I have to admit, it was hard watching my mom drive off with Becca for the weekend. My afternoon felt so weird and quiet without her.”

Drew liked when Josie talked about Becca. Her features were always their most honest when her daughter was the subject, it was like she was too invested in what she was saying for her face to hold back. “I bet. I like how she’s at a very inquisitive age right now. She wants to know what everything is or does.”

“Yes, and her favorite question is ‘why,’” Josie said with a laugh. She walked past Drew to give the sauce another stir, smelling it as she did so. “This smells delicious.”

So did she, Drew thought, catching the soft and flowery fragrance of her perfume as she stepped around him. He took her in with his eyes, standing there at the stove, stealing a taste of the sauce from the wooden spatula. She looked carefree, happy, and the moment she saw him watching her, she looked caught, too.

“Want a taste?” Josie asked, holding the utensil toward him.

He grinned. “You have no idea.”

His reply made her swallow, but she stood still as he tried it. Drew tilted his head back with a moan of delicious appreciation.

“Woah. That’s way better than the jarred stuff.”

“I know,” she exclaimed. “I found a recipe online a few years ago, and I’ve not been able to go back since. It’s too good this way.”

He liked how excited she was about the food. It felt good to be this joyful about something so small. Whenever she first suggested they cook together, he had been worried he’d be telling himself to keep his hands off her all night, which was still the case, but it was a much bigger treat spending this quiet and intimate time together.

It was a glimpse into what the future could look like. Simple evenings like this could be everything, just the four of them. Drew, Josie, Becca, and Scout. He could see them surrounding the dinner table, Becca slipping Scout some scraps under the table, and Drew and Josie tackling the dishes after dinnertime. They could spend the evenings out back and Saturdays at the park. He liked the idea of that.

Drew took the spatula from Josie’s hand, his fingers caressing hers swiftly before bringing his hand down to the pan. “I agree. I think if you decide this isn’t going to work out, then you’ll have to leave me the recipe as a parting gift.”

Josie giggled, leaning back against the counter, her hands finding the edge to lift her onto it. “It’s the least I could do,” she said, teasingly.

“Of course, I’d much rather never see the recipe a day in my life and instead learn from you year after year.” He let the spatula rest and went to stand in front of her, hips between her legs as she sat there on the counter.

“Year after year?” Josie raised a brow.

Drew looked her in the eyes, his hands resting on her thighs. “If I can have it my way.”

She brought her hands to his head, letting her fingertips comb through his hair as she looked into his eyes. She saw honesty there. And hope, again. They may be teasing, but he was also taking it seriously, and she knew a part of her was too.

He leaned into her touch, loving how her fingers felt in his hair. He wanted to feel them all over his body, but first, he wanted to feel her. He’d been thinking about her lips on his all week, and right now he wanted to relive that experience.

They continued not to say anything, only looking at each other. Drew moved in closer. Her heart picked up speed as his head leaned toward her,

his mouth very slowly making its way to her neck. The gentleness of his lips contradicted the stubble on his chin.

The idea that he hadn't undergone a fresh shave only sent fantasies of how it'd feel to have his soft and rough nature covering every inch of her. Between her thoughts and the welcomed warmth of his breath on her neck, she leaned into his kisses and exposed more of her skin to him. It felt so good.

Drew took the movement and soft moan that escaped her mouth as a sign and kept working his way softly up her neck. "I've been thinking about kissing you again all week," he said lightly as he came closer to that spot he loved below her jaw. When he found it, he felt her wiggle which only made him smile between kisses.

Josie's hands were still in his hair, except her smooth caresses had turned into a tugging need to touch, hold, and feel him against her. "I've been thinking about a lot more than that," she said, her eyes closed and her body responding to his tongue and lips now moving toward her ear.

Drew smiled into her skin before taking her ear between his teeth, tugging, then kissing, licking, then nipping. Her head came toward him as her body pressed into him. "What have you been thinking about, Josie?"

He was driving her mad by playing with her ear. She'd always been a sucker when he went there, and she knew he knew it. And she was totally okay with it. "What?"

He chuckled. "What else have you been thinking about? Tell me."

"Mmm," she said, leaning further into him, letting the sensation wrap over her.

Drew's hands were caressing her back, his fingers had slipped beneath the fabric. Her skin was smooth and warm. He raised his forehead to hers, appreciating the sight of her closed eyes, the way she was giving into the moment. She opened them and he saw the heat within. The need for more. The need for him.

Her arms dropped to his shoulders as she looked at him, and one of his came up to cup the back of her head. "What have you been thinking about?"

His voice was a husky whisper. For a split second, she contemplated ignoring his question and kissing him, showing him. Instead, she replied. "Us."

"What about us?"

His eyes bore into hers, making her entire body feel alive, as though with his look alone, he was connecting every last part of them together. “Everything,” she whispered. “How it would work, what it could be, where it would go. Along with how many nights I’ve dreamed about you, how many times I prayed you’d whisk back into my life, how often you snuck into my thoughts.” She could feel him go tense between her arms and legs, as though he were holding onto every word like he was scared that one little movement would stop her admission. “I’ve thought about how much I want this and want you.” She gave him a sly grin as she continued, not forgetting how good his mouth had just felt on her skin. “I’ve also been thinking a lot about all the things I want to do with you, and to you, starting with tonight.”

He saw the twinkle in her eye, and he lifted his head to softly rub the bridge of his nose against hers as he let out a chuckle. “I assure you there are all sorts of things I want to do to you, too,” he said.

“Then do them.” She leaned forward, their lips meeting again after a week apart that felt like a lifetime. The surge of light it sent through her, the energy and a knowingness of rightness only sent her soaring as his mouth took hers, their tongues joining in the reunion, and she found her hands kneading against his shirt, desperate to feel the contours of his back. If she had an inkling that she could do it, she’d just rip his shirt right off of him. Instead, she grabbed and pawed at him like a kitten desperate for its new toy.

Drew’s head was spinning in an ocean of ecstasy. He knew the saying, “Nothing was better than sex,” but man did they have it wrong. Nothing was better than having the love of his life back in his life. The sex, the dinners, hopefully living together one day, and even the arguments were all just going to be bonuses that would never be as good on their own or with anyone else. It was Josie that made everything better, made it all worth hoping for, and dreaming about.

His hand was firm on the back of her head, and she knew she’d let him kiss her for the next ten years as long as he didn’t let go. They were like two forces melting into one, pushing into each other at the threshold of the counter, her hands grabbing at his back, his holding onto her for dear life, neither of them able to get enough.

When the loud intrusion of music cut through their kiss like a freshly sharpened knife, it took his body a second to catch up with his ears. Josie

reacted a second faster, as the melody hit her and she realized her mom was calling her. She pulled back the moment it cut through her fog of desire.

“It’s my phone. It’s my mom.” She said as Drew already withdrew to the table where she was pointing at her purse from which the sound rose. He found it quickly and handed it to her.

She answered the call immediately, still seated on the counter. “Hey. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it’s fine, but Becca is insistent that she wants to go home. I tried telling her I had a fun day planned for us tomorrow, but she says she wants home.” Eleanor’s voice was a bit tired on the other end, which made Josie wonder if she was already worn out from an afternoon of entertaining a toddler. It’d been a long time since her mom had kids that young around.

“That’s okay. If she wants to come home, then let’s get her home. Is she there by you?” Josie felt a pang of guilt knowing her daughter wanted to be home, while she was over here enjoying herself with Drew. She tried assuring herself she couldn’t have known this would happen. Becca had been so excited about going over there.

“Yeah, she’s sitting next to me.”

“Put her on the phone, please.” Josie heard her mother tell Becca that her mom wanted to talk to her. Her voice was so sweet when she came on the phone.

“Hi, Mommy. I want to come home.”

“Okay, baby. You can come home. It’s okay that you changed your mind. Is there any reason that you don’t want to stay at Nana’s tonight? I know she has a fun day planned for tomorrow.”

“No. I just want to come home. I like it.”

“You like home?”

“Yeah. Can I come home now?”

“Of course, baby. Mommy loves you so much, and I can’t wait to see you. Let me talk to Nana so we can work out the details.”

“Okay.”

“I love you, and I can’t wait to see you.” She heard Becca already giving the phone back to Eleanor. When she came back on the line, Josie said, “I can leave in five minutes.”

“This is why she needs to be closer. You’re coddling her too much and she isn’t around other people enough.” Eleanor’s voice was disapproving.

Josie tried to keep her temper in check. “Do not start, and don’t talk about her like she isn’t sitting right next to you.” At that moment, Josie questioned her judgment in letting her daughter spend the night there. She knew what it was like to have people always talking about her as if she weren’t good enough. Hell, the woman who did it was now doing it to her daughter. It made her angry at herself, but how did she best navigate the dynamic whenever Becca also loved her Nana and liked spending time with her? She’d have to work through that another time. Right now, she needed to get her daughter home.

“I’ll be there in a few hours,” Josie said.

“No, I’ll drive her home. I’ll book a hotel so I can see your sister tomorrow and salvage this weekend.”

Josie rolled her eyes. She knew she wouldn’t schedule any future sleepovers at her mom’s house. It wasn’t worth it if she couldn’t understand a little girl missing the comforts of her own home.

She could always offer the spare bedroom, though, so that she wouldn’t have to pay for a hotel, but she decided not to. If Eleanor wanted to stay in a hotel, then that was her decision.

“Thank you,” was all Josie decided to say instead.

“We’ll see you after a bit, though I imagine Becca will be fast asleep before we get there. It’ll be way past her bedtime.”

“That’s fine. She’ll be happy when she wakes up in her own home in the morning.”

“Mmhmm. We’ll see you later.”

“Bye, be safe.” The other line had already gone silent. She let out a deep exhale, looking up to see Drew watching her.

Chapter 28

“Is Becca okay?” Drew asked, the concern thick in his voice.

“Yeah, just a little homesick. My mom’s going to bring her home.”

“Good,” he said as the timer for the oven went off. Drew slipped on an oven mitt to grab the meatballs. He saw Josie out of the corner of his eye still sitting on the counter, her hands gripping the edge as she kicked her legs back and forth. She looked deep in thought. She also looked sexy as hell without even trying. Then again, she always did, he thought.

He wished he could crawl into that mind of hers and figure out what was running through it. “What are you thinking about?” he asked as he sat the meatballs down and grabbed the pot of noodles to strain out the water.

Josie chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. Then she let out a sigh. “I don’t know. Everything. I’m feeling guilty that Becca wants to come home, and I don’t like the way my mom talks in front of her sometimes.”

Drew sat the noodles back on a cool burner and then walked over to her, resuming his place between her legs. He pulled her lip from her teeth with his thumb, his hand softly on her chin as he looked into her eyes. He could see her struggling with internal conflict. When she first moved in next door, her eyes were like shields against the outside world, but lately, she’d let that armor down and he could peer right in, often seeing the battles she dealt with.

“You don’t need to feel guilty. Becca knew she could call you once she was ready to come home and that’s what she did. That’s what matters. You would’ve never arranged for a sleepover if you didn’t think she would enjoy it.”

The way he looked at her with such kindness and assurance made Josie feel a little better. She liked having him here, having someone to comfort her. “I know, but it doesn’t always make it easier.”

“I bet it doesn’t. I have no doubt that parenting is incredibly hard and full of complicated emotions.”

Josie raised a brow. “When did you get so educated on parenting?”

He laughed. “I’m not. It’s just a guess. Although, if Becca’s okay with me being around more, I might need to read a thing or two about three-year-

olds.”

It was Josie’s turn to laugh this time. “Trust me, you can read everything out there and still find yourself struggling most days. But the books and information do help.”

“There’s that smile I love so much,” Drew said, caressing her cheek with his thumb. She leaned into it, liking the way the gentle brush of his skin felt on hers. “The food’s done,” Drew said. “Do you want to eat? I understand if your mind is elsewhere. I can always pack some up for you and Becca to have when she gets back, or tomorrow if she’s asleep.”

Josie looked him in the eyes, seeing nothing but a caring man who would have no issues letting the night end here even though it was supposed to be their first date all over again. She didn’t want dinner right now. She wanted him. “It’s a long drive for them.”

He looked at her in question.

“I don’t want to eat, Drew.”

The side of his mouth began to lift as his head cocked to the side. The way the overhead light shone down on his hair made the sun’s streaks only that much lighter. “What do you want, Josie?”

Instead of answering, she slipped down off the counter causing him to take a step back. She leaned over to turn the burner off. Giving him a seductive smile, Josie opened the drawer of pot holders and laid one out before she moved the pan of red sauce upon it. She found herself double-checking that the oven was indeed turned off because even in moments like these, she couldn’t turn off her responsibilities. The last thing she needed was to be naked and the house catching on fire.

And naked she intended to be.

Drew said, “I’m not sure I know what’s going on here.”

“You know exactly what’s going on here,” she replied.

He smiled. She smiled back. “Is there time?” He knew there was. It was a stupid question. Her parents’ house was hours away. Although, part of him knew he’d have no problem carrying on all night if they had the opportunity.

She walked towards him, and Drew couldn’t stop himself from running his hands through her hair. Oh, how he missed waking up next to her hair falling all over the pillow and in his face. He’s spent countless hours reminiscing over playing with the dark auburn locks, just running his

fingers through it, twirling it. He'd find little random strands here and there, one on his pillow, another stuck to his shirt, and the inevitable strands marking their territory in his shower. He'd longed for those strands of hair to make an appearance again, to reinstate that he had her back in his life. The woman he never stopped loving.

"There's time," she whispered, looking up at him, her head tilted back, wondering what he was thinking about as he twisted a piece of her hair between his thumb and pointer finger. "You can pack me up leftovers afterward."

"I think I'd do just about anything for you afterward," Drew said back. He'd do anything for her now, ever since he met her. He looked at her beautiful brown eyes staring back at him through those thick lashes, and he couldn't resist any longer. He had to kiss her, feel her, know she was his again.

He leaned down, his mouth taking hers gently at first, then more demanding and animal-like, as though he were making sure her lips never yearned for the touch of another man's again. It made her heart swoon, the butterflies in her stomach breaking free of any chains she'd tried putting on them before. They flew, fluttered, and damn well decided to break free and flow through her entire body sending jolts of electricity through her toes and fingertips, which were now caressing the stubble on his jawline.

She no longer thought about dinner or toxic mothers. She didn't care about what her neighbors would think of her dating the man next door so soon from an outside perspective. Hell, she didn't care what she thought of anything either. All she cared about was the warmth that radiated from his lips, the promises his tongue spoke inside her mouth, and the assurance his hands offered on her body.

Drew felt her press into him. She wanted more. He wanted more. He scooped her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He spun them around so that he could sit her on the countertop of the dark blue island, suddenly thankful he had the bright idea to put one in this old kitchen. His mouth left hers as he ravished kisses down the side of her cheek until he found her neck, and that's where he began toying between his teeth, lips, and tongue.

Josie tossed her head back, an appreciative moan escaping her throat, low and unashamed. It felt so good to have his lips on her, touching her. Her

hands were tracing the lines of his back, tugging on his muscles, pulling him in closer. His fingers found her buttons, stumbling as he tried to quickly undo them.

“Have I told you how incredibly sexy you look tonight?” His voice was hoarse and predatory.

She moaned. “No. I don’t think you did.”

“From the moment you walked in the door I wanted to strip you out of this shirt. Trace my fingers below your neckline. Taste the skin underneath.”

She couldn’t reply, his words affecting far more than her ability to think. He felt her legs wrap tighter around him and he looked at her, reveling in the need present in her eyes. Her mouth was slightly parted, the last of her buttons coming undone for him, and he let the shirt open, shaking his head with a wicked smile.

“Mmm,” he said. “This tank...”

The look on his face was like that of a lion spotting his prey. She couldn’t look away.

“You wore this very thing at the lake house and it took all I had not to run my fingers over these little straps.” Something he was doing now, with her white shirt unbuttoned and falling down her shoulders. “I envisioned taking it off of you. Kissing every inch of your skin beneath it.”

“Yeah?” The simple question snuck out of her before she realized it, and she didn’t even recognize her voice. It sounded different like she was answering a call that only he could summon.

“Oh yeah. Every last inch. Tenderly.” He ran his finger along the low-cut fabric, appreciating the delicate material and the goosebumps arriving from his touch. He liked that he made her body react. He could see her chest moving up and down, her breathing becoming deeper with anticipation, the sound of her voice throaty and wanting.

“At first. Then more roughly.” He looked at her, their eyes locking. “I imagined kissing you all over until I found my way to my favorite spot.” His eyes drifted down to the denim of her shorts causing the throbbing between her legs to speed up. “Until you can’t bear another minute and need me inside you.”

Josie sprang forward, grabbing the sides of his face and pulling him into her, letting her mouth taste his again. She indulged in the passion she felt,

delighted at the way his hands pawed at her, desperate to feel every part of her.

Then he pulled back, stunning her.

“I want you upstairs. I want you in my bed.” His voice was hard, determined.

“Okay,” she whispered. She’d go anywhere with him. She just wanted him.

He slowly kissed her again, this time a simple and gentle kiss, a loving one. “I want to do this right. I wouldn’t mind taking you on this island right here, right now. But there will be time for that. Tonight, I want you in my bed.”

If she wasn’t already a pool of needy mush, that would’ve done it. Because he was all she wanted right now. And the next thing she knew, he was tossing her over his shoulder. Talk about cutting through the tension.

Drew smiled as her laughter filled the house. He was sure there were more romantic ways of taking a woman to his bed, but this was now his favorite way if it meant hearing that enchanting sound.

As he entered his bedroom, he flicked the lights on and then laid her on the bed. “I know you have lamps,” she said humorously, propping herself up on her elbows.

“What? This harsh overhead light doesn’t get you in the mood?”

She rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. He walked to the side of the bed, turned the switch of his lamp, and then retreated to kick off the main lights. “Better?”

“More intimate,” she admitted.

“Anything to make you smile,” he said truthfully. “Now where were we?” He was already climbing on the bed over top of her, liking the way her hands instinctively touched him. Josie smiled at him again, not knowing that even that simple gesture was making him hard. Hell, she was always causing him to perk up, but now that she was underneath him, even with her clothes on, he couldn’t control it. He wanted her too badly.

She could feel his excitement already, and that only encouraged her. As he brought his mouth down to kiss hers, she was already exploring the contours of his skin, sliding her hands up under his shirt. His body felt like it always had, but somehow better. They may be older now, he even had his own sets of wrinkles and sprigs of gray, but it all made him sexier now,

more mature, grown up, and still so handsome. She let her fingernails scrape down his back parallel to his spine, and she smiled into the kiss as he groaned into her mouth, his hips rocking into her, and her pelvis tilting up to meet him.

“Josie.” It came out gravelly and she loved it. She ran her nails down his back again, except this time she caught his tongue between her teeth as she did so. She heard him groan again as the pressure of his cock against her only became more prominent. It felt good. So damn good.

He drove his tongue in further, twisting and lapping, wanting to taste every last bit of her mouth. Then as he felt her nails for a third time, he pulled his head away and made for that spot by her ear that he enjoyed so much. He knew it affected her because her fingers lost their way and began tugging and massaging into his sides halfway down their trail. He kissed and nipped at her, inhaling her soft intoxicating scent. A mixture of floral fragrance and pure Josie. He smiled into her neck as he made his way down until he was tracing little kisses along her collarbone.

She let her hands rise to his hair, playing with the light brown tendrils, messy and in need of a haircut. She loved it. She closed her eyes, feeling every touch of his lips against her skin. How was it that something so simple could feel so good? How had she lived so long without being touched like this? Cared about like this? She may have been touched, but it was nothing like this.

She didn't want to think about that though. She wanted to be here, now. She raised as if to shake herself from her mind and back into focus on the present, and Drew took the change of position as a chance to pull her shirt off her arms and he grabbed the bottom of her camisole, pulling it up and over her head.

Josie reached out for the hem of his shirt, tugging it over his head and tossing it across the room. She was sitting up, and he was on his knees in front of her, his chest bare and he was so beautiful, she thought. She placed her palms on him, slowly feeling across his chest and down his torso.

He just watched her, in awe of the way she was looking at him, as though he weren't real, or maybe she'd dreamed of this for so long too that she also needed to make sure it wasn't a figment of her imagination. He cupped her chin with his hand, and she looked up. All he saw was that his entire world was right here in front of him.

“Josie...” He wasn’t sure he should say it, knew it might scare her, but he had to. He swore he’d never take a second chance for granted.

She was looking at him, and she could see it written across his face, clear as day in his eyes. He still loved her. He always had. “Me too, Drew. Me too.”

She said it so softly, but he knew what she meant. And she knew what he was thinking. He bent back down, kissing her again, their lips colliding with a ferocious need. It was as though the words, spoken or not, weren’t enough. They needed to show each other, be with one another. Their noses rubbed against each other in that way that only feels good when you’re kissing someone you love, and he gently laid her back down, a hand caressing the back of her neck while the other trailed down her front, feeling, touching, and exposing her breasts.

He reached behind her, causing her to arch her back to give him more room, where he unclasped her bra and tossed it to the side. His mouth followed his hands to her nipples, his lips enclosing one, circling it with his tongue, while his hand caressed the other. She arched into him, wanting him to continue, needing him to continue.

He went from soft and gentle to sharp nips and tugs, and then back again. Sounds were escaping her that she couldn’t keep up with because it felt so good, and then she felt his hand slide lower and lower, past her belly button and down to the top of her shorts.

He could feel her muscles tense beneath him as he continued to suck on her nipple and glide over the skin down to her waist. He grabbed the button of her shorts with his one free hand and expertly pushed it through and undone. Switching to her other breast, appreciating the muffled whimpers from her throat, he undid her zipper and lightly grazed his fingers beneath the denim until he felt the lace of her panties. Oh, how those only stimulated him further. All the things he wanted to do to her. But first, this.

He slid his hand further down, feeling the way her breath hitched, her desire shooting through her. He kept going until he felt her, wet and welcoming, he raised to look at her. She met his eyes, and he could see the fire behind them, the desire and passion, and he watched it explode as he drove a finger inside her, taking it slow until he added a second one, his thumb beginning to encircle that sweet spot that drove her wild.

Her lips began to part as her breathing grew more shallow, and his slow movement turned faster, pumping, his fingers in and out, in and out, his thumb giving way to a more demanding rub than a gentle caress. She began bucking against his hand, making his cock throb in response. He found her breast with his mouth again as her head tilted back, a moan filling the room. He left wet kisses down her stomach until his lips were just above her shorts.

Drew smiled, looking at her, and lifted up. He grabbed both sides of her shorts, pulling them down her legs, then her black panties followed. He stared at her. "Beautiful," he said.

If she wasn't so overcome with a need for him to touch her again, she might shy away from his gaze. Might feel insecure about her body almost a decade later, the stretch marks, gained weight, and looser skin. But she didn't care. She didn't care about any of it. She just wanted him with her, on top of her, inside her.

Drew bent back down, but rather than continue where he left off, he first traced a finger from her chin down the middle of her body, to the spot his thumb had left not even a minute ago. He leaned on one arm as he began teasing her swollen middle with his finger, massaging and stimulating her center of pleasure. He took in the tan lines from her daily walks. He smiled at the evidence of motherhood that graced her creamy skin. He bent down, pressing his lips lightly to her belly, kissing from one side to the other, all the while his fingers working her continuously.

When she moaned, his cock pulsed, as if in tune with her and only her. "Mmm," he whispered into the delicate skin just above her hip bone. "You are so perfect, Josie."

She scoffed at that, her head still back in joyous delight at the generosity of his hand. He raised to look at her and she felt the movement so she opened her eyes.

"I'm serious," he said, his eyes trained on hers, not a single ounce of humor behind them.

"I'm far from the college girl you met," she said, not willing to pretend she hadn't changed.

His eyes narrowed on her, somehow his pupils growing more still, more serious. "You're better." He removed his hand from between her legs and traced along one of her stretch marks. "You're real. I want real." He traced

another with his mouth. “I want raw.” And another, but with his tongue this time. “I want you. You’re perfect. Stunning. An amazing mom. Tremendously strong. Far kinder than anyone I know. And determined.” He raised over her, looking into her eyes and Josie felt her heart skip a beat. “Wherever you go, hope goes too. Wherever you are, there is a love and fierceness that anyone is lucky to know. That is who you are and that is what I want in my life.”

Josie blinked back the tears that wanted to show themselves. He would never know what his words truly meant to her, because for so long she’d felt incredibly alone in this world, hidden behind her lies and custom-built doors and expensive furnishings. The only love she’d felt was that of her daughter’s, and though it would have always been enough for her, there was no denying it was a different kind of love. She wanted Drew’s too. She had missed his love, this connection, this feeling that no matter what happened it would be okay because they could handle it.

It no longer had to be just her carving a path in the world for her and Becca, it could now be the three of them at the end of any tunnel.

“You’re beautiful, Josie. Exquisite inside and out,” Drew drawled.

“Okay,” she said, unable to say anymore as his eyes continued to devour her. Even their presence over her skin sent tingles through her body.

As if satisfied, he lowered back down, but instead of kissing her, he went straight to her essence, his lips enclosing her, sending her head back. She heard him groan which only made it that much better, the ecstasy of his tongue caressing her inner muscles sending a shock of pleasure right through her.

“Ahh,” she moaned. “Drew...” but the rest was lost on her lips as his mouth covered her heat, his fingers parting her lips and thrusting inside her.

“You taste so fucking good,” Drew said, still driving his fingers in and out, his tongue lapping her up. He felt her hands grab at his hair, pulling hard, her hips beginning to rise until she was riding against his face. His arousal was rock hard against the bed, her movement only encouraging him further, and he began to suck on her as his fingers touched her to her very core.

“Drew,” she moaned. “Drew, Drew...” and he felt her body tremor beneath him, his free hand grabbing the back of her hips to keep her to him, not willing to let go until she reached her highest climax.

She tugged on his hair, but he kept going until she was nothing more than floating in the clouds, the ecstasy satiating every part of her, not sure if her heartbeat would ever slow down again, her body melting back into the bed, and the sound of her whimpering pleasure fading away. “I want you inside me. Now.”

He began to lift away, but she grabbed onto him. “I was going to grab a condom,” he explained.

“Fuck the condom,” she said, surprised at her haughty voice like a dominant demanding more.

His eyes turned primitive and he quickly unbuttoned his pants, shedding everything he still wore to the floor before climbing back on the bed over her. Josie leaned up and kissed him, pulling him down on her and Drew parted her legs with his own. His length was already teasing against her, and she moved up against it, only making him want her more.

“I need you,” he said into her ear. “I need every inch of you.”

“Take me.”

With that, he didn’t hold back as he braced himself with one hand, and positioned his cock with the other. He looked her in the eyes as he slowly entered, almost coming undone right there at how good she felt. She was so wet for him. He slowly pulled back and then thrust into her further this time, watching as her eyes began to go back, her head with them. He bent down, kissing her jaw as he slid back out, then rammed into her again, further and harder this time.

She tilted her head forward, her mouth finding him, the soft fullness of his lips contrasted with the rough and demanding movements of his hips. She kissed him as he thrust inside her again, each time a bit faster.

“More,” she breathed.

He kissed her desperately, and she did the same like two lost souls finding each other again. And then he began to go deeper and faster, slamming into her, unable to hold back, she just felt so damn good. It felt so fucking right.

“You...” he began, but it felt too good. He could feel her tightening around him. “Josie, you feel so fucking amazing,” and the words brought an intoxicating sound from deep within her, alerting him to the tremors shooting through her body again, and he felt keenly aware of how great she felt beneath him, his own body letting go and then he pulled back and

rammed into her again, and again, and again. Until he lost himself in her, completely gone and yet fully here, and she was moaning against his face as he was doing the same into her until they both had nothing left to give, their bodies satisfied and full and so damn alive with one another.

He rested his head on top of hers, careful not to crush her with his weight. They were both trying to catch their breath, their chests flaring up and down like a smashed thumb in one of those old cartoons growing up. Then he heard her giggle and he finally opened his eyes to look at her, but hers were still shut, but she looked radiant, laying there, her lips in a parted smile as she laughed.

Finally, she opened them and saw the questioning look on his face. She tilted her chin to give him a light kiss on the lips. “That was so much better than homemade sauce.”

He laughed too, rolling to his side on the bed next to her. He reached down and grabbed her hand in his, holding it up to kiss it. “Damn straight,” he agreed.

They both lay there, basking in their joy.

Chapter 29

As Drew finally rolled out of bed and went to the bathroom, Josie took a moment longer to lay there and enjoy the moment of quiet. She'd long since caught her breath, but she wasn't quite ready to move. Drew had initiated round two not long after they finished the first one, but it was she who wanted on top that time. Who knew when it'd be before they could do this again, and she had plenty of food at home, so eating spaghetti was the last thing on her mind.

She sat up and began sliding back into the clothes she had on earlier, deciding she'd better get downstairs to head home in case her mom decided to drive with a lead foot. She normally didn't do anything fast, but it'd be Josie's luck that they hopped in the car the very moment she hung up the phone and sped the entire way here. The last thing she wanted was to not be home for Becca once she arrived back.

Buttoning her denim shorts, she heard Drew before feeling him as he slid his arms around her waist from behind and kissed her on the cheek. "If Becca is up for it, maybe we could all go for a bike ride or something tomorrow? Did I spot one in the garage?"

"She'd love that." Josie had forgotten all about Becca's bike. She and Henry had bought it for her right before the accident and then life kind of turned upside down until now. She doubted the training wheels even had a rough edge to them yet.

"Good." He gave her another kiss before releasing the hug and reaching down to grab his shirt off the floor. "For all the crap you give me over leaving my blinds open at night, look at you being a hypocrite," he said jokingly.

Josie turned, following the direction of his eyes out the window, and saw that her bedroom was dimly glowing next door. Did she forget to turn a lamp off or something? "I could've sworn I shut them all before coming. Then again, I was pretty excited for our date tonight." She gave him a flirtatious grin.

“It’s okay. I know you were just spying in my room this afternoon, probably hoping to catch a glimpse because you can’t get enough of me.”

His smile made him all the more handsome, she thought, giving him a loving shove as she passed by and headed into the hall. “Please. The first thing I’ll be doing is shutting those blinds so you can’t watch me sleep. You’ll be obsessed with me after tonight. That’s for sure.”

“I was already obsessed. So the jokes on you.” They both laughed as they entered the kitchen, the food long past cold. “Well,” he started. “Thanks for cooking dinner.”

She grinned. “Anytime. Want help getting this all cleaned up?”

“Nah. I’m a grown-up. I can clean the kitchen.” He came close, wrapping his arms around her again, and the warmth of his chest as her head rested against it was like coming in from a cold snowy day and cozying up to the fireplace. “Besides, I know you’ll want to be home for your girl.”

She looked up at him. “Yeah, I’m ready to make sure she’s all good and get her tucked in.”

Drew leaned down, kissing her. It may not have been as deep or aggressive as upstairs, but the passion burned just as bright, and she melted into it. She loved having his lips on hers.

“I’ll walk you over,” he said, once their kiss was over.

“No,” she laughed. “It’s just next door, and if I’m honest, I’m being a little cowardly. I don’t know if I could resist pulling you inside and I’m not ready to explain what I’ve been up to tonight to my mom when she shows up.” It was a sad truth. She may be a grown woman, but she knew her mom would judge and press for information and insinuate all sorts of horrible things, depending on her mood, and Josie didn’t want to deal with it. She also enjoyed her privacy and didn’t think her personal life was everyone else’s business.

“Okay then. But if there’s no car in the driveway, I’m at least standing on the porch until I know you made it in safe.”

He held her hand as they walked to the front door, which to her amazement only had the screen shut still. She was way too paranoid to live like that. Then again, she knew it was open when she arrived and it never crossed her mind to shut it while being here. Maybe she just felt more comfortable in Drew’s presence. Or safer.

He opened the door for her and with one more kiss goodbye, a little longer and slower this time, she descended the steps and crossed over her yard and up the stairs. She gave him a little wave before unlocking the door and going inside. He was such a gentleman, she thought, turning to shut both of her front doors.

As she did, something caught her eye a little ways down the street. A large SUV was parked along the curb a few houses down on the opposite side of the road, but even in the darkness, she was certain it was the same black one she'd seen before. She'd never seen it parked there before, but maybe someone had relatives visiting. That would explain it.

The hairs on her arms stood, her instincts disagreeing. Was she being watched? That didn't make any sense. She had nothing to do with Henry's work scam, and if they'd just come to talk to her, they'd realize that. Her head was quickly swarming with worry and anxiety over what may come in the future. Her biggest fear was undoubtedly getting locked up for something he did, and she kept trying to tell herself that was impossible. She was innocent and that could never happen. But she didn't know how these things worked.

Her mind was racing and she needed a distraction. She didn't want this to ruin the amazing night she just had with Drew. Besides, her mom and Becca should be here anytime. She turned toward the hall at the same time as her stomach grumbled. She was hungry, and nothing sounded better than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

She walked into the small kitchen, not bothering to turn the light on. Her home had become familiar underfoot and it felt good to know it so well already. As she entered the kitchen and reached out for the light switch, she let out a gasp that was immediately muffled by a hand clapping over her mouth, and a strong arm wrapping around her, taking away the option of running.

She'd noticed the shadowy movement too late and now she was firmly stuck against them. Who was it? Did Henry get involved with a bad group of people and didn't pay up or something? She squirmed and moved as much as her muscles could bring forth, but the grip on her was stronger. As her senses went on hyper-alert, her nose decided to work and the overwhelming realization of the smell filling the kitchen made every part of her freeze.

Cologne. It wasn't just any cologne. It was his. His favorite. "Shhh," she heard the figure behind her say, but as quickly as her body had frozen, it kicked back into high gear as she tried twisting and using her hands to pull his arms from her, all to no avail, but she kept trying.

"Stop it! Stop it!" He shouted in a hushed voice. "I'm going to take my hand off your mouth, but you have to promise not to scream. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head, her mind in a frenzy and her body ice cold matching the chill in his voice. She felt his hands begin to lift away and she turned, automatically taking a step back as she did so. It was still dark in the kitchen, but she no longer needed the light. Her eyes had adjusted and she was on high alert now. She knew who stood before her. It was him.

It was Henry.

"But how?" she whispered, her eyes filling with horror. There in front of her, in her new kitchen, in what was supposed to be her new life, safe space, her freedom, stood her dead husband, all six foot two of him with his broad sculpted shoulders, large biceps, and muscles that she knew could pack a punch. And those cold blue eyes, which were honed in on her like their target was finally in the cross arrows. His raven-colored hair looked more black in the darkness of the kitchen if that was even possible, and it only added to her fear, standing there before him wondering how the hell he was still alive.

Then she said, "The black SUV. It's yours, isn't it?"

"Yes," he replied, nodding his head and never taking his eyes off of her.

She could tell he was holding back some of his anger with what little control she'd known him to have. "How?" Her voice was shaky and she didn't like it. She reminded herself he was supposed to be dead. He was a criminal, an abuser, a giant fucking asshole and her back straightened a little as she asked her next question. "What are you doing here?" The steel in her voice gave her a little confidence that she had otherwise not felt.

He laughed, a low and gruff sound. It gave her goosebumps and her insides were telling her to run while she still could. "Well, I thought I was coming to take care of my wife and daughter. Rescue you both from your grief." His eyes pierced hers, and even that felt painful. "But it turns out my widowed wife hasn't wasted any time moving on from her grief. What was

it? A month? A week? Did you at least wait until our daughter was asleep before you started fucking the man next door?"

His voice had become a shout, an angry harsh sound breaking through the walls of peace and safety she had previously felt here. Her home was beginning to feel foreign, as though it wasn't hers after all. It was his all over again, to act however he wanted and treat her however he wished with no one to see.

No. She wasn't going back to that. "You're supposed to be dead," she said, her eyes hardening.

"Sorry to disappoint, sweetheart, but here I am. Alive as ever!" He was laughing again, his arms spread wide as if claiming the space he stood in as his own.

"The police know what you did. The FBI is probably after you."

"Well it's a good thing I'm dead, isn't it?"

She hated the arrogance in his voice. He wasn't scared at all, which meant he probably had no reason to fear the police. It was she who was growing more scared by the second. He took a step forward, causing her to step backward. She was instantly reminded of how small her kitchen was, suddenly not appreciating the U-shape of it as much now that she felt cornered in it.

"What's the matter?" he asked with a vicious grin. "Don't you want to hug your dear husband? Welcome me home?" He looked around. "Speaking of homes, what a fucking disaster," he said, his eyes raking over the walls and kitchen. It infuriated her. She'd already grown to love this house, its old character, flaws, and all.

"You know," he continued. "I was glad when I realized you sold the house. It was only going to make my plan go smoother, and I figured you couldn't imagine living there all alone anymore anyhow. But then you went off and bought this dump," he shook his head in disbelief.

"I wasn't alone. I had Becca," Josie said. His words had hit a nerve. "We were just fine without you." She should've stopped there. "Better, even." She felt the sting of his palm on her left cheek before she could see it coming. Her hand flew to the spot, her eyes automatically burning. "I fucking hate you!" She screamed it. Then she screamed it again, though it only made his smile grow. It was like her pain and reaction were fueling his never-ending cruelty.

“Too damn bad, Josie, because you’re stuck with me.”

He said it with such certainty that she felt it to be true deep down in her core, but as she stepped back again, her backside bumping into the counter behind her, she was reminded of how far she’d come from feeling trapped inside that miserable house, the world shut out from the pain she had suffered. The counter was a reassuring comfort as though the house she bought was a supportive mom, whispering the truth into her ear. Reminding her she had the upper hand, it was okay to fight back, to at least try. She could do more than survive, she could fight.

“No,” she said, her head shaking as if to reinforce her stance. “No, I’m not. And neither is Becca. You’re dead, or at least you are to us. And even if you’re not, what are you going to do? You’re a criminal, Henry.”

His face turned as red as a hot stovetop, and his temper lashed out with his words as he grabbed her by the back of the head, entwining his fingers in her hair and ripping backward. “What the fuck do you think you can do?” he yelled. “What? You think the man you’re fucking next door can save you?” He laughed again, his breath a hot and unwanted presence on her neck. He was close, so close to her, and it made every part of her come to life with the need to put distance between them, but his grip was too tight, and her head was already searing with pain from where he had her. She was doing her best not to show how much it hurt, holding back the gasps and whimpers that wanted to come out, begging to remove the pain.

“Let me tell you a little something,” he said in an angry growl. “I had a plan, damn it. I had a goddamn plan, but I didn’t realize just how big of a fucking whore you were. I had it all figured out. When I knew they were going to catch on, I reached out to my connections and got it all squared away.” He let out a laugh that made her believe even if he was alive, his heart died a long time ago. “It pays to do business with people in high and low places. We had it all planned. How to fake my death, make them believe I could’ve never survived, new passports, cash, everything we could need to start fresh and bask in the glory of our new financial fortune.”

She didn’t dare move as he spoke, every word sinking in as he told her. All she could think is who in the hell did she marry?

“After the crash, I was going to have someone go by and persuade you to sell the house, making it easy for you to uproot quickly, but it turned out I didn’t have to do that. You’d taken care of that part for me. So it was

supposed to be easy from there. I'd wait until the life insurance money came through, then I'd take you and Becca with me to Cuba. You should see the house, Josie. It makes our last one look like gum on the bottom of a shoe. It's fucking perfect."

She could see his eyes were wild, filled with rage and excitement like he got off on knowing he planned it all out. "But then you fucked up the dream, didn't you?" he asked, cutting off her thoughts. "Was it loneliness? Were you too damn bored and lonely to grieve your husband a little longer?"

She realized he expected her to answer. Part of her wanted to lie, beg his forgiveness, do anything to stop this train from wrecking, a path that she knew they were headed down. But she couldn't. She couldn't give him any more of her.

"No," she said, though her voice was a little rough considering the painful way he still had her head ripped backward. "I wasn't lonely."

He glared into her eyes, and she could see the hate that filled them. "When I saw you and him up there, the way you let him fuck you like the trash that you are, I knew you were a lost cause. Anyone that easy isn't worth it," he spat, and his words dawned on her. The open blinds. The light coming from her room. She knew she'd shut them. She always shut the blinds, and she'd thought she shut out all the lights.

Nausea ran through her now. He was there. Watching. Then dread covered her body like a thick and scratchy blanket, suffocating her.

He shook his head. "If only you could've waited, things could've turned out differently." The way he said it and the look in his eyes made her blood run cold. "I tried letting you know. Didn't you get my flower?"

Josie was confused at first, then it hit her. It was probably still under the seat of her car, wilted and dead like her husband was supposed to be. He saw her eyes go big, but she didn't answer.

"You didn't think it was from someone else, did you?" His laugh was more salacious this time, like nails going down a chalkboard. "Surely you didn't erase our wedding day from your mind as quickly as you did your husband. Although," he turned to face the hall for a moment. "I noticed there's no photos on the walls. What a shame. How is Becca supposed to remember Daddy if I'm nowhere in sight?"

She didn't like the way his voice was growing calmer and more menacing by the second. She swallowed back some of her fear, but it returned like a familiar friend.

"Oh well. Maybe I'll just have to take her with me and leave you behind." He gave her a hateful smirk. "I do know of a headstone awaiting a body. I appreciated the funeral you threw even though they never found me. What an honor, indeed."

She froze, causing his smile to widen. She wouldn't put it past him. She knew what kind of monster was standing in front of her, the way he thrived in her tears and screams. But there was one thing she couldn't understand. She'd seen the crash site, the blood. Whose was it? "I saw the car. There was blood everywhere." She stopped speaking as delight spread across his face.

"Oh yes, yes, yes. Lots of blood," he beamed. "Let's just say someone learned what happens when they betray me." He smiled. A real genuine smile. "Besides, how could it look real if someone didn't die there that night?" She felt the bile rise in her throat and did her best to swallow it back down. He made a tsk, tsk sound and frowned at her. "Now what to do with you?"

She refused to look away. "Just go. Leave Becca and me alone, and you go."

"Haven't you been listening, Josie?" He shook her by the hold he had on her hair, then let go and grabbed her shoulders, bringing his face in close to hers. "People who betray me must pay the consequences. Although," he paused as if considering something. "My connections say the life insurance money hasn't come through yet, but should be soon. I guess that might give you some time to try and make it up to me."

Her face hardened, but her insides were scared. "I'll mail you the check."

He laughed, his fingers digging in deeper on the backs of her shoulders. "I'll make one thing clear. There is no happy ending for you here, Josie. I've been through this house. I can see how you're trying to erase me. Although I will admit I had some hopes for us when I saw you still put out my cologne, as though maybe you were holding on to some small part of me. Clearly, I was wrong." She thought of her panic attack, the times Ellen had mentioned a man stopping by when she wasn't there, and the way she'd carelessly brushed it all off. She'd let her guard down.

“When I go, I am taking Becca with me. As for you, we’ll see what happens.”

To hell with this, she thought. She’d been here before, at the mercy of his violent mood swings and need to hurt others, but now she knew she was dealing with a much bigger monster than she’d ever imagined. He was a criminal, a murderer, a downright psychopath and she would die before she let him take her daughter away. If there was a time to do something, it was now. Before her mom brought Becca through that door.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 30

Josie gave Henry a small smile, surprising him. “What’s your game plan then?” she asked. “Hide out here until the life insurance pays out? Why do you need it anyhow?”

He eyed her, looking unsure of how to take her sudden curiosity and civil tone. “Mostly. It seems you’ve gone pretty unnoticed here, though the affair next door will be cut short.” His last words were spoken with a murderous tone.

“Why do you need the money if you have everything squared away in another country?” He dropped his hands now that he was processing her questions. It wasn’t a lot of room, but if she could keep him distracted, then maybe she could make a run for it.

“I have people to pay here, and I don’t want to touch the offshore accounts until I’m out of the U.S. It’s cleaner this way.”

“And you need me to make that happen.” She stated, catching on. Hell, he probably never meant to take her and Becca with him, unless he did love them in that fucked up mind of his. Who knows. Either way, she knew she still had a part to play in this, so killing her was off the table for the time being. But she knew that wouldn’t stop him from lashing out in other ways.

He didn’t answer, but he took her in as if measuring her up, then he scoffed. “Don’t get big-headed on me, Josie. Smart never looked good on you.”

She caught herself before rolling her eyes. “I’ll play along,” she said. “But only if you stay somewhere else. We won’t go with you, and I don’t want Becca around you.”

“Excuse me?” he shouted. “She’s my fucking daughter. I’ll be around her all I want.”

She wouldn’t back down. “No. Either you stay out of her life and leave us alone after this, or I’ll tell the first person I come into contact with that you’re alive and you’re hiding out here.”

She saw how quickly his eyes changed into daggers. “You think you can threaten me?” The gap between them started to close, so she did her best to

get past him. He grabbed a hold of her wrist, yanking her back against the counter, the edge jamming into her. “Let me remind you who you’re dealing with,” he seethed, still gripping her wrist. “You don’t get to tell me how this goes. I make the rules!” His other hand found her throat, his thumb digging in under her jaw, causing Josie’s mind to race.

She struggled to move, but he only dug in harder and she quickly felt the ache and burning sensations of not being able to breathe. She could see the sparks flying in his eyes. He was enjoying this, and as her panic rose, all she could think was he might not be able to stop himself to allow his plan to fall through. He might kill her here and now.

A sound from the hall toward the front drifted into the kitchen, causing them both to pause. Then she heard the storm door shut with a click.

“Josie?” Drew called into the house. He was surprised the house was so dark, but then he noticed the light in the kitchen toward the back. She was probably eating after they chose exercise over dinner.

Henry quickly let her go, racing to the far side of the kitchen where the knife block sat under the window. He slid one out, noticing her eyes going large. He motioned for her to stay silent, then indicated what he’d do with the knife otherwise.

“Get rid of him,” he sneered in a voice so low she could barely hear, then he tucked himself into the small pantry closet.

She met Drew in the doorway between the hall and the kitchen. “Oh, what are you doing here?” she asked, the surprise in her voice real.

He knew something was wrong the moment he saw her, but as he went to reach out, she shook her head so slightly that he almost missed it, but her eyes were as wide as a set of French doors, and he stopped short. He didn’t know what was wrong, but he tried to match her nonchalance. “You left your phone on the counter. I didn’t realize until I heard it start ringing, but then it cut off before I got to it. It must’ve died, because it wouldn’t turn back on. I just wanted to get it back to you in case it was your mom. I figured she and Becca should be here any moment.”

Her hopes of dialing 911 instantly dropped with his explanation. He was right, though, her mom and Becca would be here any moment, and she needed to keep them away. Far away. “Oh, thank you,” she tried to say in a calm voice. “I’ll get this charged then.” How did she let him know to get help without risking Henry attacking them? All she could see was Henry

slitting Drew's throat, the unwanted image popping up in her mind over and over.

"Okay, then," Drew said after a moment of silence.

She had to think, and fast. "Sorry, I really do appreciate it. I'm just exhausted is all." She tilted her head back, seeing the irony of the situation. She'd spent years trying to hide the evidence of abuse, and now she was praying it was visible. "It's been a long weekend, and I feel like I've taken a beating from it all I guess." She saw his eyes run over her neck. "I think maybe we were moving too fast, and I hadn't fully processed my grief. I never told you this, but I was married. My husband, Henry, died recently, and well, sometimes life has a way of surprising you, and that's what that was. A surprise." She could see his face twisting into confusion. "I can't help but think what I'd do if he were still here. But one thing is for sure, we would have never happened."

"What? Josie, what are you—"

She cut him off, worried he might say something to get her caught. "Look, I'm just trying to say that I think we need to end whatever we have going on between us. I'm not ready for it." She ignored the shakiness in her voice.

Drew had no clue what she was talking about or why she kept tilting her head up. He knew about Henry, knew what the bastard did to her, so why was she acting like she hadn't told him he died?

"I think you should just go."

Her voice was cold, unwelcoming, the opposite of the Josie he knew and loved, the woman he'd just shared his bed with. And she was already turning her back to him, dismissing him. He stood there in shock, unsure of what to do or say until her face caught the light. Then he saw it. The patchy red skin of her cheek and then the fresh coloring below her chin, wrapping around her neck.

The sound of tires crunching over gravel caught his attention, and he knew it caught hers too, because her head snapped back faster than he'd seen anyone move, and her eyes were as big as a full moon.

Did Henry hear the car, she worried. Would he even know what the sound meant? Then Drew surprised her by saying, "That's the pizza. I guess I should go." Realizing he was just dumped he added, "For what it's worth,

I think you're making a mistake, Josie. We were great once and we could've been again."

Praying that Henry couldn't see her through the slats of the pantry she took a risk and mouthed her daughter's name, her eyes screaming it in desperation, and she could only hope that he understood her as he turned and left through the front door. As it closed behind him, she heard the pantry door open, and Henry's hand quickly spun her around, his face wound up and furious.

"Great once? Who the fuck was that?" He spat the words at her, little bits of saliva landing on her face. When she didn't answer right away, he brought up the knife, pressing the point of it into her neck enough to draw a bead of blood, the pain was only the tip of the iceberg of what she'd known from him.

"Nobody," she tried, but he only pressed harder, and she could see in his eyes that he had no problem with using it on her. "Drew," she said.

His brows scrunched together a moment as if processing something. "That dick you dated in college?"

"Yes," she replied, though she didn't remember talking much about him to Henry, or if she ever did.

"How long has this been going on?"

"What?" What did he mean? He hadn't been supposedly dead for that long. What did it matter?

Henry threw the knife at the far kitchen cabinets, getting in her face as he held her head on both sides. He began screaming it at her. "How long, huh? How long have you been screwing that bastard you fucking whore?!"

She was trying to shake her head, but she couldn't move it. What was he talking about? "It— it just started," she stumbled out.

He let go of her, letting out a deep belly laugh, then his right arm reared back before his fist came crashing into her face. It didn't sting this time, it burned, deep down inside her, her head pounding and her stomach swirling with nausea as she slid down the cabinet fronts, but he only grabbed her and yanked her back to her feet. She knew the tears had already started, not because she meant to cry, but rather she could feel them seeping down her chin, her neck, and underneath the front of her button-down shirt.

"You lying bitch." He grabbed her by the back of her hair again, and she felt his breath hot on her pounding face. It hurt all over. "I knew it. From

the very beginning. You were a worthless whore who didn't know the meaning of loyalty."

If she could get her mind to slow down and think straight, she would've tried making sense of what he was saying, but all she could do was think about how angry she was and how bad her face hurt. The pain from her hair was only a mild distraction from the outcome of his fist.

Her lack of understanding must've been evident on her face though, because he shook his head as if not believing her confusion. "That's right. I know you two were talking. I heard the fucking voicemail he left you, still in love, and wanted nothing more than to apologize. Well fuck that, because you were already mine. Not that you were worth it anymore," he said, looking at her with disgust. "Every time you looked at me with those stupid pleading eyes over the years, as if you couldn't fucking understand how I could hurt you. Well, now you know you fucking slut. I knew your secrets, knew the kind of trash you were, holding onto some fantasy of another guy."

He slung her to the floor by her hair, not that she'd put up much of an effort to stop it. She wanted nothing more than to be away from him, even if just for a moment. "Don't worry. I put an end to that dream like I'm going to put an end to your current fantasy."

Then his foot came crashing down on her, and instinct came over as she huddled into the fetal position, protecting her head with her arms, just like old times.

Drew's heart was racing as he descended the front porch steps, heading straight for the car coming to a park in Josie's driveway. He couldn't see inside the vehicle as the lights blinded him, but he knew it was Eleanor. As he approached the driver's window, he noticed the apprehension on her face as she squinted at him through the clear glass. He didn't know if she'd recognize him all these years later, especially in the dark.

As if a light bulb turned on, the recognition spread across her features, followed by a lowered brow and hostile glare. He wasn't that surprised, but at least she knew it was him. He'd glanced in the backseat and saw that Becca was sleeping. Good. That was good. That should make this a little easier.

As Josie's mom began to shift in her seat, unlocking the doors as she did so, Drew realized he had no clue what his game plan was. All he knew was that the look on Josie's face, one of fear and worry, was a sure sign that he needed to keep Becca out of that house at all costs. He didn't comprehend what was going on with her at first, and he still wasn't fully sure if he understood, but there was one thing for sure – whatever was happening inside there was ugly, and she wanted to protect her daughter from it. Something Drew was happy to do, but he also wanted to protect her. Those marks were fresh and nasty, and the violence he knew she's endured in the past is horrible, so whoever is inside there with her is a monster.

Of course, he didn't see anyone or know for sure someone was in there, but he was pretty positive she was trying to tell him something. Warn him of something. He remembered everything she said about Henry, and he also remembered what she learned from Officer Michael. Maybe there was more to it that she didn't know. Maybe Henry had been involved with some shady people or owed the wrong person some money. Maybe they were here to collect. He didn't know, but he didn't like the idea of Josie being left to fend for herself.

He needed to help her. Protect Becca and help Josie. He wished he had his phone on him. He would've already dialed the police, but he couldn't risk running to his house to get it until he knew that Eleanor wasn't going to take Becca into that house.

“What are you doing here?” That's the way Eleanor chose to greet him when she finally opened her car door and rose out. “Where's my daughter?”

He hushed her. “Keep your voice down. I'll explain later. Right now, I need you and Becca to get into my house. Do you have your phone on you?”

She looked at him with discontent. “Excuse me? Who do you think you are, Andrew Warren? Where the hell is Josie? What's going on here?”

He didn't have time for this. “Listen to me,” he said in a sharp tone that got her attention. “Do you have your phone? I need it.”

“It's in my purse.” She gestured toward the car, where he saw it in the passenger seat.

“Get it,” he instructed. “Call 9-1-1 and tell them to hurry here.”

She looked at him with alarm. “What's going on?!”

“There’s no time. I’ll unbuckle Becca and you can carry her inside.” He pointed toward his house. “That’s my house. The front door’s unlocked.” He was already opening the back door, trying to be quick and quiet. When she hadn’t moved yet, he yelled as quietly as he could. “Move, Eleanor! Get your phone. Now!”

She began moving, her hands shaking and fumbling to open the passenger door. As he undid Becca’s buckle, gently lifting her out of her seat, he heard her start waking up. “Shh,” he soothed. “It’s just me, Drew. Go on back to sleep kiddo.”

She yawned, blinking her eyes a couple of times. “Where’s Mommy?”

Damn it, he thought. He needed her to stay asleep. It’d make this so much easier. He needed to get back inside. Who knew how long the police would be? “She’s just inside, but we’re going to meet her in my house. Do you want to see Scout?”

At this, Becca seemed to relax into a tired smile, but then the sound of her Nana’s shrill and fretting voice cut through the night as she tried explaining to the police that she needed them here ASAP but had no idea what was going on. Drew realized this was going horribly wrong and terribly slow, and his mind was full of fear for Josie.

Then they all heard a loud sound come from the house, followed by what could only be glass shattering. His eyes met Eleanor’s and they both took a step instinctively toward the front porch, but then Drew motioned at her to stop. Becca’s eyes were wide and she was frightened now, and he couldn’t blame her. He took her by her Nana, taking the phone from Eleanor and saying into it, “This is Andrew Warren. I am the next-door neighbor. I think there’s been a break in and the intruder is still in the house along with the homeowner. There are loud sounds, and I have reason to believe the intruder is violent.”

He answered a couple of questions and then hung up, though the assurance that squad cars would be there soon didn’t do anything to lift the heaviness he felt. He turned toward a worried Eleanor.

“Here,” he said, trying to pass Becca into her arms. He needed to go help Josie. Now. “You two go in my house and wait. Lock the doors.”

Becca clung onto him, refusing to let go of his neck. “No!” She was shouting it over and over. “Stay with you. Hold me!”

“Becca, let go of him,” Eleanor said sternly. “We need to go.”

“NO!”

Drew tried shushing her again in as calm of a manner as he could. “It’s going to be fine, okay? You’re going to introduce your grandma to Scout and then your Mommy and I will be over in a minute.”

She only clung on harder, not willing to go without him.

“Shit,” he mumbled. He could see the fear and tears in her eyes, her voice getting louder and more frail. He was worried they would be heard from inside, and when he looked at Eleanor, he could see how scared she was, too.

But he couldn’t get Becca to let him go, and there was no way he could take her in there. He needed them both somewhere safe, out of harm’s way. He also didn’t have time for all of this. Then he remembered Josie’s face when she heard the tires. He knew what she’d want him to do – whatever it took to protect her daughter, even if it meant her suffering the consequences of the extra time.

“Alright,” he said. “Follow me. Let’s get inside my house and then I’ll come back.” He was already walking, Eleanor on his heels, the whole time Becca was already protesting his leaving them.

He barely felt relief once he had them inside the safety of his home, because all he could think about was how he needed to be next door helping Josie before any of the horrible scenes he was seeing in his head played out. He kept imagining opening the door to a pile of her blood, her collapsed in it, not breathing. Or worse, her stabbed over and over in the back or beaten until she wasn’t recognizable. His stomach did somersaults, a feeling of nausea washing over him.

He tried sitting Becca down, but she wouldn’t let go. “Becca, sweetie, I promise I will be back. Everything is okay.” He hoped he was making promises he could keep. She shook her head at him then buried her face into his neck, where he felt the dampness of tears cascade down, soaking his t-shirt. He patted her head. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I know it feels a little scary right now, but you have Elean–, er, your grandma, right here and Scout’s here too. I just need to go get your mom so we can all be here together. That’s all.”

She looked at him, and he felt the seriousness of the situation piercing straight through his heart when those brown eyes met his with such terror she asked, “Is Mommy okay?”

He had no fucking clue how to answer that question. Nothing in his life had prepared him to confront a situation like this.

He rolled his shoulders back, lifted his chin, and spoke as honestly as he could to this little girl who already meant the absolute world to him so quickly. “I’m going to do everything I can to make sure she is. Now I need you to stay here and wait for us to get back, okay?”

She nodded her head, though she was crying again. He passed her off to Eleanor, giving her a small nod, unsure of what he was trying to say with the gesture, but she apparently received the message because she returned it, then he gave them all one last glance over his shoulder before leaving through the front door, telling them to lock it on his way out.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 31

Josie scrambled up the stairs, the banister slippery under her grip from the blood sliding down her arm. She cut it on the broken lamp shards when Henry shoved her into the side table. Her other hand dripped its own fair share of red, staining the stairs as she tried taking them two at a time.

The moment he had paused between kicks in the kitchen to laugh at how pathetic she looked, she mustered all of her hate into enough energy to get up and try to run. She made it to the living room before he caught her, hitting her from behind before thrusting her body across the room. The sound of glass shattering filled the room.

As he'd stalked toward her, nothing but violence shining where his eyes used to be, she grabbed at the books that had spilled onto the floor and began chucking them at him. She wasn't going to go without a fight. It slowed him down as he deflected them with his hands, but it was only enough time for her to get back up on her wary feet.

He had stood there, taking her in as if he was finally seeing her for the first time. She wasn't much in comparison to his strong build, but she was fueled by anger, years of anger, and fear, not solely for her situation but for Becca. She wouldn't let him win, whatever that meant to him, which from the look on his face, she knew meant nothing short of her death.

Henry's eyes had seemed to dance over her stance, as though he was going to enjoy what came next. "What do you think you're going to do, sweetheart? Hit me? Ha! I'll give you one good shot. Do your best."

She didn't give in to his taunt. She didn't know what she planned to do, but she wasn't going to get close to him willingly. Then he lunged forward at her and she put all her power, core engaged like her softball days, into a right hook that landed solidly against his nose. The impact hurt her hand like a bitch, but it drifted away compared to the rest of the pain in her body and the adrenaline that was coursing through her. She hadn't given him time to look at the blood on his hand that he put to his nose, because she was already following the first punch with a second one from her left fist. It was

much less effective, but it was better than laying on the ground in the fetal position and getting the shit kicked out of her.

The shock of her fighting back must've passed because Henry's arm came swinging at her and though she tried to move, she wasn't fast enough. The blow hadn't landed her on the ground this time, but the tackle he made did. She had fallen hard on her back, her head slamming against the ground, his heavy body on top of her.

He wasn't talking to her anymore at that point, only laughing as the blood ran down his nose, coating his upper lip and sinking between his front teeth. As he wrapped his hands around her neck, cutting off the circulation of air coursing through her body, he ran his tongue across the blood on his mouth and smiled.

Panic surged through her. She could feel her lungs burning, needing air. Her throat stung and her eyes felt like they might bulge out of her skull, but no matter how hard she pulled at his arms, no matter how many times she hit him, twisted beneath his weight, or scratched at his hands, she couldn't free herself from the suffocation. Death by marriage, she had thought, hating this man with everything left in her.

In a last effort, she had flailed her arm back in hopes to get some strength to hit him again, but the stinging slice of something sharp had woken up a last sense of hope. She fumbled for the shard, grabbing the first one she could wrap her hand around, welcoming the newfound pain as a chance to rescue herself. Then she had driven it at the man trying to take her last breath away, and when it landed somewhere between his shoulder and neck, she finally felt the entrance to her throat open back up as his hands went to the stab wound.

She had gasped for air, coughing, her insides on fire, but she had to keep going. She had to get away from him. She had thrashed and kicked and hit until he was off her enough, between trying to avoid her attacks and remove the lamp piece from where it was sticking out and soaking his shirt with blood. The moment she was able to break free from under his weight, she'd gotten up and ran, stumbling and disoriented. She had looked back to see him coming and looked for the closest thing in sight, a vase she and Becca always filled with flowers from their walks, and she had grabbed it and thrown it at him. He ducked and it went fracturing into a thousand little pieces against the wall.

She had turned and sprinted for the staircase, unsure of where to go or what her plan was, but she knew if her mom was still outside with Becca, then the last thing she needed was to be anywhere near the front door. She had thought Drew caught on, though he looked completely confused and betrayed in the hall, yet whenever her mom's car pulled up, he had known to cover for her. That had to mean something.

Help was sure to be there any moment now. She only had to survive until it got there. Would he have known to call the cops? Surely he wouldn't come back himself.

The idea only sent panic and more adrenaline through her as she sprinted for her life up the stairs, but she wasn't fast enough and her hand couldn't get a good enough grip on the wooden rail from all the blood, so whenever Henry reached out for her leg, she couldn't maintain her balance and landed hard on the stairs, her chin radiating a sharp tingling through her jawline as it made contact on the landing.

Josie began kicking at his hands, trying to break free, scurrying up the rest of the stairs, Henry grabbing at her the entire time.

"You have nowhere to go," he spat, and she noticed the lamp shard was still embedded in him, the humorous joy was gone from his face, and all that remained was a menacing intention to put an end to her. "You're going to die either way, bitch, so you might as well quit making it harder for yourself."

The sound of the front door opening caught both of their attention and when Drew stepped through it, Josie's heart jumped into her throat. She felt a mixture of relief and pure terror. His eyes found hers, and he hated what he saw. She looked like a train ran her over, blood and bruises already marking her body. Then his eyes found those of the man only a couple feet from her, also covered in blood and looking disheveled and as dangerous as a poised snake ready to strike.

Before Drew could think what to do, Josie scrambled to her feet, the sounds of sirens slicing through the air, and just as quickly Henry took the remaining stair in a leap and maneuvered his arm around Josie's neck. He did it so quickly that she didn't have time to move away from him, and now she stared back down into Drew's eyes which were hard and directed right at Henry.

Drew raised his hands, hoping to somehow put the man at ease who held Josie at the top of the stairs. He couldn't bring himself to make eye contact with her again, because he knew he'd be overtaken by how scared he was of losing her.

"Just let her go. Whatever you want, I'm sure we can work it out." He took a step closer to the stairs, his hands still up. The sound of the sirens grew closer and he knew they'd be here any minute. He just needed to stall.

Henry scoffed. "Fuck you. The only thing I want is right here in my grasp." Josie could feel the hate radiating from him as the arm around her neck tightened. "Once I'm through with her, maybe you'll be next."

"Listen," Drew tried. "You don't want her. She's done nothing wrong. If Henry screwed you over, she had nothing to do with it." He was caught off guard by the harsh laughter that rang out from the man.

"You fucking fool," he said. "I am Henry."

Drew couldn't believe what he just heard. Of all things, that was the last of which he'd expected him to say. But how? Henry was dead. Before he could think of what to say next, he heard the loud arrival of several police cars, followed by doors shutting, blue and red lights flashing inside the house through the doorway, and the sounds of voices and footsteps. It felt like an eternity before the first uniformed officer broached the entryway, but the small space filled fast with several officers assessing the scene.

Drew's hands remained up as guns were drawn and pointed at him and Henry at the top of the stairs. He'd heard them shout their arrival and to put their hands up, but all he could do was watch Henry instead of look at them because it was evident he wasn't giving up that easily. An unwanted knot formed in his chest, threatening to shatter his very world at what might happen next.

"Put your hands up!" An officer shouted at Henry again, but he still didn't let his arm drop from Josie's neck.

She tried to move, pull his arm away, but he only tightened it. "Don't fucking move," he growled. She stopped, scared of what was going through his mind. It was over. The police were here. They had guns and they were pointed at them. Surely he didn't think he could get out of this? Then after another officer shouted and began to move toward the stairs, which Drew had moved away from as he was instructed to do, Henry reacted.

In an instant, he'd moved his arm from her neck and as she began to go forward to descend the stairs, he'd yanked her back again, though this time something sharp and painful was jabbed at her throat. He had finally jerked the shard from his shoulder, but now it was threatening her life, at the mercy of the man who she somehow had married. Til death do us part indeed, she thought, with a sick horror at her reality.

"Don't take another step or I'll slit her throat right here." She could feel the shake of his hand through the sharp glass at her neck, the little trickle of warm blood seeping down her throat. Everyone was at a standstill, and Josie realized this could very well be her last moment.

She heard one of the officers say, "Nobody move." Followed by another one reporting, "Not a clear shot." She'd seen enough crime movies and read enough books to know her outcome didn't look promising with that last statement. There seemed to always be collateral damage, and the only way she'd make it out of this alive was if Henry got to walk out that door a free man. Even then, though, she didn't trust him not to force her with him just so he could take her life anyway. He didn't care how it ended for her. She was merely a pawn for him to not get shot at this very moment.

Josie closed her eyes, picturing her sweet Becca from the moment she first held her to waving goodbye when she drove off with her mom yesterday, then she let the tears come out as she opened her eyes and looked at Drew.

She was going to fight. She wouldn't let him end it that easily.

"Tell her I love her." Josie's voice came out stronger than she expected, and it seemed to grab everyone's attention, who until this moment had been focused on Henry and not her, and then she moved. Swiftly reaching her hands up to grab Henry's wrist that was holding the glass shard at her throat, doing her best to twist it away from her, while she rammed her body into his. When she thought there was room, she leaned forward just a bit, unsuccessfully avoiding the sharp edge of glass and feeling a terrible pain as warm blood seeped down her neck. Then she rocked her head back to slam against his. Josie felt his arm loosen and pivoted out from under his grasp and tried to take the stairs.

Her heart was beating so fast that all she heard was its thunder in her ears, but then her head flung back in a painful whip as he snatched her by the hair and yanked her backward. She lost her footing, landing on the

stairwell and before he could reach down to grab her, she kicked him with her right foot, getting his knee, causing him to buckle down beneath her and giving her time to rise.

She tried not to think about the guns pointed at them, at the fact that she had no clue where her daughter was at this very moment, or that Drew was standing right downstairs, and then she hurled herself at him, her hands out, pushing with all the might she had left. Henry went flying backward, his arms flinging out grabbing at her wrist and she fell forward too.

He kept falling as he lost his grip on her blood-soaked hand and she caught onto the rail before landing at the bottom of the stairs with him.

Whenever she regathered herself and rose back up to a stand near the top of the stairs, the silence of the room hit her. She looked down and saw him. That monstrous, evil man was slumped on the ground on his back, his neck at an odd angle, and his body looking like it wanted to fold in half.

An officer moved closer and checked his pulse. "He's dead."

"Finally," Josie heard herself saying, then she walked down the stairs, stepped over his lifeless body, and threw herself into Drew's open arms.

Epilogue

Josie smiled at the moving truck parked next door as she pulled into the drive. She found the front door open except for the screen and wasn't at all surprised that it was unlocked. Her house was quiet, which meant Becca must be in the back yard. She passed through the kitchen, plopping her purse and a couple of grocery bags on the island before going out the back door.

The laughter and barking filled the air immediately, as did the sound of birds, lawnmowers, and the chatter of their new neighbors deciding where to put which boxes. She smiled, taking it all in.

It was a bright and sunny summer day, her daughter was now four, and a year had passed since the ugly disaster that took place next door. She would love to say they were fully healed, but no one comes out of that unscarred or unaffected.

It took several months to get everything sorted out, but one thing remained a fact. Henry was dead. With all of the eyewitnesses, it was evident that Josie acted out of self-defense and his death was not her intention. Although, it wasn't something she lost sleep over, which she sometimes questioned whether that made her a bit of a monster, too.

His crimes still had consequences that resulted in the authorities taking a big chunk of her safety net, but she didn't care. She didn't want anything that tethered her to him any longer. She did what she could to help them, by sharing the bits of details Henry had told her that night, though she knew it was all out of her hands as to what happened from there. She was okay with that. She wanted it all to be in the past.

She knew how lucky she'd been that the cops had arrived so quickly, something that she later learned was thanks to her neighbor Ellen, who had already called the police before Eleanor did. Apparently, she'd found the unfamiliar black SUV suspicious and called it in, having noticed it had been driving slowly through the neighborhood a lot lately. If it wasn't for her call and the police already headed in their direction, Josie didn't know how

different that night could have turned out. Others might consider Ellen a nosy busybody, but to Josie, she would always be a dear friend.

Becca had been pretty shaken up whenever her bruised and bloodied mom finally walked in the door that night, having refused to sleep until she saw her. Eleanor had been no better, keenly aware of the flashing lights and sirens next door, followed by an ambulance. Josie held Becca and they both cried until neither of them had anything left, her daughter falling asleep in her banged-up arms.

As Josie now stood there in her new back yard, admiring Drew, who had been nothing but a loving role in their lives this past year, he gave her a quick wave before continuing their game of freeze tag, which Becca was exasperated at Scout for not staying frozen. She knew he still had nightmares about that night, as did she, but she would always love him for choosing to put her daughter first. He'd been begging her to marry him just about every day the last year, and she kept laughing it off saying she didn't need marriage to be happy. Though she planned to say yes soon, because the truth was, she loved him and so did her daughter. She was ready for her happy ending, and they'd already been living together for months.

Her sister had been a surprising comfort this past year. She still threw judgment and passive-aggressive comments at Josie more often than not, but she had also shown her that more caring side lately. She never asked Josie about Henry or what she dealt with, but it was almost as if she could somehow understand Josie a little. It had begun to feel like Chelsea might be in her corner. She was definitely in Becca's. She had made a point to visit them often, bringing movie night snacks, books about bugs that could be found in the back yard, and manicure sets to do with her. It was nice to feel a spark of hope that she and her sister could be friends again one day. If nothing else, she knew Chelsea would always remain the best aunt.

As for her mom, Josie would like to think they were finally close now that the shocking truth and disastrous aftermath had come out, but the reality was that her mom couldn't help but ask her time and again what she was thinking by not telling anyone. Or reminding Josie how lucky she was that she wasn't dead due to her stupid decision to stay with Henry. Eleanor just couldn't wrap her mind around why she would've stayed or how she could've lied to them all for so long. It didn't help that everyone in her parents' town looked at them differently after the scandal of Henry's crimes

and faked death came out, followed by the ugly turn of events between him and his now-widowed spouse. She knew her mom would always blame and resent her, at least a little.

It was okay, though. Josie had never expected her mom to change, nor did she have hope for it. She didn't need their understanding or approval, something which they still didn't have for her decision to move her and Becca in with Drew, but then again, she didn't care and she didn't ask for their input. She knew all of her decisions and lies had consequences, and she was ready for them because, at the end of the day, they were all made from a place of love.

She ran to join her family on their summer day of tag, first scooping up her daughter to shower her in kisses. It was true, one day she'd have to fully explain to Becca what type of person her father was, and she prayed her daughter would never have to be in a position to understand why Josie did the things she did or why she lied. It was also true that her daughter would learn that it was her mother who took her father's life.

She couldn't protect her from all of the ugly in this world. She knew that now. But she could shower her with a love that was good, beautiful, and pure for as long as her daughter would let her.

Acknowledgements

I've come to realize that sitting at my computer to write a story is the easy part, but making sure that it's ready for my readers requires a constant pestering to my inner circle. Thank you to those who are in it.

With that, I'd also like to thank my sister for her keen awareness while reading over the plot structure, but also for her excitement and support that made doing the last round of edits feel like the week before Christmas. Thank you for catching the small details that I overlooked.

To my mom, I am constantly amazed and grateful for your capacity to hold space for so many people in your life. I know your plate is continuously full, yet you always have time to be my soundboard, provide selfless encouragement, continue to be my first set of eyes, and offer honest opinion. Thank you for being in my corner.

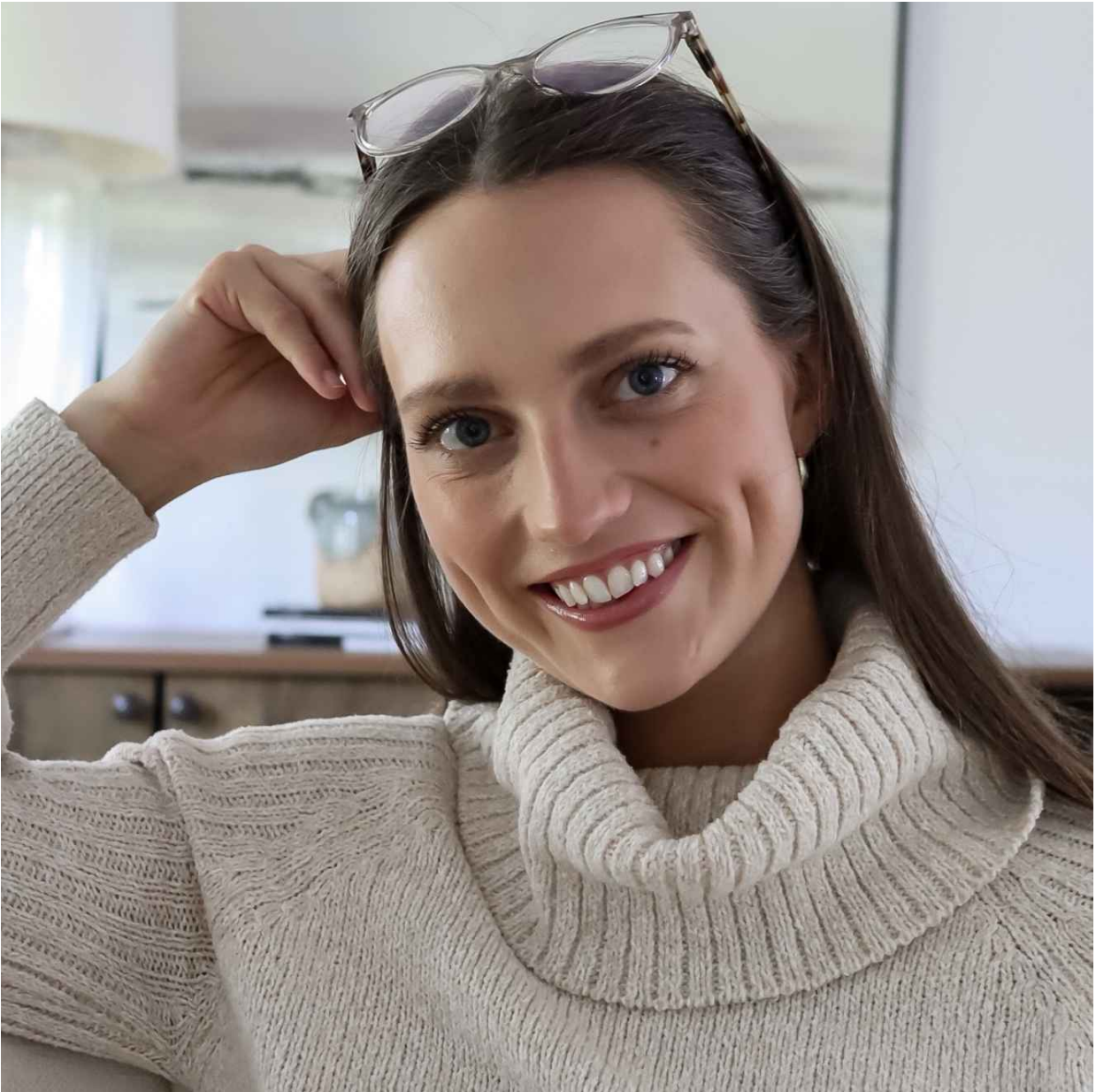
A big thanks will always go to my husband and daughter. My daughter for being that bright light in my life and my husband for supporting me on this journey. I love you both.

Lastly, I want to say thank you to my readers. I appreciate each and every one of you.

OceanofPDF.com

About The Author

Bella Perry



Bella Perry is a romance author who grew up and currently lives in the Midwest with her husband and daughter. Having moved a lot during her adult years, she enjoys exploring the fictional terrains of new settings and

homes for her plots. However, in her personal life, she enjoys her current balance between city life and rural roots. After diving into Human Resources, followed by Real Estate and Property Management, Bella decided to leave her day job to embrace motherhood. The one thing she never stopped doing was writing, and her passion continues as she shares her books with her incredible readers.

Subscribe to Bella's newsletter for updates and more novels.
www.BellaPerry.com

Bella loves to hear from her readers. Stay connected through social media, and please don't forget to leave a review on Goodreads and/or wherever you purchased your book.

@bellaperryauthor
Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok

OceanofPDF.com

Next Read

WHERE DID IT GO RIGHT?

by Bella Perry

A forced proximity contemporary romance between a hot and famous celebrity and a dedicated teacher coming off of a bad breakup. It will be a vacation to remember.

After patiently waiting years for a proposal, Slone Madison is shocked to find that her boyfriend's surprise party is far from anything she had expected. She decides it's time to end their relationship and take that long-awaited vacation by herself, one she'd been promised for a long time. Little did she know her week of paradise would lead her on a whirlwind path with Derek Billings, a famous actor who is figuring out his next career move and future as his ex has made destroying him her newfound mission – unless, of course, he would be willing to take her back.

Slone wouldn't have thought a last-minute vacation could turn into the never-ending web of lies and surprises that she finds herself in back home. Although, her actual home was subleased by her ex-boyfriend, Brad Roberts, without her even knowing. Forced to return his calls and visit him in the city to retrieve her belongings, she must face the situation she had tried to leave behind.

Realizing how much Slone means to him and determined to win her heart again, Brad is thankful when she shows up on his doorstep. He's ready to give her what she always wanted and is hoping to get their life back to normal, but he wasn't ready to face new obstacles when he discovers his favorite celebrity now has his eyes on her as well. How much can one week impact a person? Brad has no intentions of letting Slone find out.

Meanwhile, Derek must find a way to navigate his next career move, his ex's vendetta, and avoid further headlines, while trying to forget about the most memorable woman and trip of his life.

When anything can happen, to what lengths will they go to secure their future? How much can change? And what are they willing to sacrifice?

Get your copy of WHERE DID IT GO RIGHT? wherever you get your books.

OceanofPDF.com