



A Journey Spared

JACKSON'S STORY

Book One in the Journey Series

A Journey Spared
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Warning: The Journey Series is an open door romance and contains several potential triggers including coarse language, suicide, PTSD, loss, rape, and violence. Please proceed with caution. Jackson's story has hardships, pain, heartbreak, and raw emotions. But there is even more inspiration, hope, sweetness, perseverance, and unconditional love. Enjoy!

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*To my husband for his patience and encouragement
while I took this journey to write my first book series
and realize a dream.*

*To Lindsay for her friendship, great advice, generous
giving of time, and love for this story.*

The Journey Series by Alexandra Grace
(Jackson's Story)

A JOURNEY SPARED

A JOURNEY TO LOVE

A JOURNEY HOME

Chapter One



There was a new softness in the air, or at least Jackson hadn't noticed it when he left the airport. *A little welcoming to ease the blow*, he thought with disdain.

Looking out the passenger side window of his ride, a safe and ordinary compact car, he squinted in the bright mid-day sun and growled at the cheerful colors all around him. The lush grass, the wildflowers in the highway median, blooming cherry trees, and the clear blue sky.

It was the quintessential spring day in Virginia, and he hated every last bit of it.

Ominous gray clouds and a rolling thunderstorm would have been a better match for both his mood and the shambles his life had become. Still, the beautiful April morning paid him no mind. It was ironic, he mused, since not that long ago, he would have given anything to be ignored.

“Jax.”

Surprised, Jackson turned toward his friend and fellow Marine in the driver's seat.

“Where were you just now? I said your name three times.”

“Sorry.” Jackson looked down at the small wooden box in his hands and realized he had been squeezing it hard enough for his hands to ache. Dropping it on his lap, he rubbed his fingers. “I was thinking that I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be here.”

“I know,” was all Aiden could say. He’d seen it countless times in others and knew what Jackson would suffer next. Debilitating pain, suffocating guilt, confusion, and roaming without purpose through the days. Some turned to alcohol or drugs. Many disappeared without a trace.

That’s why Aiden got out before he lost every sense of who he was. Four years of his life were spent in the Marines, most serving under Jackson, and that was enough. He was proud of his service, grateful even, but he never intended to make the military a lifelong career or let it define him as Jackson had.

“Remember when we arrived in Afghanistan the first time?” he asked, hoping to turn Jackson’s attention away from the raw emotions he was struggling to control and understand. “We’d barely wiped the sand out of our eyes before we were under attack. I was terrified, and you had no patience for it. You told me that the world would not wait for me to decide what type of man I wanted to be.”

Tuning out, Jackson focused on the passing landscape outside his window. He knew where Aiden’s impromptu storytime was heading, and he wasn’t impressed.

Undeterred, Aiden continued to fill the awkward silence and to make his point. “At the time, I wanted to punch you, but I’ll never forget it. I’m grateful for what it taught me. After that, whenever things got unbearably difficult as they often did, and I could feel myself slipping into the darkness—” he paused when Jackson’s gaze cut to his.

Since his brush with death, Jackson was acutely acquainted with unforgiving darkness and how it can consume the mind. But he wasn't in the mood to be motivated or inspired and wondered with frustration if he would ever be again.

When Jackson didn't look away as expected, Aiden continued. "I had to make the conscious decision to be the person I needed to be to survive and keep the darkness where it belonged. This is your moment, Jax."

Aiden flashed his trademark toothy smile over his shoulder when Jackson had nothing to say, then returned his attention to the road.

As the pair made their way down Virginia's I-95 toward Richmond, Aiden attempted to keep Jackson talking and his mind distracted by asking questions. He asked about high school and his traveling adventures with BMW, his nickname for Jackson's three closest friends and fellow Marines, Billy Barnes, Will Mason, and Josh Wilson.

Jackson had only fond memories of high school with his friends. The four of them were inseparable and had played football together since they were nine years old. Jackson also ran track in the spring since running came so easy to him, and it kept him in shape for football.

Billy and Josh played baseball in the off season, and Will spent every minute he could chasing girls. How Will managed to attract so many beautiful girls with seemingly little effort was often a topic of animated debate, but, of course, none of them complained.

Billy and Josh were happy to take advantage of Will's talents and allow him to do all the work. Send Will into any situation, and he'd soon return with a hoard of stunning females. Jackson would indulge in the game sometimes, but girls and relationships didn't fit into the lifestyle and future he'd carefully planned for himself.

All he wanted was a lifelong military career and to satisfy his insatiable hunger for adventure. He wanted to travel the world and make a difference. To live freely and gain experiences, not possessions or wealth.

He was grateful it was a dream all three of his friends shared and it took little convincing to get them to join the service alongside him. After graduation, they spent every free moment living as they wanted. Free and together.

Whenever they were on leave, they traveled instead of going home. They toured Europe, Asia, South America, and even Africa with no itineraries or expectations. They explored the land and found thrilling new adventures by immersing themselves in the culture. When they grew tired of exploring and doing things their mothers would never approve of, they drank too much and camped wherever they passed out.

They were young, daring, and reckless, but they were exactly who they wanted to be.

Easy conversations of past adventures ended, and Jackson's anxiety began when the pair reached the outskirts of Richmond and took the exit toward Jackson's childhood home. He rolled his shoulders, but no amount of stretching could prepare him for returning to the one place he'd avoided for the past eight years.

Aiden followed Jackson's directions through several turns until the road narrowed to a private gated entrance surrounded by a line of meticulously trimmed shrubbery and trees. Aiden pulled the car up to the black box that housed the keypad and punched in the code Jackson provided.

The gate hitched into motion.

"Something funny?" Aiden asked when Jackson laughed.

"It's been almost fifteen years. You'd think the old bastard would've changed the security code."

"Maybe he wanted to make sure you could always come home."

Jackson scoffed but couldn't blame him for his optimism. Aiden had a profound respect for and close relationship with his father—something Jackson wanted once with his own when he was young and oblivious.

As the gate inched open at the speed of dripping molasses, Jackson's thoughts drifted to his beautiful mother, Jacqueline. The code was her birthday.

He was in the seventh grade when she died and desperately needed his father for comfort. But the Great Grayson Vane was unreachable, and their already fragile relationship turned volatile and vanished before his mother was in the ground.

Less than a month after the funeral, Grayson moved into a penthouse apartment downtown. He rarely stopped by the estate to see his only son, and if it weren't for Eleanor, the estate's caretaker, Jackson would have ended up in foster care or fending for himself at twelve years old.

Suddenly, the car moved, bringing Jackson's focus back to the present and he directed Aiden where to park.

"Be right there, Jax," he promised.

Jackson leaned back against the headrest and waited the few moments it took for Aiden to appear beside the car. Then, he grunted out his disgust for the fate he'd been dealt with a push on the door and accepted Aiden's help into the wheelchair.

There is no other choice, now is there? he lectured himself. The sheer embarrassment was worse than the excruciating pain he endured with every movement of his legs. It was the same as jabbing at his heart with a dull dagger since he despised nothing more than being dependent on others, especially for something as basic as getting out of a car.

"All right, Jax. Let's get you home."

While Aiden pushed Jackson up the driveway, he admired the dignified colonial house, but it was more of a mansion by Aiden's standards. A stunning example of what history and wealth could buy, and a sight not easily forgotten.

The smokey gray stone covering the entire two-story structure contrasted against the dark green shutters, manicured lawn, and overflowing flower beds and gardens. The center had a large, porch flanked by wide white columns and an extended wing on each side. Wisteria growing along the inside corners was blossoming wildly in lively shades of purple and blue. The windows glinted in the sunlight, and it was easy to see every flawless detail had been labored over with love, courtesy, and commitment.

“This will work,” Jackson finally said when they came to the small roundabout with a garden of shaped bushes and flowers circling a central water fountain.

To Aiden’s relief, there was a ground-level entrance door on the side of the house and headed toward it. They didn’t get far before the screen door flew open, revealing a plump older woman with dark gray hair. She wore a white apron over her yellow dress, and her hair was neatly tied in a bun on top of her head with a thin blue ribbon.

“Hi, Eleanor,” Jackson greeted.

A shaky grin was all he could assemble as she stood motionless in front of him, her hands clasped over her mouth. It took a moment for her to wade through an ocean of shock, relief, and emotion, but when she did, tears sprang to her eyes. Rushing to him, she bent to wrap him in a hug.

Now, he was home.

She took Jackson’s face in her hands and kissed his forehead and both cheeks before straightening to study him, her hands on her hips. “You could have told me you were coming back today.”

“Surprise.”

“Best one ever. I’ve missed you so.” In looking him over, her heart sank. He was skin and bones, slumped inside his wheelchair with long hair and a beard. But saddest of all, his eyes were dull and hallow. Where was her Jackson? “You’re too

skinny,” she complained to keep her worries from showing. “Didn’t they feed you over there?”

“Hospital food makes me lose by appetite and since it wasn’t your cooking, it wasn’t worth eating.”

“Such the charmer.” Pulling herself away, Eleanor turned her attention to the man standing behind him with a satisfied smirk on his face. “Who’s this handsome fella?”

“I’m Aiden, Jackson’s chauffeur, corporal, and friend.”

Aiden reached out his hand, but she stepped around the wheelchair instead and swallowed him in her arms, squeezing the air from his lungs.

“Any friend of Jackson’s is a friend of mine.” She gave him a loud kiss on the cheek. “Please come in and relax a bit. You must be worn out from your flight.”

Still recovering, Aiden folded his arms and leaned on the back of the wheelchair. “You could have warned me,” he whispered to Jackson with teeth clenched.

“And miss out on seeing that look on your face? Not a chance.”

Eleanor held the door for Aiden to push Jackson inside, then led them through a large mudroom and butler’s pantry on the way to the eat-in kitchen. The antique off-white cabinets surrounded the bright, cheerful room and were topped by matching marble countertops with tan, gray, and gold specks. The massive island in the center took up half the space and provided bar seating for four.

Following Eleanor down an adjacent hallway, Aiden tried to take in the magnificence of the Vane estate. Oil paintings, Oriental rugs, sculptures, and vintage furniture. His eyes couldn’t move fast enough. Then, there was the curved staircase, layered crown molding, original wide plank hardwood floors, and the largest crystal chandelier he’d ever seen. All of it was so spectacular, extravagant, and nothing like Jackson.

Aiden had only known Jackson as his unyielding sergeant who took no shit and could drink anyone under the table. He never got the slightest bit tipsy, and Aiden both respected and despised him for it. Too many times, he took on the challenge only to wake up hours later naked and covered in mud or soaked in piss—courtesy of imaginative Marines who could never let a good drunk go unpunished. As if conditioning in the Goddamn desert with a hangover wasn't bad enough.

Oh, and that was another reason Aiden spent most of his free time cursing Jackson. He never fatigued. He could run for hours without tiring, and he tortured his squad with the same regimen. *Bastard*, Aiden accused with complete admiration.

After depositing Jackson in a bedroom as Eleanor instructed, Aiden returned to the car to retrieve his bag.

"Please stop worrying, Eleanor," Jackson insisted. She was fussing around the room, moving breakables and small pieces of furniture to clear a path for the damn wheelchair he was strapped to. "I'm not dangerous in this thing."

"I know. I only want you to be comfortable."

"I'll be fine." At least he hoped to be one day.

With a long sigh, she sat on the bed to face him. Everyone that knew him, understood how much Jackson loved being a Marine, but she knew it best. They'd talked about it at length since he was a boy. It was every part of who he was as his friends were. Acceptance of what he lost and his new circumstances would not come easy. She knew this and recognized the sorrow in his eyes. But it wasn't only the military life he was missing.

"When we first heard what happened, I thought we'd lost you." She lowered her gaze and pulled a tissue out of her apron pocket for the tears that were sure to follow. "We had no idea where you were. All we knew was what we heard from others, and while it wasn't much, none of it was good."

She blotted at her eyes. “I’m so sorry about Josh and Billy. I know how much they meant to you. Such sweet boys.” She shook her head then caught a glimpse of Aiden in the doorway.

“I’m going to head out. I’ve got a couple more hours of driving ahead of me,” Aiden said awkwardly and crossed the room. “Jax, I know you’re going to get back to your old self soon. There’s nothing that can keep you down for long.”

If only he could believe that, Jackson thought. He was never one to give up, but at that moment, he couldn’t see a point in trying.

“Sergeant Vane, it was an honor to serve with you.” Aiden clicked his heels together and held a formal salute. Then, he looked down at Jackson with his eyes only and grinned.

“There’s no need for that.”

Aiden dropped his hand and shook Jackson’s. “Glad you’re alive, Jax. Now, stay that way.”

Not having the words, Jackson nodded and returned his gaze to the window. Several minutes later, he watched Aiden’s car disappear around the bend, symbolizing the end of his life as he once knew it.

Although his heart was beating and his lungs still taking in air, everything was broken, and nothing was as it should be.



After escorting Aiden out, Eleanor returned to Jackson’s room but didn’t enter. Instead, she stopped in the doorway and watched him stare out the window, disregarding her presence.

She had so many questions.

But mostly, she wanted to know why he insisted on going through the surgeries and recovery alone? She would have gladly dropped everything, swallowed her fear of flying over the ocean, and stayed by his side for as long as it took. But he was unselfishly hard-headed, as usual.

She also wanted to know what happened in that desert, and most importantly, how was he managing now? She was worried about him, but no matter how much she wanted him to talk to her, he clearly wasn't ready.

To give him space, she went to the kitchen to start dinner. An extra plate would be set at the table that night, and her heart was full. After cooking all of Jackson's favorites, they would sit down at the dining room table, something they hadn't done in years, and enjoy a meal together.

When he was younger, she and Jackson would eat breakfast and dinner together every day, and he'd tell her about his activities, friends, and ambitions. *He was such a good boy*, she thought affectionately. Always used his manners, treated her and others with kindness, and followed her rules and instructions to the letter. After all, he came out of the womb with the military in his DNA, his heart on his sleeve, and energy that wore her smack out.

His little legs were always on the go as a baby, and not surprisingly, his first steps were a run. When he got older, he was always active, and sometimes, she wished he would slow down for a minute. Enjoy a movie or a board game, sip tea on the porch, something more her pace, but that wasn't Jackson.

He wanted to run, see, experience, and she encouraged him to do whatever made him happy. She'd helped find materials for the things he wanted to build; bandaged scraped knees and elbows when he'd stop long enough for her to see them; and kept a pitcher of cold water on the porch for when he got thirsty.

But she refused to compromise or waver on one thing. He was to be cleaned up and sitting at the dining room table by six every evening for dinner. Evenings were for recharging and spending time with family, she insisted, despite his parents rarely joining them.

Jacqueline usually had somewhere to be, Eleanor fumed as she poured her signature marinade over the raw chicken.

Grayson, of course, had no patience for family dinners or anything involving his son. He preferred Jackson to stay out of the way and out of sight, and Jackson was happy oblige so long as he could go outside.

What started out as an escape from his father when he was young, soon evolved into a lifestyle. A life Jackson adored and was undoubtedly mourning, along with the loss of his two friends and career.

With a sigh, she placed the chicken in the oven and retrieved a handful of raw asparagus from the basket she kept in the pantry. Jackson was clearly hurting, and while she rinsed and chopped, she prayed. She asked God to help Jackson heal and for Grayson open his arms and heart to his son.

A fresh start and a new, positive vibe in the house would do them all some good. But she knew Grayson well and wouldn't be surprised, despite her pleas and prayers, if he had the opposite reaction.

Alone in his room, Jackson removed the smooth wooden box he slipped into the side pocket of the wheelchair when they arrived and pulled himself onto the bed. He hadn't opened it since it was given to him that morning at a small ceremony in Washington, D.C., and tried not to despise the contents.

He wanted to take pride in what it represented, but all he could muster was a profound desire to smash and bury it. How could something so small pack such a devastating punch to the gut?

To get it over with, he flipped open the lid. Sunlight streaming through the double windows reflected in the gold edges of the metal and stabbed at his eyes. Absently, he traced the gentle heart shape with his finger and thought of the day that earned him the so-called award.

It was no different than every other morning in the unforgiving desert. Physical training at five, lukewarm MREs for breakfast, and breaking down camp before starting the day's mission. He'd never forget the lively conversations he had with his friends or the sound of their laughter over the clank of metal as they loaded the Humvees.

Later, while traveling to their destination, the distant horizon vibrated in the heat until the sunset painted the endless sky in indescribable colors. He could still smell the stinging combination of diesel, sweat, and gunpowder, and remember the feel of soft desert sand on his skin. Those were memories to be grateful for.

But he would give anything to forget how the missiles bleached the black night and launched his vehicle over a tidal wave of sand. Blinded, all he could do was ride the crest into the endless void and hope he was deposited in one piece. The brutal wave tossed him and others across the cabin like a pinball, his bones snapping on contact. He screamed but heard nothing.

The silence provided a reprieve, but it was fleeting. While the vehicle crashed to the ground and rolled, shards of glass rained over him and sliced both fabric and skin. Sand mixed with open wounds. His entire body burned with a pain he'd never experienced.

Then, the sound of rapid gunfire echoed across the vast terrain, replacing the ringing in his ears. Frantic, he felt around for his rifle, only to discover he was covered in a thick liquid, either oil or blood or both. Everything he touched was boiling hot and gritty.

When he tried to sit up, his head took off, spinning out of control, and his stomach rolled. Blood ran into his eyes and mouth. Smoke filled his lungs, choking him and burning his throat. The last thing he heard before he fell into the dark

obscurity of death were the shrieks of his brothers in pain. If it was over, at least they would die together.

That was the chaos he relived in vivid detail—fear, pain, heartbreak, and helplessness clashed at debilitating levels.

Here we go again, he thought when the freight train slammed into his head. In one fluid motion, he slapped the box closed and threw it inside the bedside table drawer. He didn't need another tangible reminder of what he'd lost sitting around in plain sight. He had enough of those already.

Lying back, he shut a pillow over his face and begged for the blinding pain in his temples to ease soon. The migraines usually started with no warning, but the persistent pulsating would only last an hour if he could find a dark, quiet space to wait it out. Each time, he tried to determine the trigger to prevent future attacks, but he had a sinking feeling that everything was a trigger these days.

Damn, he hated the dark quiet.

As he waited, he tried to focus on the creaks and moans of an old house settling for the night instead of the war raging in his head. It was much quieter than the barracks and infinitely more soothing than his hospital room. Incessant beeps, carts rolling up and down halls, and the never-ending conversations of nurses outside his door. He preferred almost any noise over the clatter of a hospital at work.

Annoyed, he tried to redirect his thoughts back to the house. It had been eight years since he last stepped foot inside his childhood home. He'd rarely went to Richmond when he was on leave, and when he did, Eleanor would meet him in the city for lunch or dinner.

Although, if he was being honest, the house wasn't the issue. He had many fond memories there. The problem was the man who owned it.

Grayson had rejected, ignored, harassed, and disappointed him too many times to count. He wanted nothing to do with his son, and Jackson had come to grips with that at an early age. No. If Jackson was ever going to have a relationship with his father, the effort would not be his. He grew tired of that one-sided chess match over a decade ago.

Damn it. Having his father in his thoughts was not helping. Once again, he redirected his concentration and heard Eleanor humming as she cooked. The familiar sound soothed him until a slamming door catapulted his heart into his throat.

Startled, he pushed up to an elbow, then heard muffled voices coming from a nearby room. As the conversation turned heated, he tried to determine if he recognized any of the voices. Then, he remembered he couldn't care less.

Throwing himself back against the pillow, he let out a long, shuttered breath. At least the throbbing in his head had lessened to a dull roar and something he could manage. Headaches were the new normal, but he didn't bother with painkillers. After having them pumped into his veins consistently in the hospital, he welcomed being able to feel again. Even if the only sensation he got now was pain.

A few moments later, the screen door slammed, followed by a roar of an engine and the screech of tires taking off down the driveway. Well, the unidentified visitor was leaving either in a hurry or in anger.

Good riddance.

It was his first night back, and he was not in the mood to entertain visitors or pretend everything he'd been through hadn't changed him. Placing his arm over his eyes, he attempted to relax and get back that elusive relaxation he found earlier when a timid knock sounded on the door.

"Jackson, sweetie." Eleanor opened the door and stood framed in it.

He shot up. “Is everything okay?” he asked, recognizing the concern in her voice and remembering the abrupt departure of the unidentified guest. But he’d be completely useless if she needed him and that was another dagger through the chest.

“Yes, sweetie. Everything’s fine.”

Sitting on the bed, she laid her hand on his, surprising him. She was right to be worried. Poor boy on edge as he was, and she couldn’t help feeling sorry for him. Although, if he knew she felt that way, he would hate her for it. So, she altered her tone.

“I was wondering if you were hungry, dear. I made your favorite—roasted chicken and asparagus with garlic potatoes.”

At the thought of eating real food, Jackson’s stomach rumbled.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Eleanor slapped her leg and stood up. “Now, let’s get you out of this bed and some food in your belly. You need it.”

He allowed her to help him into the wheelchair. Assistance from her didn’t sting quite as badly.

“Well, that’s what four months in a hospital bed will do to you.” He tried to make light of it for her benefit, but it was another touchy subject.

His entire adult life, Jackson prided himself on his fitness routine. Five days a week, he’d rise at dawn and run ten to fifteen miles, stopping several times along the way to work in some calisthenics. He ate healthy and was in the best shape of his life.

Now, he was bound to a wheelchair after four surgeries to repair his damaged bones. Doctors weren’t optimistic that he’d ever walk again. The old Jackson would have said ‘bullshit.’ The long journey of physical work would have been a welcomed challenge. But life was different now, and his motivation was lackluster at best.

Some days, it took all the strength he had not to end his suffering for good. Part of him was already buried with his friends six feet under a mound of anger, sadness, and regret.

Inescapable pain replaced his reasons for living. But every time the thought crept into his mind, so did the faces of the people he loved—Eleanor, Will, Josh, Billy, and their parents.

The Jackson they knew would never give up. He would fight, crawl, claw, do whatever was necessary to live life to the fullest, and he couldn't bear to disappointment any of them. That would be worse than the pain. Worse than death. He was living for them, trying to take advantage of this second chance. After all, he'd survived when so many others hadn't.

But why was that? Why were he and Will the only ones spared in the blasts? It was the question that haunted him most.

"Someone joining us?" he asked when they reached the dining room and saw the six white candles placed evenly down the center of the long, mahogany table. Eleanor always decorated with candles when guests were expected for dinner.

"No, not tonight." Frustrated with herself, she rushed around Jackson and gathered up the plates, silverware, cloth napkin, and glass for the third setting.

"Eleanor, who was here earlier?"

She paused at the question but didn't answer and continued resetting the table to her liking. "Let's get you settled."

He said nothing as she removed a chair, pushed the wheelchair to the table, and set the brake. But when she started toward the kitchen, he gently took hold of her arm.

"Who was here, Eleanor? Who is no longer coming for dinner?"

"I wanted to do something nice to celebrate your return home. I've missed you so much. I'm sorry, Jackson. I didn't mean to upset you." Tears spilled down her soft cheeks.

He released her arm, angry with himself for making her cry.

"So, Grayson came home, found out I was here, got angry, and left to avoid the inconvenience."

It was the reaction he expected from his father and why he wished he had somewhere else to go. The transformative family

reunion Eleanor dreamed about was never going to happen. Grayson Vane had no interest in playing dad to a 26-year-old disabled veteran. But he'd never wanted a role in Jackson's life, and his current situation wouldn't change that, except their inevitable run-ins were potentially more hazardous now. This would be the first time Jackson would face his father as an adult and well-equipped to defend himself.

"Jackson," she began, overwhelmed with disappointment.

"Dinner smells delicious, Eleanor. Let's eat. I want to hear about all you've been up to since we last spoke."

She smiled down at him, understanding he needed to focus on something other than his father, and hurried to the kitchen to collect the food. After a few quick trips, her eyes were dry, and dinner was displayed perfectly on the table in beautiful serving dishes of varying colors and sizes. Candles still flickered only for him.

Over the next hour, they ate, talked, and enjoyed being back together again. Eleanor updated him on her daughter and grandchildren in southern Virginia and how she hoped to visit them soon. She didn't mention her son-in-law, Jackson noticed, but he wasn't surprised. Jackson had never liked him, and it was painful to watch Eleanor constantly searching for the good in him. There wasn't any.

To ensure her son-in-law didn't enter the conversation, she quickly changed the subject and told Jackson about the vacation she took last June to see her sisters in Maryland. She also had her rooms repainted a cheerful yellow and planted another garden beside the back porch.

"I like to stay busy. It gets pretty lonely sometimes."

"What about the man of the house?" Jackson couldn't say his name a second time.

"You know Grayson lives at the apartment full time. I only see him when he wants something or throws a party here, so

that's plenty enough for me. Plus, he isn't very chatty unless he brings company. Then, it's just him showing off."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "Eleanor, why haven't you left? You don't deserve the way he treats you."

"This is my home, sweetheart, and I have nowhere else to go. Heather has her own life in Stony Creek. I'd be in the way or twiddling my thumbs there." She shrugged and leaned back in her chair. "At least I have a purpose here and the hard labor keeps me young and fit." She kept her gaze on Jackson until a deep belly laugh snorted out.

"It was a valiant effort."

"I tried to say it with a straight face." She wiped the happy tears from her face before another laughing fit took over.

When, she leaned on the table to catch her breath, Jackson patted her hand. "Maybe next time you can pull it off."

"I doubt it. It's about the same odds as your father giving up his work, whiskey, or women."

"I thought he preferred brandy."

"I was being dramatic, deary. Try to keep up."

Jackson held up a hand and grinned. "Brain's a little slower these days."

"You do look tired," she observed when Jackson sunk into his thoughts.

"I'm still on London time, I guess."

"In that case, I propose we continue catching up tomorrow. You need some sleep."

"That would be nice. Dinner was wonderful, Eleanor. Better than a five-star restaurant."

"You flatter me, and I love you for it." She helped him move away from the table, then pointed him toward the doorway.

"Eleanor," he said and looked over his shoulder. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetie. I'll see you in the morning. If there's anything you need, please holler."

Chapter Two



Early the following morning, while Jackson stared at the ceiling, wondering if he'd ever get a good night's sleep again, the house phone rang. Eleanor answered it from the kitchen.

"Yes, he's here. Sure. One moment, and I'll get him," he heard her say above the sound of her hasty footsteps on the hardwood floors.

"Jackson, sweetie," she called through the door before turning the knob. "It's your doctor calling."

Adjusting the pillow, he sat up and accepted the phone. Still nothing from the leg department, he noticed with a sigh.

"Hi, Doc."

"Jackson, so good to hear your voice."

The familiar British accent boomed through the receiver. Dr. Evans had the distinct and commanding voice of a drill instructor converted into a kindergarten teacher, and Jackson missed him deeply. They had grown close over Jackson's last month in the hospital, but the journey hadn't been easy. Jackson

had been angry, uncooperative, and preferred to be left alone to wallow in his misery, but Dr. Evans wasn't easily swayed. He stayed by Jackson's side, finally winning him over with patient persistence.

"How are you?"

"I've been better," Jackson answered honestly. He'd never been successful at hiding his true feelings from Dr. Evans, and after a while, he stopped trying.

"Understandable. All the nurses miss you around here."

"Ha," was all Jackson could say, but the old joke wasn't funny. He loathed both the dependency and the attention.

"Anyway, I have a list of physical therapists in your area, and I want you to set up an appointment this week. You need to start working those muscles and get the blood flowing. I can email them to you. What's your address?"

"I could give it to you, but I no longer have a cell phone or computer to check it. I've been out of commission for too long."

"What about a pen and paper?"

Jackson quickly scanned the room. "Sorry, Doc."

"Fine. I'll send it to you tomorrow. Now, get with the century, you damn caveman." Dr. Evans laughed then hung up without waiting for a response.

Smiling, Jackson shook his head and set down the phone. "Thanks a lot, Doc," he murmured under his breath as Eleanor appeared in the doorway.

"Eleanor, do you have plans today?" Swinging his legs off the bed, Jackson pulled the wheelchair close.

"Nothing that can't wait." She crossed the room to hold the chair steady for Jackson to slide into it. "Is there something I can do for you?" she asked, pushing him out the door.

"I realized that I need some things. Would you mind driving me to a few stores?"

"Of course not. You know how much I love shopping."

After a hearty breakfast of vegetable omelets, bacon, and fresh fruit, the pair climbed into the SUV Jackson's father kept in the garage. The big trunk would make it easy to get the wheelchair in and out.

"He prefers his fancy little sports car. I have no idea why he bought this monstrosity," Eleanor complained and heaved herself inside. The vehicle still smelled new, but dust covered the hood. She gave Jackson a wide smile before pushing the button to open the garage door. "Ready?"

"As ready as I can be."

"Good. But let's make sure to get a heavy-duty razor while we're out. That unruly beard of yours is freaking me out."

"Agreed."

He couldn't wait to get rid of the facial hair. He hadn't shaved since the morning of the incident and every strand was a reminder of what he'd been through and lost.

After three hours of shopping, they stopped by their favorite restaurant for lunch. It was a spot they frequented when Jackson was still in high school and in town while on leave. Despite being crowded for the lunch rush, Jackson and Eleanor were seated immediately at a table by the front windows.

"Welcome back," the waitress sang cheerfully and set down their drinks without them having to order. "It's great to see you again."

Amused, Eleanor watched the girl's eyes lock onto Jackson as they always did.

"Do you know what you want to order today, or do you need a few minutes?"

Eleanor requested a few minutes and continued watching the waitress as she reluctantly scurried away and huddled in the corner with her co-workers. She looked back at their table but never noticed Eleanor—she was completely invisible with Jackson around.

“What’s so funny?” Jackson asked, suspicious of Eleanor’s smile since he hadn’t said a word.

“You didn’t notice our waitress undressing you with her eyes?” She couldn’t help herself. Young lust was such a glorious thing.

With a huff, he ignored her and returned to the menu.

Although he was experienced and educated in the ways of the world, he was completely oblivious to so many things, including how beautiful he was. It was one of the many qualities that made him special. Not only did he have an attractive face and the most incredible blue eyes that made women stop in their tracks, he also had a beautiful soul. He was humble and kind, selfless and strong, and he loved with his entire heart.

More times than she could count, she’d witnessed women fumble over themselves around him. Because he never noticed, she often recounted every detail of the women’s reflex reactions. Of course, he’d immediately dismiss it and tell her she was crazy, then try unsuccessfully to redirect the conversation. It was quite entertaining.

Before she could tease him again, or even read the menu, for that matter, the young waitress returned to take their orders. Couldn’t keep herself away for long, Eleanor joked to herself.

“So, tell me, my boy,” Eleanor began when they were alone and laid her hand on Jackson’s. “Do you know what you’re going to do next?”

He looked down at their hands—his dark and rough from years of sun and training and hers weathered from age and hard work—and realized he hadn’t been touched by someone he cared about in so long. Although he was surrounded by hospital staff for the past four months, he’d never felt lonelier there—no visitors, no family or friends who understood him, no one except Dr. Evans to talk to. But that had been his choice, hadn’t it?

With a sigh, he returned his attention to Eleanor. “To be honest, I have no idea. I’m twenty-six years old, washed-up with no real-world skills, and no working legs. What prospects could I possibly have?”

“Now, you listen here, child. You are anything but washed up.” It broke her heart to see him so down on himself. He was happy and hopeful before combat stripped it from him. But on her watch, he was not going to stay that way. “From here on out, you’re going to get up every morning and thank the good Lord that He spared your life in that desert. He is giving you a lesson in perseverance, and you are going to listen. You have your entire life ahead of you. If you put your mind to it, you will learn to walk again and find your new purpose in life. If anyone can do it, you can.” She gave his hand a squeeze, then sat back in her chair, arms crossed, and proud of herself.

Her words cut sharply, and he wanted to believe her. He’d do anything to forget, turn off the memories, and find happiness again. He just couldn’t see the path that would take him there.

Gauging him, she decided to take another route. “What about sex?”

Jackson choked on the water he was drinking and coughed to clear his lungs. “Jesus, Eleanor!” Snatching up his napkin, he wiped his lips and glared at her. Were there no boundaries? “Where did that come from?”

“Well, I’m not a prude. I know that men sometimes need a little to get their juices flowing.” She smiled at the dumbfounded look on his face. “Our waitress is cute and has an eye for you. Maybe you should ask her out.”

“Absolutely not,” he could no longer stifle a laugh. “You’re crazy, you old bat.”

Thankfully, their food arrived and diverted the direction of their bizarre conversation. While they ate, they talked about possible maneuverability improvements for Jackson’s bedroom suite.

“But you’re not going to be in that wheelchair for long.” She pointed that all-knowing finger at him. “You’re going to be walking, no, running soon, so we just need to make sure you can get around the house easily until you do.”

“Speaking of walking, we’ll start there. Dr. Evans is sending me a list of physical therapists to call. He hasn’t been optimistic that it’s going to work, but—” He stopped when Eleanor pointed at him again.

“You tell that doctor to stick it. It’s going to work. You need to believe it and give it all you’ve got.”

She’d preached that his entire life, Jackson thought warmly. *Believe in yourself and give it 100 percent*, she’d demand. *Anything less is cheating yourself*. In everything he’d ever done, he tried, worked hard, and practiced until he ached. It was all or nothing.

But things were different now, and he couldn’t help wondering if this was more than he could handle.



Later that evening when his new laptop, phone, and wireless router were set up, Jackson sent Dr. Evans his email address and cell phone number. Within ten minutes, he received the promised list of physical therapists and strict instructions to make sure he attended every appointment. It was 2:15 a.m. in London. What in the hell was he doing up? With slight annoyance, Jackson saved the document and closed the laptop.

Next, he texted Will his number and invited him to stop by when he had time. Although it would be hard to talk about what happened to them, he needed to see him. Will saved his life, risking his own to pull Jackson from the burning wreckage after the explosion. And while he was unconscious, hidden away in a nearby ditch, Will returned to rescue two more of the wounded while taking three bullets himself. He applied tourniquets, bandaged wounds, and kept them all safe until the search and rescue team arrived hours later.

Of course, Jackson knew none of that when he awoke from the coma following his first surgery. Every day, he asked the hospital staff about his friends and the rest of his squad. No one ever had the answers he demanded, and their attempts to pacify him with empty promises only agitated him further.

It was several weeks before he learned that Will had been the only other survivor. The missiles hit two Humvees head-on, instantly killing all souls on board, including Josh and Billy. The other Marines he rescued succumbed to their injuries within days. Will was discharged two weeks later and shipped home with crisp new bandages on his wounds and a shiny medal for his bravery.

They'd both been through hell, and although Will's physical recovery was shorter, Jackson hoped he wasn't struggling to cope with the aftermath. He wanted to believe Will was back to his old self, happy and enjoying life the way he was known to do.

Out of his three closest friends, Will was the most electric. Excitement spread like wildfire in his wake no matter the situation, and there was never a dull moment with Will around. Jackson couldn't wait to see him. But what if he was only another painful reminder for Will, and he didn't want to see him? Although he'd understand, he couldn't bear losing another friend. He just couldn't.

For the rest of the night, he worried over Will. By dawn, he was exhausted, but that was nothing out of the ordinary lately. He was trapped in a dark maze with no light and no way out.

Sitting up, he placed his hand over his racing heart. He was sweating, gulping for air, and desperate for an escape from a past that seemed to have him in a chokehold.

Is this my life now? he wondered, looking up at the ceiling and beyond. Frantic fits of anxiety, suffocating memories, fear, heartaches, and regrets randomly attacking him between

blinding migraines. Oh, and not to mention two dead fish for legs.

With that, he threw his legs over the side of the bed with a force that matched his frustration, sending the rest of his body crashing to the floor. He hit hard, and so did the lightning bolts through his hips and spine. A shriek escaped his lips before he realized what happened.

Eleanor came running when she heard the commotion and found him sprawled on the floor, face down on the rug, writhing in pain. The wheelchair was pushed up against the window.

“Fuck,” he yelled, agony stealing his manners.

To soothe, she rubbed his back. “Honey, are you okay? Can you move?” His legs were distorted, and he had a fist full of the shaggy rug in each hand as he sucked in one shuddered breath after another through his teeth. But when his hand shot up in response, she backed away.

It took everything he had to make the agonizing adjustments, but soon, he was leaning against the bed with his eyes closed and his dead fish lying straight out in front of him. Finally able to breathe again, he angled his head toward Eleanor and apologized for the foul language.

“Oh, sweetie. I’ve lived with your father all these years. Believe me, my ears are no longer innocent.”

Despite the pain, Jackson managed a grin, then took hold of the wheelchair. It took some maneuvering and more exertion than either of them was accustomed to, but they got him up and into the detested wheelchair together. Exhausted, he allowed Eleanor to push him out of the room.

“Are you kicking me out?” he asked when they passed the dining room. “I said I was sorry.”

“Ha. I’m not kicking you out. Not today, anyway,” she teased. “I thought we’d eat breakfast on the back porch this morning. It’s a beautiful day, and fresh air does a body good.”

Together, they lowered him down the short stoop onto the back porch overlooking the lake a short distance away. While she hurried to the kitchen to collect the food, he poured himself a glass of orange juice and filled another for Eleanor. The sun was still low at the front of the house, casting bright strokes of orange and pink across the sky and water.

Calm mornings like these were Eleanor's favorite. The temperature was a mild sixty-eight degrees, and the gentle breeze was barely enough to jostle a leaf. Birds sang happily from every angle, and there was not a single gnat or mosquito around. It was another perfect spring day in Virginia, and Jackson couldn't help wondering with slight irritation if he was ever going to stop despising it all.

A lone duck circled the lake before landing in the center. He'd spent a great deal of time there growing up. The lake and the surrounding grounds were ideal for young boys who sought adventure. They'd go swimming, search for new trees to climb in the forest, chase small creatures that crossed their path, play football or war with pretend guns, fish on the bank, or sail boats made from items around the house.

He'd forgotten about some of those memories until then. And Eleanor was always there, watching over them and making sure they had snacks and fresh lemonade whenever their empty stomachs caused a detour.

"I was just thinking about you," Jackson confessed when Eleanor returned and joined him at the small metal table."

"Oh, yeah. What about?"

"Mainly how you would take care of the boys and I during our adventures here."

"Awww. You boys were so much fun."

She took his hands for grace and praised God for the food and again for Jackson's safe return. While His plan unfolded in the months ahead, she asked God to help Jackson be patient and find peace through the challenges.

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Believe what, sweetie?” she asked before taking a bite of buttered rye toast.

“That God has a plan for me, and this all happened for reasons I have yet to discover.”

“With all my heart. You’re meant for greatness, Jackson. Obviously, that greatness was not meant to occur in the military.”

“I wish I had your faith in God and myself.” Wouldn’t it make living so much easier?

“You’ll find your purpose,” she assured him with a pat on his arm. “And it’s going to bring you more joy than you could ever imagine.”



While Eleanor washed dishes after breakfast, the doorbell ringing caught her by surprise.

“Who in the world?” she murmured and rushed to the door, worrying that Jackson’s gloomy mood may not be ready for company.

She opened the front door and found a man around Jackson’s age standing on the stoop. He was tall with short blonde hair and dark sunglasses. She didn’t recognize him, and her face must have told him so.

“Eleanor, it’s me.” He removed the glasses and held his arms out to welcome her signature hug.

With a squeal, she obliged, then held him at arm’s length for a better look. “William, it’s so great to see you. So handsome, you are. Are all those women still beating down your door?”

“Don’t go getting all jealous on me, Eleanor. You know you’ll always be my favorite girl.”

“Right!” With a laugh, she pulled him inside and closed the door. “Was Jackson expecting you?”

“No. I thought I’d surprise him. How is he?”

“He’s trying, but it’s hard. He’s only been home for two days, so it will take some time.” She draped an arm over his. “Come on, I’ll take you to him.”

“Jackson, sweetie,” she said softly when they reached the back porch. He was facing away from the door and didn’t turn around when it creaked open. “Someone’s here to see you.”

She urged Will to take her seat at the table before leaving the two friends to their overdue reunion.

“Wow. What’d you do?” he asked when he laid eyes on Jackson. “Roll straight out of bed and into the wheelchair? You look like hell.”

“And you have a way of making a guy feel special. Asshole.”

Slapping hands, Jackson yanked him down to his level for a hug. “It’s so good to see you, man.”

“I heard you were transported to London, but they discharged me and shipped me home so fast, I couldn’t get any details.” He sat down opposite Jackson at the small table. “For the longest time, I had no idea if you survived.”

“I almost didn’t, or so they tell me, but I’m here, thanks to you and the doctors who didn’t give up on me. Now, I need to find a way past the aftermath and get my legs back.” Jackson looked down at his legs, daring them to do something and give him some hope. Nothing.

“What do the doctors say? About your legs, I mean.”

“They’re not optimistic that I’ll be able to walk again.”

“They don’t know you, do you?”

“That was the old me.”

“Whatever.” Will poured himself a glass of orange juice and sipped. “But they’re doing something to help you, right?”

“Physical therapy.”

“That’s it?”

“Guess there’s nothing else for me.”

“Well, in that case, you might as well get the best. You remember my cousin, Avery, don’t you? She’s a physical therapist in town.”

Will’s playful grin was suspicious. “I haven’t seen her since high school. Is she really a therapist, or are you trying to set me up?”

“Of course, she’s a therapist. Just because she’s hot, runs in the family, doesn’t mean I’m trying to set you up.”

Jackson narrowed his eyes. “Text me her information, and I’ll give her a call,” Jackson said. When Will smiled, he added, “To schedule an appointment.”

The conversation soon switched to life after discharge. Will was still living with his parents, trying to find a job with no luck. He, too, had trouble sleeping. The nightmares started about eleven weeks ago and were so vivid that he’d wake up screaming. He was teetering on the edge of insanity. His parents were worried about him and sent him to multiple psychiatrists. It hadn’t helped. The only good thing in his life was a woman.

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you’re in an actual, committed relationship?” The explosion must have altered his personality, Jackson considered.

“Yeah, and get this, we met during our leave, before the last deployment,” he said proudly. “I haven’t been with another woman since.”

“I’m speechless.” Will had taken himself off the market. The female population was going to be devastated. “Well, she must be special.”

“She’s the only thing keeping me going. My shrink says I have PTSD.” He rubbed his hands together and then ran them over his hair. “You know, throughout your career, you hear about it, but you never think it will happen to you. It’s fuckin’ hell.”

Jackson could relate and saw the all-to-familiar hopelessness flash over his friend’s face. “What’s her name?”

“Sydney,” Will answered with an easy smile.

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

The following week was more of the same. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner with Eleanor and spending time with Will on his good days. Jackson would go fishing when the weather was nice, but he didn’t enjoy it as much as he had hoped. He was usually alone, and his tranquil surroundings allowed his mind to wander to dangerous places.

The replay was more intense when it was quiet, which was why he had trouble sleeping. There was no off switch.

That day, he went fishing because he could find nothing else to pass the time. Every day was a long wait—for what, he didn’t know. With his motivation waning, he packed up his supplies to head back to the house. But when he leaned over the side of the chair for the tackle box, an unexpected jolt shot through his left leg and sent him and the wheelchair flying backward.

He landed hard on his back, but he didn’t notice. All he could do was fight through the intense muscle spasms radiating from his ankle to his hip. After dragging himself up, he repositioned his legs and massaged the muscles.

Could this be the start of his legs coming to life again? Damn, he hoped so. He would gladly take more of this pain if it meant he could one day walk again.

Electric shocks soon dulled to tiny needles—thousands of them repeatedly poking all over his leg while his muscles continued to spasm. Another welcomed feeling. He laid back on the grass and tried to concentrate on every prick of the needle. It was uncomfortable, but it was what he’d been begging for. It was hope.

Basking in his newfound appreciation for the pain, he didn’t hear Eleanor approaching until she appeared beside him.

“Jackson, are you okay?” Her voice was frantic as she knelt beside him.

“Better than okay. My leg’s dancing a jig.”

“What? Is that a good thing?” she asked, trying to understand him. He was acting so strangely, and why was he on the ground?

“Eleanor,” he sat up again. “My legs have been dead for months, and now my muscles are moving.”

Excitement shone bright in his eyes, warming her soul. “That’s wonderful, dear.”

“It’s only my left leg, but it’s something.”

She placed a hand on his face and beamed. “This calls for a celebration. Let’s go pop open a bottle of your father’s most expensive champagne.” She tapped him on the leg.

“Ow.”

“Oh, my gosh. I’m so sorry. Did I—”

“Gotcha.”

When he smiled, she smacked him, harder this time, and stood with her fists on her hips. “Don’t you mess with me like that. If you don’t watch it, I’m going to save all that bubbly for myself.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Eleanor laughed. “So true. If I’m going to be naughty, I’d much rather have company.”

Chapter Three



Despite lying awake all night daring his legs to come to life again, a twinge of hope had reclaimed his heart. And now that he smelled Eleanor's special eggs and maple bacon, he was eager to start the day.

"Good morning, sweetie," Eleanor greeted Jackson when he entered the kitchen. She was stirring the eggs and skillfully adding her special seasonings at the same time. "Hungry?"

"Always when you're cooking."

She smiled then scooped the eggs into a bright red serving dish.

"Here." She set the dish in his lap then collected the bacon and fresh fruit. "We'll eat in the kitchen today."

Following him to the small table that had been in the Vane family for nearly a century, she sat in the sturdy wooden chair and watched while he filled his plate.

"What?" he asked without pausing.

"I like the new sparkle in your eyes. Is that from yesterday?"

"Yeah. I hope it happens again today."

“Me, too, sweetheart.”

Ignoring his empty stomach, he waited for Eleanor to scoop herself a portion of eggs, pick a few pieces of bacon, and fill two glasses with orange juice. Years of having his hand slapped as a child had taught Jackson to ignore literally everything until Eleanor said grace.

“So,” Eleanor began after she’d asked for the blessing, “what’s on the schedule today?”

“Nothing much.” With the first bite, he nearly sighed. Eleanor had a way of turning ordinary scrambled eggs into a culinary masterpiece. “Will is coming over this afternoon.”

“Great! What will you two boys be getting into?”

“I’m not sure. Guess we’ll go fishing.”

“Please invite him to stay for dinner.”

“All right. I know he won’t be able to turn down one of your meals.”

“Then I’ll make something special tonight. Will he be bringing the angel that settled him down?”

“Not this time. He said she had class and then work.”

“Darn. I was hoping to...did you hear that?” Her eyes were wide as she sat frozen in her seat.

Then, her smile faded, and she jumped up from the table, quickly putting away dirty pots and dishes, Jackson knew what that meant. He set his plate, still full of food, in his lap and backed away from the table. “I’ll eat in my room.”

“Sweetie, please. You two need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to him. Plus, he prefers that I stay out of sight, so I’m happy to.”

“Jackson, don’t go,” Eleanor pleaded to his back.

He regretted disappointing her, but he had no interest in facing his father that day and ruining his good mood.

“Mr. Grayson! So nice to see you,” he heard Eleanor say and rolled his eyes. He didn’t deserve her kindness.

“I’m in a hurry,” Grayson snapped, causing Jackson’s blood pressure to spike. “Is my white tuxedo back from the dry cleaners?” The sharp tone in his father’s voice had Jackson stopping in the hallway to listen.

“No, I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware you needed it cleaned this soon.”

“Damn it, Eleanor! If you’d get out of Jackson’s ass long enough, you’d see the note I left on my—” A deep, choking cough prevented him from continuing.

“Is everything okay, Mr. Vane? You’re looking pale.”

“For fuck’s sake, Eleanor. I’m fine.”

Grayson’s sharp footsteps grew louder as he stalked past her and out of the kitchen.

“Wear a different tux.” Jackson slowly rolled his chair toward his father and watched his expression switch from raging mad to amused in an instant. “And don’t talk to her that way ever again.”

“I will do as I Goddamn please in my own house. The one I’m so graciously allowing you to live in right now.”

He planted his feet, looked down his thin, sculpted nose, and casually slid his hands in his pockets. What Jackson wouldn’t give to punch that pale, smug face of his.

“She does everything for you, more than she should, without complaint. She doesn’t deserve to be treated like a slave.” He kept his cool, as his training taught him to do, but his hands ached from squeezing the wheels on his chair as though they were his father’s neck.

“That’s what I pay her to do. If you don’t like it, you’re welcome to go elsewhere.” With a quick pivot, he headed down the hall.

“Why do you do this?” Jackson yelled.

Grayson stopped outside his office, then came back to him, ready for battle. “Do what, son?”

“Don’t call me that. You were never a father to me.”

Grayson smiled. "Oh really? Without me, you wouldn't be here."

"What does that mean?"

"Your mother never wanted a child. I'm the reason why you were born." He took a step forward, enjoying the stunned look on Jackson's face. "What? You didn't know?"

No, he didn't. Of all the hateful things Grayson had said over the years, none had been as terrible as saying Jackson's beautiful mother hadn't wanted him either.

"I'm the one that convinced her not to go through with the abortion. I hired Eleanor to raise you. I made sure you were properly educated and provided for. Your mother did nothing but bring you into this world."

Jackson's head was spinning. Had his few good memories of his mother been figments of his imagination?

"If that's true, why do you hate me so much?" It was something he'd always wanted to know.

Grayson was a few feet away from him now, his cheeks flushed and eyes bright with either amusement or anger. Jackson wasn't sure which, but he also didn't care. He needed answers.

"You really want to know why? Let me enlighten you with the person your mother truly was. Who she became after you were born."

"That's not what I asked."

Ignoring him, Grayson continued. "She resented me for getting her pregnant and for the marks it left on her body. We fought constantly, but she was able to hide her hatred for me when we were out. You see, she enjoyed the privileges that being married to me provided, but her love was scarce."

With his temper rising, Grayson paced but kept his hands balled into fists in his pockets.

"Our relationship was strong in the beginning. She was stunning, passionate, fearless. You got all that from her, by the way, and her eyes." Grayson shook his head and stopped to

address Jackson directly, old resentments simmering back to the surface.

“Do you know how difficult it was to look at you when all her affection and desire for me came to a fucking halt?” He didn’t wait for Jackson to answer. “Damn, she hated me and took great pleasure making me suffer in true Jacqueline fashion. She poured herself and the love she once had for me into her volunteer work, and then, into her ludicrous affair.”

Grayson grinned, lost in the satire. “Oh, they were masterful at sneaking around, but I knew. They’d meet up while I was out of town or slip away during her supposed mission trips to God knows where.”

He tossed his arm out to the side in frustration. “Hell, she even talked about him in front of me, throwing the affair in my face. I tried to make her forget him, but nothing I did was ever good enough.”

Another memory punched Grayson in the gut and he stumbled backward. Grabbing the handrail on the staircase, he took several jagged breaths. “She left me for that asshole...all because of you.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it. I was a child!”

“Didn’t matter,” he snapped. “It all started after you were born, and I lost my shit when she left. But she came crawling back as I knew she would. I guess it wasn’t as much fun without my bank account.” He smiled, knowing he’d won there. “We tried to make it work, but I couldn’t get him touching her out of my mind, and she still hated me for what I did.”

“What did you do?” Jackson managed, his mind reeling.

“When she refused to have my child, I switched out her birth control pills.”

Jackson couldn’t think, couldn’t speak. His father was even more dreadful than he realized. Who was he really? How could he manipulate his wife? The woman he claimed to love.

“After she returned, it wasn’t long before she was diagnosed. Fuck!” He bent over as he yelled it, releasing the tension. Then, he stood, threw his head back, and ran a hand over his face. “What am I doing? I don’t have time for this shit,” he murmured to himself with a distinct sigh.

Spinning, he headed up the stairs, then stopped to glare down at Jackson. “Moral of the story here...you are who you are because of me. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“You’re wrong. I am who I am despite you.”

“Keep thinking that...son.” He tossed Jackson a tight-lipped grin that didn’t reach his eyes before continuing up the stairs. Soon, the sound of victory came in the form of the bedroom door slamming behind him.

Grayson had won, accomplishing exactly what he set out to do. He’d hurt Jackson yet again by taking away the few good memories he had of his mother. But the more he thought about it, not much had changed as a result. It simply confirmed what he’d always suspected—both of his parents were absent in his life because they never loved him, and he barely knew or understood either of them.

Manipulation, affairs, revenge, secrets. The truth was much worse than he could have ever imagined, and Jackson was the innocent victim caught in the crossfire. At least he now knew that no matter what he’d done, accomplished, or said, and no matter how perfect he tried to be, it wouldn’t have been enough.

In a way, Grayson had given him a gift, and he needn’t waste any more time on either of them. They were both dead to him. Ghosts in a past he’d rather forget. The only memories he wanted to remember were with the people who loved him and supported him when his own parents wouldn’t.

Speaking of those who love him, he spun the chair around to go check on Eleanor. Her forgiving heart would undoubtedly be broken over the cruel things Grayson so effortlessly said. Blood

or not, Jackson was her child, and she gave him a childhood filled with happiness, discipline, acceptance, and life lessons.

And if Grayson ever again spoke to her the way he did that morning, Jackson wouldn't hold back. If Grayson wanted a fight, then, let the next battle begin. He was ready.

Two steps inside the mudroom, Will sucked in a long breath. "Is that roast beef I smell?" he asked and headed through the butler's pantry into the kitchen. He'd let himself in since the side door was open, which had been Eleanor's way of saying, *please come in* since he was a child.

"What else would it be? It's your favorite, isn't it?" Eleanor asked when Will reached her and took her hand.

He set down the cooler he'd brought and knelt on one knee. "Eleanor, will you marry me?"

"Ha! If I was thirty years younger, I might take you up on that offer." She wrapped him in a hug and swatted him quickly on the rear with her towel before leaving the kitchen to continue her chores.

Jackson shook his head at Will. "You haven't changed a bit."

"I love that woman with all my soul."

Smiling, Jackson spun the wheelchair toward the door. "Get in line."

He grabbed the box of worms Eleanor picked up for him from the hutch and motioned for Will to follow. After collecting the cooler, fishing rods, a chair for Will, and the snacks Eleanor insisted on making, the friends headed to the lake. They set up on the wide dock and cast their lines before Will broke the silence.

"I can tell something's bothering you. Out with it." Will removed a bottle of beer out of the cooler and handed it to Jackson before taking one for himself.

Setting the rod against the wheel, Jackson twisted off the cap and took a long pull. The last time he'd had a beer was with Billy and Josh before being deployed for the third time. Will was busy, and Sydney, apparently, had been the reason he ditched them that night.

The three of them stayed out until dawn, crashed at Billy's house, then left for the base later that afternoon. It wasn't the smartest thing they'd ever done, but it also wasn't the worst. Will, of course, made fun of their red eyes and hangovers for days.

"Jackson."

"Sorry. I was thinking about Billy and Josh. The last time I had one of these was with them." He held up the bottle before grabbing his fishing rod.

Will let out a long sigh and looked out over the water. He missed them more every day. "As I recall, you had more than one."

"Like you'd let me forget."

"Never." Will smiled, raised the bottle to his lips, and drained it. "So, what's got you on edge today?"

"Saw the man that calls himself my father this morning."

"Shit." Will removed another beer from the cooler, opened it, and drank deep. "What did he do?"

"Nothing, except a few new insults I hadn't heard before. Did you know that my mother almost had an abortion?" He nodded when Will snapped his eyes to Jackson. "He claims he stopped her and that I owe him."

"Fuck him."

"Agreed." Jackson reeled in the line and cast it into the water again. "He took credit for raising me and said Mom did nothing except cook up ways to get back at him. Did you know she had an affair?"

Will puffed and shook his head. "Wow. That is a new development in the Vane saga. Although, not entirely shocking.

But I don't recall your mother doing *nothing*. She wasn't here much, but she was nice to you, at least when I was around."

"Yeah, but he claims she knew how to turn it on when required. I don't know how much to believe. He showed up ready to fight."

"Why does he do that? I've never understood his motives."

"Who knows?" Looking down at the bottle in his hands, Jackson couldn't drink. He wanted to, desperately wanted to get sloppy drunk and forget, but he didn't have the energy. "And I don't care. I've got enough to deal with right now."

"I feel ya." Will emptied his bottle and set it aside before grabbing another from the cooler. "I don't think I've slept more than an hour since I got back."

"It takes a toll, doesn't it?"

Will checked his line. "I'm surprised Sydney is still around. I'm too tired to do anything. Then, there's the visions..." He looked to Jackson, who he knew would understand. "And I have these outbursts now that I can't control. Sometimes, I don't even know it's happening until it's over."

"What kind of outbursts?"

"You name it. It doesn't take much to set me off, and I cry all the fucking time." Will rolled his eyes.

Twisting in his seat, Jackson faced Will squarely. "You?"

"I know. I'm not proud of it."

"I don't think I've ever seen you cry." That was concerning. Will was the happiest person Jackson had ever known, and his smile and loud belly laugh were always at the ready, no matter the circumstances.

"Usually happens after I come out of a rage-fest and realize my outbursts have hurt someone." He took a long drink and looked out over the calm water, wishing his thoughts and emotions were the same. Peaceful, smooth, predictable.

"Rage-fest?"

“That’s what I call them. A chaotic festival of yelling, punching things, and storming away.”

Jackson gaze shifted to Will’s hand clutching the beer bottle and noticed his raw knuckles.

“Don’t worry,” Will answered before Jackson could ask. “I haven’t hit a person.” A sly grin reached his eyes when they met Jackson’s.

“I didn’t think you would.”

“Good. Even during fits of rage, I still have boundaries. Although, I don’t think Sydney shares your confidence in me. I’m afraid she won’t be able to take much more.”

“I’m sure she’s stronger than you think, and if she hasn’t left already, she’s not going anywhere.”

“I hope you’re right. I think it’s love.” Uncomfortable with another new feeling to add to the list since he returned, Will ran his hand through his hair then chugged his beer.

“I figured.”

“You did?” A quick, unsteady laugh bubbled out. “Should have known I couldn’t hide anything from you. She’s amazing, and I don’t deserve her.”

“Yes, you do. You’re the most amazing person I know, besides Eleanor, of course.”

“Of course.”

“And you deserve an equally amazing woman that loves you back.”

“Thanks. That means a lot coming from you.”

Jackson grinned when Will looked at him with sad, insecure eyes before slipping on his sunglasses. Trying to hide again, he mused. “Plus, you of all people should know, I don’t waste my time with douche bags.”

“Whatever! What about that guy you adopted in sixth grade?” Feeling more relaxed, Will sat back in his chair and reeled in his line. After casting it back out into the water, causing a ripple on the smooth surface, he picked up his beer and drank.

“Who? Tanner?”

“Yeah. He was a total douche bag.”

“No, he wasn’t.” Jackson laughed when Will tilted his head and glared at him over the dark sunglasses.

“He picked a fight with Josh. The only one of us that would save a fly from drowning in this fucking lake.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one. It was the final straw, but before that, I felt sorry for him. He had a tough life, and he needed a friend.”

“He needed a lot more than a friend. You were too busy trying to save him to notice. He was an orphaned puppy to you.”

“I wonder where he is now.”

“Probably in jail,” Will joked and finished off his beer before his line went taut, surprising them both.

The rod jerked, but he was able to toss aside the empty beer bottle and snag it before being hurled into the lake. Will turned the reel as fast as his hands would move and leaned back to pull the fish closer. Over and over, he reeled and pulled with little progress.

“What in the hell do you have in here? Fuckin’ tuna?”

Jackson threw back his head in a fit of laughter as Will struggled with the line. “You act like you’ve never fished before, and I know that isn’t true.”

“Shut up! The bastard weighs more than I do.”

“I can’t wait to see this one! Keep going. I’m enjoying the show.”

Will furrowed his brow, narrowed his eyes, and glared over his shoulder. Jackson was having too much fun with the spectacle, Will decided, and for that, he couldn’t let that damn fish get the best of him. With one final yank of the rod, he used all his remaining strength, and pulled hard, snapping the line. Will was thrown backward, and he and his chair landed with a thump on the unforgiving wooden dock.

The impact knocked the air out of his lungs, and after he stopped coughing, he heard Jackson's uncontrollable laughter. Laying his head back, he tried to be offended, but the turn of events was too hilarious. His hand slapped against his stomach, and he let the laughs, the deep ones that made his abs hurt, take over until he realized the sun was burning his eyes.

"Where are my sunglasses?" He shot up and twisted, looking for them. "Do you see them?" he asked Jackson, who was having a hard time wrangling in his amusement.

Jackson doubled over in another fit of laughter and pointed behind him. He turned around and saw the glasses floating on top of the water. Jumping to his feet, he ran a few steps, then dropped to his stomach, and reached over the edge of the dock. He got a finger on them before they were consumed by the water and sank to the bottom.

"What are you doing?" Jackson yelled when Will sat back on his heels with a scowl. "I've never seen you shy away from a challenge."

"You're right!" He stood, yanked off his shirt and shorts, and kicked off his flip flops. Puffing out his chest, he grabbed hold of the waistband of his boxers and smiled wide.

Jackson pointed, amusement gone. "Don't even think about it."

"Consider this payback for all those times you made me run or do more push-ups than the others." Will slowly began to push the boxers over his hips until Jackson held up his hands.

"Wait! Let's talk about this. I was your squad leader, by the way, and you snuck away in the middle of a scouting mission. You nearly blew our cover."

"I was hungry."

"We were all hungry!" Jackson laughed now, but at the time, he wanted to strangle his friend and do more than give him a few more miles to run when they got back to safety.

Since he'd deserved the punishments, he left the boxers in place and took off running. Blowing by Jackson, he jumped off the end of the dock, clutched his knees to his chest, and landed in the water with a loud splash. He rose to the surface soon after and took a long breath before disappearing under the water again.

To see more of the water around the dock, Jackson pushed to the edge of his seat and searched for him, but it was too dark and dense. Seconds collected into minutes and Jackson worried. Was he stuck? Had he passed out? Hit his head?

Then a hand, holding sunglasses, shot out of the water, and the rest of Will soon followed.

"Victory is mine!" he yelled and threw his head back to float on top of the cool water, the glasses on his face where they belonged.

"I see your water survival training was finally put to good use."

"I knew it would come in handy one day. Nowhere to go swimming in the desert."

Jackson slowly reeled in his line, careful not to snag Will, then set down the rod. "See that tuna while you were down there?"

"Damn it. No. But I'm going to catch that fucker."

"Maybe next time."

"Yeah," Will sighed. "Next time."

Chapter Four



The day Jackson would never forget started like every other day. Breakfast with Eleanor, watching minutes tick by at the lake, or reading. But in the quiet, his mind jumped in a hundred different directions, setting off a torturous cycle of anxiety and sickening migraines. The only thing that helped keep the storm at bay was keeping busy, and that had proven to be a difficult task.

He'd yet to grow accustomed to boredom, and never wanted to. In the military, and when his legs worked, there was always something to do. His mind and muscles were constantly stimulated. Now, he sat and wasted away all day. He could use a hobby or two, if for no other reason than to keep his mind occupied.

That afternoon was his first physical therapy appointment, but he was no longer looking forward to it. The tingling, spasms, and movement hadn't lingered in his leg, and neither had his positivity.

When they arrived at the physical therapy office, he pulled himself into the wheelchair Eleanor held steady for him.

“I’ll be back in an hour. Good luck and give it all you’ve got, sweetie.” Eleanor blew him a kiss when he looked back at her and said a quick prayer. He was going to need all the help he could get.

Inside, Jackson checked in and waited for his scheduled appointment with Avery Mason.

He’d known Avery since they were kids but remembered very little about her—other than she looked a lot like Will but with darker hair, and she seemed to be constantly underfoot. He never paid much attention to her, but she was always there. At parties, track meets, football games, Will’s house. She followed Will and his friends wherever they went, but Will never complained. He adored her and thought of her more as a little sister than a cousin.

Avery saw him first, sitting by the front window in the lobby, and nearly tripped over her own feet. Jackson Vane had been the center of her boy crush since she was seven years old, and no man since could compare to her Jackson. Without knowing it, he had shaped her opinion of what a man should be, and through the years, she had many failed relationships because of it. Dreams etched in stone weren’t easily forgotten, and seeing him again only confirmed what she already knew. She was still hopelessly in love with him.

Before going to him, she ran her fingers through her hair and took a deep breath in a desperate attempt to keep her heart from beating out of her chest.

“Jackson? I can’t believe it. I haven’t seen you in what, seven, eight years?” She knew exactly how many years, days, and hours it had been—too many.

“Hi, Avery. It’s great to see you again.” He held out his hand, and she took it. “We were teenagers, I believe. Was that really eight years ago?”

“Yeah. A little hard to accept.” She reluctantly released his hand and assumed a stance that she hoped made her appear confident. “You look great.”

“You lie, but I appreciate it nonetheless.”

Small talk continued on the way to her office until he parked the wheelchair in front of the small desk while she grabbed a notepad and pen. The sturdy oak shelves beside the door held notebooks and several framed photos of Avery and her family. There was a shot of her and Will with identical smiles. They looked happy—two close friends unified by a deep understanding and comfortability.

“So,” she began and sat across from him. Hoping to compose herself and her frayed nerves, she fidgeted with the notepad. But it was pointless since those Caribbean blue eyes of his kept stealing her breath and making her think unspeakable things. “I, uh, usually take time when I start a new patient to get to know them. We have somewhat of an advantage, but we were kids then. Tell me about yourself and what brought you here.”

He hesitated and looked down at his hands, and she instantly wished to take it back. She knew Will was struggling, but she’d been too flustered to consider how the incident had affected Jackson, too. The sorrow in his eyes said it all.

“Jackson, I’m sorry. We don’t have to talk about that now, or ever, if you don’t want to.”

She reached out, touched his hand to comfort him, but he flinched. Her heart sank. The Jackson she remembered was affectionate, joyful, confident, and never fearful. She wanted to make it better. To say something that would take his apprehension and anxiety away, but the words wouldn’t form.

“Thank you,” he said and took a deep breath. He saw the pity flash in her eyes and wished he hadn’t. “I was discharged a couple weeks ago after spending about four months in surgery and recovery at a London hospital. I’m sure Will has told you

what happened, and I assume you have my medical information.”

From the look on her face, she wanted more from him. He just didn't have it in him. He'd been there five minutes and an irritating throb was already pulsating at his temple. All he wanted was to get through the next hour without a migraine starting.

“Yes, I read your chart. I was sorry to hear about what happened to you and, of course, Billy and Josh.” Realizing he was uncomfortable she changed the subject. “If you're ready, I'd like to go over the initial schedule for your program, and then we can get started.”

She reviewed his program using the chart she meticulously prepared the week prior. After this first session, he would have two appointments a week and a home workout routine. Then, based on his progress after a month, she'd amend it as needed.

Once he was settled on an examination table adjacent to the fitness room, she began a physical evaluation. First, she tested Jackson's posture, joint and muscle movement, and flexibility by rotating his ankles, legs, back, and hips. While she worked on his right side, his back to her, he was silent.

“You doing okay?” she asked, remembering his discomfort when she touched him earlier. When he nodded, she continued. “Let me know if you need a break.”

To ease the tension, she talked about whatever popped into her thoughts. It was an excruciating exercise in mind control, but she had to do something to distract herself from the fact that she had her hands all over him. He wasn't as muscular as she was used to seeing in photos, but the shape that made her stutter was still there.

She often fanaticized about touching those muscles and pressing her body against his. That day, the fantasy replayed in high-definition, and she had to keep reminding herself that she was a professional. He was her patient, and she had a job to do, but damn, he was distracting.

“Left side now,” she instructed. “Like before, tell me if you feel any pain or need to stop.”

He obeyed by rolling over to face her and adjusting his legs. She worked up from his ankles to his thigh, testing his range of motion. But when she pressed on his back and hip, a familiar jolt pieced through his leg, causing it to jerk and slip out of her hands. He buried his face in the pillow and pounded his fist on the table as the pain consumed his joints and muscles like rabid fire.

She waited patiently from across the room and fought the urge to go to him. It was agonizing to watch him struggle.

“Can I get you anything?” Her instinct to soothe won out over her better judgment, but he ignored her. “I’ll be right back.”

When she returned a few minutes later, Jackson was still lying face down, his forehead pressed against the table. The pillow had fallen on the floor, but at least his breathing had slowed, and his muscles relaxed.

“I brought you some water.” She held out the bottle, but he turned over and shook his head.

The intense tingling returned to his left leg, and as he rubbed the muscles, he realized he could move his foot. Although it was painful, he wiggled his toes and circled his ankle for the first time.

He turned his eyes on her, bright and energized, and her breath caught and stung in her chest. Then, he flashed her that smile she missed, the same one from her dreams where his smile came with love. A love that had always been in his heart for her as it was meant to be, and...the bottle slipping from her hands snapped reality back into view, making her feel like a fool. He had a way of doing that to her, but all she needed was to look like one, too.

“Avery, I can move my foot.”

Rushing to the table, she set down the bottle and took over massaging. “Jackson, that’s wonderful. Has this happened before?”

“Once, and I almost broke my neck when it knocked me out of the wheelchair.” He laughed. “I want to try to stand. Will you help me?” He was too excited to worry about stubborn pride.

She nodded and waited for him to swing his legs over the side of the table. Then, when his hands were steady on her shoulders, she pulled him forward so he could balance upright on both feet.

“Well?” She raised her gaze to his and wished for time to stand still.

He was looking down at her and standing close enough to feel his breath on her cheek. His eyes, piercing into her soul, were bright with hope. Beautiful moments like these were why she chose this profession. But sharing all of life’s struggles and triumphs with Jackson had been her heart’s desire since she was a girl.

“How does it feel?”

“Painful, but amazing.”

He held on for a few more seconds before his knee gave out. Slapping his left hand on the table, he draped his right arm over her shoulder to keep from falling.

“I’ve got you.” She helped him back onto the table. “By the way, I asked another therapist to take my next appointment,” she confessed, trying to hide her pleasure.

He lifted his head to see her. “Why?”

She shrugged. “You were hurting, and I didn’t know how long it was going to last. I couldn’t leave you like that.”

She raised her eyes to his, her hands stopping to rest on his hip. *Keep talking, or you’ll melt into a puddle*, she warned herself.

“Now that you’re feeling better, we can do some more—if you’re up for it, of course. I don’t want to push you.” She lifted his leg and rotated it outward.

“I can keep going, but I need to let Eleanor know. Would you mind grabbing my phone?”

After arranging for Eleanor to pick him up in an hour, Avery continued stretching, testing, and exercising his legs. He was able to lift his left foot and leg a few inches by the end of the appointment, and he couldn't wait to do it again. The needles had dulled to tingles, but the ability to move his foot remained, and he wiggled his toes whenever possible.

When Eleanor arrived, Avery walked beside his wheelchair to the lobby.

“Thank you,” he said, stopping at the door. “I know I wasn't the best patient today. I understand that every session is going to be a challenge, but I'm ready for it.”

“Good. Keep up with your home routine, and I'll see you soon.”

Through the front windows, she watched him roll to the parking lot then drag himself into the vehicle. If her heart was going to pound this hard during every appointment, she wasn't going to survive it. But this could be the chance she'd been hoping for her entire life.

Maybe, just maybe, Jackson Vane will finally see her.

“This calls for a celebration,” Eleanor announced after Jackson told her about his appointment. “I picked up some steaks at the market earlier. We can grill out, turn up the music, and have a good time. Why don't you invite Will to join us?”

“Great idea.”

Jackson wiggled his toes inside his shoes again and removed his phone from his pocket. He sent a text to Will and suggested he bring Sydney, shaking his head as he typed it. It was going to take a while to get used to that one.

Entering through the gate of the Vane residence, Eleanor slowed the SUV and shifted in her seat when the little red

convertible parked in the driveway came into view. The driver-side door swung open, and Grayson gracefully unfolded himself from the car as Eleanor pulled up behind. He leaned against the door and crossed his arms.

“Shit.”

Eleanor set the brake then turned to Jackson. “I didn’t know he was going to be here, or I would have warned you.”

“Not your responsibility, Eleanor. This is his house, and we’ve said all there is to say.” He patted her arm. “Don’t worry.”

“Can’t help it. I’ll get the chair.”

While she helped Jackson into the wheelchair, his father never moved from his spot to greet them or offer help. Not that Jackson would have accepted it, but he knew Eleanor would be disappointed.

“Mr. Vane, Jackson had his first physical therapy session today, and he’s made terrific progress already. Isn’t that great?” From the expressionless look plastered on Grayson’s face, her efforts were meaningless.

“Eleanor. Jackson.” Grayson finally acknowledged, but his eyes stayed on Jackson, daring him to respond.

But Grayson had no idea who he was dealing with, or how far Jackson would go to ensure they didn’t have another heated argument in front of Eleanor. So, when Grayson altered his stance and shifted his annoyed gaze to Eleanor, Jackson considered it a silent win.

“I’m planning a dinner party here this weekend. Make sure the house is spotless,” he barked. “I left instructions for dinner and drinks on my desk, and I will need my dark gray suit dry cleaned.”

“Yes, sir,” was all she could say. She was accustomed to rushing around to satisfy his demands with little time to prepare.

He opened the door, then stopped with one foot on the floorboard. “Oh, make sure you stay out of sight,” he directed Jackson over his shoulder before dropping into the seat. With a

swift touch of the gas, he circled the roundabout and sped down the driveway.

“Well, that was fun,” Jackson joked, but since the interaction was what he expected, he didn’t give it another thought. “Recognize flavor of the week in the passenger seat?”

Irrked, Eleanor puffed out a breath and took hold of the wheelchair.

“It’s okay. Let me know what I can do to help get ready for the...dinner party.” He motioned quotation marks and enunciated *dinner party* in an elegant British accent he picked up from Dr. Evans, making Eleanor laugh. “There’s my girl,” he said and kissed her hand.

While Eleanor prepared dinner, Jackson tried calling Will since he hadn’t responded to his earlier text messages. He looked forward to sharing the evening with those he loved most. After a trying but successful day, celebrating with a strong drink, juicy steak, and great friends was exactly what he needed.

But when Will didn’t answer his phone call either, something felt terribly wrong. He dialed again, and after several rings, his call was finally answered.

“Jackson? Is that you?”

He couldn’t make out the female voice. “Yes. Who is this?”

“Jackson, oh my God.”

Her choking sobs echoed through the phone, making Jackson sick with fear.

“Avery, is that you? What is it? What’s wrong?”

Eleanor heard Jackson’s raised, frantic voice and rushed to his side.

“Avery, where’s Will?” Panic rushed over him. “Tell me.”

“He’s...”

“He’s what?”

No answer.

“Avery!”

“Oh, my God. How is this happening?” She sucked in a shaky breath, but it burst out of her throat with more sobs.

“What’s happened?”

“Oh, my God. Jackson, he’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

“He’s dead.”

Avery’s uncontrollable cries boomed through the phone. Eleanor’s voice filled his other ear with questions, but he comprehended none of it. He didn’t feel Eleanor removing the phone from his rigid hand or his soul being ripped from his body.

How could it be? Jackson thought. It can’t be true.

But if Will was dead, so was he.

Chapter Five



Life passed by in a blur after those two dreadful words were spoken. ‘He’s dead.’ The sun rose and fell without his acknowledgement. Bathing, eating, sleeping, breathing, surviving the hours was a chore and he had no interest in any of it.

The last of his three best friends was gone, and with him went Jackson’s spirit and will to survive.

“Jackson, sweetie.” Eleanor peeked her head in the room. The curtains were drawn, but the open door provided a dim stream of light from the hall, highlighting Jackson curled up on the bed and facing the back wall. Helplessness stabbed at her, but she refused to let it take over. “We need to leave for the funeral soon.”

Funeral. He buried his face in the pillow. He wasn’t ready.

Eleanor searched the closet for something appropriate for Jackson to wear and immediately cursed herself for not buying him a suit earlier in the week. She knew he didn’t have anything

formal enough to wear. Without a word, she left the room and returned a few minutes later with a full suit and shoes.

“It’s a good thing you and your father are about the same size. These will have to do.” She held up the suit she chose from Grayson’s closet, but Jackson didn’t look or acknowledge her presence in the room. Tossing the clothes on the wheelchair, she crossed the room and sat on the bed.

“Jackson, I know this is hard, but you need to go say your goodbyes.” She ran the back of her hand over his cheek. “They want you to say a few words, remember?”

He looked up at her with only his eyes, pleading for her to save him. “I know, sweetheart.” She leaned down to kiss his forehead. “I wish I could make it better.”

Taking her hand, he held it to his chest. She was all he had left.

It took some coaxing, but she was able to get him out of bed and dressed. He sat motionless while she brushed his hair and pushed him to the driveway. He said nothing on the way to the funeral home or when ushers escorted them to the front of the room to Will’s family.

At the sight of him, Will’s mother, Caroline, rose to greet him. Since there were no words that could make it hurt any less, they just held each other and cried.

“He loved you so much.” She opened her mouth to say more, but sobs caught in her throat. Cupping her hand over her mouth, she hurried back to her seat, leaving Jackson alone in the middle of the aisle.

But when his head dropped into his hands, Eleanor pulled the chair into his spot next to her and rested a hand on his leg to remind him he wasn’t alone.

The ceremony soon began, but Jackson couldn’t focus. His mind kept jumping from one memory to the next. Memories with Will, Billy, and Josh when they were kids and traveling

around the world. Basic training, his mother, Eleanor, and war. The destructive chaos pounded against his skull.

He was sinking, drowning. He longed to yell how unfair it was. How could they all be gone? Why was he still alive when he felt so dead inside?

“Sweetie, it’s time.” Eleanor stood and pushed him to the front without waiting for a response.

It was his turn to speak, but with Will’s body in the casket behind him, he struggled to wade through the agony for the words. Sweat began to bead on his forehead as a headache raged, nausea rolled, and a familiar ache pounded in his chest. Rocking in his seat, he pressed the base of his palm to the concentrated source of the throbbing and stared blankly ahead. For Will, he must find a way to summon the strength to begin.

“Will was more than a friend. He was my brother.” Jackson closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “He always had my back both in life and in service, and he’d do the same for anyone else. You could always count on him to be there.”

Tears clouded his vision at the thought of never feeling that security again.

“I know he is still here with us. At least, I hope he is.” He swallowed hard. Not knowing was torture.

“There are no words to describe how much his friendship meant to me. The love he gave from that huge heart of his was absolute.” Jackson wiped the tears that were flowing freely now, darkening his suit.

“So maybe I could tell you the things I loved most about Will. I love how he was my best friend since the first day of kindergarten. I love the many adventures we took and how he was always up for anything. All you had to do was ask. I love that we had the same dream and that we pursued it together. I love how he always followed his heart and did the right thing, no matter the consequences. I love how he supported the people he cared about and stood by them, even when we didn’t deserve

it. I love the scar he gave me when we were twelve so that I can think of him every time I look in the mirror. I love that he never lost his smile, not even when taking a beating from the drill sergeant and when the smile was the reason for the punishment. I love how he always knew what to say in every situation, and I love all the unforgettable memories I have because of him.”

By then, his voice was almost a whisper.

“Caroline and Jon, thank you for raising such an amazing son. All our lives are better having had him in it. Will’s memory will live on through us.” He paused and looked up. “Will, I’ll never forget you, buddy. I love you.”

Ready to escape the sea of sorrow staring back at him, he headed toward his spot in the audience, but stopped at the end of the aisle next to Caroline and Jonathan. He accepted a hug from them both and noticed Avery sitting in the same row. Her face was down and red from crying.

Then, she raised her gaze to him, and the emptiness he felt was mirrored in her eyes. At first, he couldn’t look away. She reminded him so much of Will, both in appearance and personality. But seeing her now and thinking of Will crushed the spirit right out of him. How could he ever face her again after this and not be consumed by raw, unforgiving agony?

Maybe someday, reminders of Will would give him comfort, but he couldn’t imagine it while so much of himself was missing.



That week, Eleanor stopped by his room less often than usual, and when she brought him food, she didn’t linger. She’d been hustling around the house, running the vacuum, and rummaging through cabinets and cooking for days. Then, by dusk on Friday, Eleanor’s light bustling sounds evolved into roars of conversations, music, and excitement. Metal utensils clanking against fine china and ice filling crystal glasses rang like bells through the house.

Another legendary Grayson Vane dinner party, no doubt.

His father's demand to stay out of sight at such an occasion came to mind, and he had a sudden urge to behave like a disobedient teenager. Part of him wanted to waltz into the room in nothing but his boxers and help himself to a drink or five. He could drown the pain in a vintage bottle of Scotch and forget for a few drunken hours.

Wouldn't Grayson be appalled? And wouldn't it be a sight to see him fumble to explain the embarrassment that was his son? But as with everything else, he couldn't muster the energy to go through with it. He'd already canceled all physical therapy appointments, and he couldn't remember the last time he got out of bed to do anything other than taking care of normal bodily functions. And even that was exhausting.

"Jackson," he heard someone whisper from outside of the door. "It's Avery. Can I come in?" She didn't wait for an answer and pushed open the door. "Eleanor said I could find you in here."

He ran his hand over his face before rolling over. The hallway light shining into the room was like a spotlight, shining on his vulnerabilities and burning his weary eyes. Squinting against it, he held up his hand to block the source.

At first, he could see only her silhouette in the doorway. She was wearing a long, dark dress that framed her shapely figure, and she held a glass in each hand. Then, as his eyes adjusted, he noticed the dress had a wide slit that exposed her left leg from the top of her thigh to her shoes. Her hair was wavy this time, and she wore it down, except the right side was pinned up with a silver clip.

"I could use some company, if you're up to it," she said to fill the silence. The irritation on his face made her legs want to run and escape a potential rejection, but she held firm. She'd picked out that fabulous dress explicitly to get his attention, and

she wasn't going to waste it. "Why are you in here and not enjoying the party?"

He dragged himself up to lean against the headboard. "I wasn't invited, nor would I attend."

"What's the matter? Stuffy dinner parties not your style? Don't answer. I already know." Crossing the room, she motioned toward the bed. "May I?"

When he nodded, she sat on the edge before handing him the extra drink. He took it but didn't sip.

"How are you?"

"Why are you here, Avery?" he asked, grateful he couldn't see her face in the shadows.

"At the party or knocking on your door?"

"Both."

His sharp tone had her questioning that decision, but only briefly. He needed her as much as she needed him, whether he could admit that or not.

"I wanted to see you. Eleanor called and said that you could use an old friend, and frankly, so could I." She ran her finger along the bottom edge of her glass and ignored her drumming heart. "When a colleague asked if I wanted to come with him tonight, not as a date or—"

"What about Will?"

"What about him?" she countered.

"Everyone is going about their life like nothing happened while I'm drowning in grief." Part of him felt guilty for lashing out at her, but exhaustion took precedence over patience. "He's been gone only...what? A couple weeks?"

"Jackson, it's been *five* weeks, and no one has forgotten what happened. Especially me. I was there, remember? I was the one that found him."

She stood and faced him, strong and fearless, and he admired her for it.

“Avery, I’m sorry.” He held out a hand, but she only stared down at him, her arms crossed. “Please.”

Conceding, because she could never stay mad at him, she slid her hand into his and slumped onto the bed again. “I’m tired, Jackson,” she said with a long sigh. “I’m tired of being sad all the time and constantly thinking about what we lost. I loved him, too.” Her voice was steady, but her body shuddered. “He was like a brother to me, but he took his own life, Jackson. He left *us*.”

“What?” His head was spinning. How could he give up? He’d assumed Will was fighting through and would always battle against what was pulling him under. For his family, for Sydney, for him.

“You didn’t know.”

He fought the urge to lash out again. “No.”

“Oh, Jackson.” She scooted closer and his eyes met hers and darkened.

“How could he do this?”

“You lived through that hell with him. You tell me.”

He ran his hands through his hair, clutched a handful, and rocked. “I can’t do this. I can’t do this without him.”

“Yes, you can.” She moved her hands to cup the back of his neck and felt him trembling. “You can do anything, Jackson.”

“It feels like I’m next. I don’t know how to stop it. I’m not sure I want to.”

“Jackson, think of Josh and Billy. They’d want you here, living life to the fullest. So would Will.”

“How?” He sat up and dropped his hands into his lap. “Show me how to do that, because I can’t see it.”

“I don’t know, but I’ll help you.” Pulling him close, she rocked with him and made promises she couldn’t dare speak yet. But there was always a chance for good to come from tragedy, beauty from the damaged, shimmers of light through darkness.

She had hope that it could all happen for them both, and that's all she needed. "We'll figure it out together. I promise."

He rested his forehead on her shoulder, too weak from treading an ocean of emotions, ebbing, flowing, and pulling him under with every crashing wave with no end in sight. He couldn't remember how it felt to not hurt. To not be angry, lost, and in absolute misery both physically and emotionally.

He circled his arms around her waist and let go for the first time since the incident. Giving in to her embrace, he felt the tension that had compounded over the past five weeks finally leave his body.

"Jackson?" His breathing soon stabilized, but the weight of him was getting too difficult for her to manage. Needing support, she shifted to rest her back against the headboard, and his head slid into her lap.

She froze, waiting to see if he reacted to the commotion, but he had fallen asleep and didn't stir. Content to wait, she brushed away the hair that had fallen into his face. The deep bags under his eyes told her he needed this, and she vowed to sit with him for however long it took.

But as the evening wore on, her eyelids grew too heavy to manage. Letting them fall closed, she leaned her head back and tried not to think about being in his bed. How many years had she dreamed about him and intimate moments with him? Too many to count, of course, but she pushed the thought aside. Getting her heart racing with long-awaited fantasies would not help with the task of remaining still.

Then, her heart took off anyway when an urgent rhythm of footsteps sounded down the hall. She didn't care who saw them lying in bed together, but she preferred those footsteps, walking with intention, did not belong to Jackson's father.

"Avery?" Eleanor whispered, shock evident in her voice. "I was coming to check on Jackson, but I can see he's in good

hands.” She moved closer to be able to speak to Avery without waking him.

“Eleanor, I’m worried. He had no idea how long it’s been since Will’s funeral or how he died.”

“I’m not surprised.” Eleanor took Avery’s hand, touched by her concern for Jackson, but anyone with eyes could see she was in love with him. Their entire childhood, she watched Avery follow Jackson around like a lovesick puppy. He never noticed, of course, and he probably had no clue now.

She looked down at Jackson. “He hardly eats, doesn’t sleep, and nothing I say or do works. I’m not even sure he hears me half the time. It pains me to see him hurting this way.”

“Me too. Before he fell asleep, he was overwhelmed with emotion.”

“He’s been in a deep depression but won’t talk about it. But he needs to let it out so some good can come back in. Maybe he will with you.”

“I hope so. If it’s okay with you, I’m going to stay. I’m afraid if I move, he’ll wake up.”

“That’s sweet of you, dear. Of course, you can stay. This sleep is going to do him a world of good. Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you, but would you mind telling Bradley Morgan that I won’t be needing a ride home tonight?” Avery didn’t think the message was necessary since they were not on a date. Still, she didn’t want to leave any perceived obligation open-ended. “If he’s still here.”

“Sure. I’d be happy to.”

Eleanor held on to Avery’s hand as she rose. “You got here just in time.”

After the last of the party guests departed, the house grew eerily quiet, except for the various creaks, moans, and pops the old

house made in the night. Although, it wasn't enough to keep Avery from dozing since she was later awakened to an intense wash of sunlight on her face and two numb legs.

Shielding her eyes, she looked down at Jackson, still sleeping soundly in her lap and his arms wrapped around her. He seemed content, tranquil.

I did that, she thought proudly, then winced. If she didn't return the blood to her lower half soon...

With a slight shift of her hips, she attempted to bring the feeling back to her legs without waking Jackson, but she was unsuccessful on all attempts.

The motion had him lifting his head and pushing up. He looked over his shoulder at her, and the disjointed, puzzled expression on his face brought a smile to her lips.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

"Did I...did you..." He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to make sense of why Avery was in his bed.

"Yes. You fell asleep while we were talking last night. You must have found me a real bore," she joked, but those sleepy blue eyes of his, near translucent in the morning sun, made her want to do more than laugh.

"Avery, I—"

"It's okay. I didn't want to disturb you, and congratulations."

"For what?"

"You slept all night." She pointed both thumbs at herself and winked. "Lucky charm."

He chuckled, and it was music to her ears.

"I can't remember the last time I slept for more than an hour. Thank you."

She nudged his shoulder. "No problem."

"Does Eleanor know you're here?"

"Yep, she came to check on you last night."

"Oh." With a sigh, he looked down at his hands.

"Don't worry. All your secrets are safe."

They sat in awkward silence awhile, neither knowing what to say, until Jackson spoke.

“I need to know how you did it? How did you move on and forget how much it hurts?”

His eyes begged for her to save him, and she was lost again.

“Because I don’t know how much longer I can live like this.”

Turning her body to face him, she slid a hand under his and brought it to her chest. He didn’t flinch or move away, warming her to the core.

“I haven’t forgotten, just learned to think differently. For weeks, I’d lie awake at night, crying, cursing him or reliving our memories together. Mostly cursing,” she flashed him a fleeting grin, “because too many times, those memories would turn on me, and I’d hear Will’s voice. I ignored it at first and kept cursing him like a sailor.”

He smirked.

“What?”

“We both know Marines are better at that...as with everything else.”

“My mistake.” God, he was adorable. “As I was saying, once the anger subsided, I could hear him telling me to live. Jackson, we never know how long we have left. We must choose to make the most of every day and that’s what I’m doing.”

Looking into his eyes, there was no denying what she felt. If she could think, she would have slid her other hand to his cheek and pulled his lips to hers. If only she were brave, she’d tell him how much she’d always loved him. But whenever it came to Jackson, *if only* was the story of her life.

“You make it sound so—” He stopped when Eleanor knocked and opened the door.

She smiled, happy to see the pair sitting close together and Jackson’s hand in Avery’s. “Breakfast is ready if you’re hungry,” she informed them before spinning, her skirt billowing with the motion, and hurrying away.

Jackson stared through the empty doorframe with suspicion. Despite a long night of dealing with guests, most of them probably sloppy drunk, she was oddly cheerful.

Without warning, Avery jumped up and rolled the wheelchair to the bed. "I'm famished. Shall we go eat?" She stood behind the chair and smiled down at him, enjoying the view of him shirtless in bed.

"I can't."

She rushed to his side. "Why not? Is something wrong?"

"I'm underdressed." The corners of his mouth curled up when he motioned to her dress.

She'd forgotten about the make-Jackson-notice dress she'd selected for the mission and was thrilled to know that it worked.

"Well, we can fix that." Feeling encouraged, she crossed the room to the closet. "There's must be something in here you can wear to our fancy breakfast shindig." Since there was no other option, she selected the only collared shirt in the closet and tossed it to him.

Once he was dressed, they headed to the dining room, but he stopped in the hallway outside the entrance and whipped the wheelchair around.

Surprised, she tossed up her hands and jumped back to save her legs from getting smacked with his. "Whoa, there, cowboy."

"I wanted to tell you something."

"Yes?" she managed, her heart still in her throat from the way he was looking at her with a sly smile and eyes bright and playful. It was a look she could get used to.

"I can still move my left leg a little, and last week, I had sharp tingles in my right leg. I can move that leg now, too. Some, anyway."

"Jackson, that's wonderful. Now, we need to continue your program and keep making progress." She bent down and placed both hands on his knees. "Are you ready?"

He thought about what she'd said earlier—healing could come through living. God, he hoped so. But, even if he wasn't convinced it was possible, he had to try. "I'm ready."

"That's the spirit."

After breakfast, Avery shifted in her seat to face Jackson. "What do you say to starting your next session here today?"

"You want to work out today? In that dress?"

"Good point. I'll go home to change and be back here within the hour." She held out her hand for his promise. "Deal?"

What about warming up? he thought. *Getting back in the swing of things at an introductory pace?* Slow and steady was not the race Avery was suggesting, and under normal circumstances, he'd respect that. But...but nothing. There was no reason not to, and he couldn't bring himself to disappoint her. S After all, she was offering what he needed—a chance. So, he took the deal.

Anyway, he'd already said he was ready, and his word was all he had.

Chapter Six



For the next three months after work, Avery met Jackson at the estate for his therapy sessions. They used the fitness equipment in his father's gym or whatever they could find around the estate. Being outdoors lifted his spirits, so whenever he rested, she walked the grounds to find new areas to use or researched exercises she could modify.

Spending time at the estate, in acres of beautiful gardens or at the lake with Jackson's undivided attention, had become her refuge. Her second home. And without the constraints of appointment schedules, she could be creative and spend more time on exercises when he needed.

And the new program was working. Jackson's strength and mobility had made considerable progress, and he was now able to stand on his own. With Avery's support, he could even take a few steps. Although it was painful, he didn't shy away from the work, but those exercises took the most out of him.

"How'd the workout go today?" Eleanor asked Avery one evening, adoring this one-on-one time with her. After Jackson's

sessions, Avery would often help her in the kitchen while he rested, then stay for dinner.

“I’m so proud of how hard he’s working. He took a few more steps today.”

“Praise the Lord. I bet he was so relieved and excited.”

“I wish I could say he was. I can’t read him. He doesn’t show a lot of emotion, and he was distracted,” Avery confided as she finished cutting the last carrot for the stir fry, her favorite. “Did anything happen recently to upset him?”

Eleanor pushed the pepper she was chopping into a bowl and set down the knife. “Well, he had another run-in with his father yesterday, and it was ugly. It shook him more than he’d ever admit. Plus, he’s been struggling with nightmares. He puts on a brave face when you’re here, but he hasn’t been improving mentally as he hoped.”

Eleanor poured the chopped vegetables into the wok, then removed the marinated chicken from the refrigerator. “I think he assumed his mind would improve as his body did.”

“He told me about the horrible noises and images he sees along with the migraines. I can’t imagine what that’s like. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Oh, honey. You are helping. You’re getting him out of his room and back in shape. You’re also giving him hope and someone his own age he can talk to.” She saw Avery’s shoulders droop and reached over the counter to pat her arm. “I know you want more but be patient.”

Avery pressed her lips together and tried to hide her disappointment with a grin. Despite spending three months, many late nights, and countless hours together, their relationship hadn’t progressed past being therapist and patient. He hadn’t tried to kiss or touch her in anyway remotely romantic, and he hadn’t said a word about how he was feeling.

“For as long as I can remember, my heart’s been his.”

“Have you told him? He’s not great at recognizing these things.”

“No. I don’t want to push him, but I’m going crazy wondering what he feels for me. If anything.” She let out a long breath. “If he needs time, I can wait. However long it takes. But it would be nice to know if he wants more.”

“He cares for you, sweetie, that’s easy to see. But he’s dealing with so much right now. Simply being able to rise each morning and get through his workouts without giving up is a victory. When things settle, he’ll be able to focus on more than just surviving each day.”

Avery nodded then slumped into her thoughts.

“I have an idea.” Eleanor circled an arm around Avery’s waist and leaned closer. “Why don’t you ask him out?”

“Eleanor, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” She smacked Avery on the hip and returned to the stove. “It would do him some good to get out of this house and have some alone time to explore who you are together when you’re not being therapist and patient.”

“Eleanor, you naughty girl. Do you have some magical mind-reading powers I don’t know about?”

“What?”

“I was just thinking about how our relationship is still strictly professional and stuck in the friend zone. It’s been three months for goodness sake.” She laughed to keep her frustration in check.

“Then, do something about it. He knows good and well how I feel.”

“Feel about what? Eleanor.” Avery joined her at the stove when she tucked her smile away and pretended not to hear. “You can’t say something like that and not elaborate.”

“It’s just a little motherly advice. He was so down and lonely when he came home, so I might have encouraged him to date or at least...you know.” She winked for clarity.

Avery gasped. “Eleanor, you *are* a naughty girl, and I love how you think.” She turned toward the island, pleased to have Eleanor’s support, then slid back to Eleanor’s side. “But he didn’t follow that advice, did he?” God, she couldn’t bear thinking of him with another woman.

“Not yet.” Eleanor winked again and returned to tossing the stir fry.

After dinner, Avery couldn’t bring herself to linger afterward as she usually did. When she was ready to leave, Jackson escorted her to the door, always the perfect gentleman, and her heart ached for him.

“Jackson?” She stopped in the doorway, shoved her trembling hands in her pockets, but couldn’t force a smile. “Some friends and I are going out on Saturday. Would you like to join us? It’ll be low-key. Just dinner and drinks.”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

The evolution of her expression going from nervous to disbelief to delight was amusing. “I don’t know what kind of company I’ll be, but it might be nice to get out.” At least he hoped it would.

“Okay. Great. I’ll pick you up at six.”

On Saturday afternoon, Eleanor found Jackson reading on the back porch. “I got you something.”

“What’s this?” he asked when she dropped a white paper bag in his lap.

“Open it.”

He reached in and pulled out a new pair of jeans and a red collared shirt.

“Thanks, Eleanor, but what’s it for?”

“Your date tonight.”

Although she was smiling, he scowled. “It’s not a date.”

“A pretty girl asked you to join her for dinner. Sounds like a date to me.”

He scoffed and returned the clothes back to the bag. “I appreciate the thought, but it wasn’t necessary.”

“I wanted to do something nice for you. You’ve been so sad lately, and now that you’re going on a...” She grinned. “Well, I can’t help but be happy for you.”

She patted his hand and contemplated whether she should say something about Avery. If she said too much, it could cause him to take a step back.

“Jackson, can I ask you something?”

He raised his eyes to her and nodded.

“How do you feel about Avery?”

“She’s great.” When Eleanor tilted her head and frowned, he knew that wasn’t the answer she wanted. “What are you asking me, Eleanor?”

“She has feelings for you. Deep feelings that go back to when you were kids.”

“I know,” he said and looked out at the lake in the distance, wishing he was there not having this conversation. “That’s why I’m going tonight.”

“Then you feel the same?”

“No, I don’t, but I owe it to her to try.” Maybe feelings would grow if he could find the energy to focus on her instead of the usual chaos.

“Good for you. She’s such a sweetheart, but her heart is vulnerable. Tread lightly.”

He understood what she meant, which only added to the pressure he already felt. Not only was he sick with nerves about being around strangers in a crowded, confined room for the first time, the wheelchair was going to be a hassle, and he was embarrassed by the dependency it created. On top of that, he

had Avery to think about. He knew exactly what she sought from him. Her eyes told him everything, and although she deserved answers, he didn't have any.

That evening, Avery arrived early and helped Jackson to the car. He was able to rise from the wheelchair independently, and while she tucked the chair into the trunk, he lowered himself into the passenger seat using the door frame for support.

"Well done," she said, joining him and flashing a smile over her shoulder.

Hope and anticipation danced in her eyes, and he wished he felt the same. It was the first time since the dinner party that he'd seen her in something other than shorts and a t-shirt, making the casual outing feel like more. The thin sundress exposed her shoulders, and the light brown dots in the fabric matched her eyes. It was also dangerously short, showcasing miles of her long tan legs. Yep, it was a date, no matter how much he denied it.

"You look nice," he said awkwardly, still unsure if he should be there.

"Thank you. You do too. Is that a new shirt?"

"It is. Eleanor went shopping this morning."

She laughed when he rolled his eyes, and the carefree sound helped him relax a bit.

"Want to know about the people you'll be meeting tonight?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Well, I work with Henry, and he is bringing his newish girlfriend Nichole, an elementary school teacher. She's a lot of fun and can get pretty rowdy at times. I think summertime is when she gets it out of her system before going back teaching our country's future leaders. Sometimes I worry about the future," she laughed again, feeling happier than she'd ever been.

"I can't wait to meet her."

“Brett and Molly were high school sweethearts and have not spent a day apart since freshman year. Their PDA makes me want to puke, but amazingly, they aren’t married with a hoard of babies yet.”

She paused and took a deep breath. “And then there’s Ben, the eternal bachelor. He has a hard time keeping his hands and lips to himself. Keep an eye out for him. His lips have no prejudices or boundaries.” She raised her eyebrows and gave him a look that said she wasn’t joking.

“I’ll remember that, and if his lips come anywhere near me, I’ll run over his toes with my wheel.”

“Ha! Good luck. He’s very sneaky. Oh, and although he’s harmless, he can get obnoxious when he drinks. He has a nasty habit of speaking before he thinks.”

“After eight years in the Marines, there’s not much I haven’t heard already. It takes a lot to offend me.”

“That might come in handy.”

She turned her eyes to him, but he pretended to be taking in the view of the city outside his window. He despised himself for the cowardice. She was so many wonderful things—beautiful, kind, strong, electric. They’d spent a lot of time together over the last several months, and he’d known her most of his life. He should be jumping at the chance to be with her. But why wasn’t he?

“We’re here,” she announced with a smile, trying not to let on that she noticed his sudden change in body language. “I know it’s been a while since you’ve done this, but I’ve got your back. Okay?”

Once inside, Avery looked through the restaurant for her friends and spotted Brett and Molly sitting close and kissing in the bar. With a quick eye roll, she headed that way. She introduced Jackson, ordered their drinks, and soon, Henry and Nichole joined them.

The friends chatted about things Jackson knew nothing about, it didn't take long for him to feel like an outsider. At the estate, he'd been completely cut off from the outside world. He knew nothing about movies, local bands, sports, or new events in Richmond.

It didn't bother him to be out of the loop. These days he preferred it, but it made contributing to their conversations nearly impossible. Plus, everyone was skirting around the uncomfortable topic—the awkward stranger added to the group with a wheelchair and ticking timebomb masquerading as a life.

The congested bar also felt like a flimsy box that could cave on him at any moment. At least the loud music and conversation helped drown out the thoughts he desperately wanted to escape and kept the smothering at a controllable level.

"Where's Ben?" Avery asked after they were seated, and the waitress left with their drink orders.

"You know him," Molly dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Gotta be late so he can make an entrance."

"So, Jackson," Brett began. "Avery tells us that you're making great progress. How is it working with our girl?"

He tipped his head toward her with a curious smile, and Jackson wondered what she'd told them already. "She's a tough coach," he answered, unsure of what to say.

Sensing his struggle, Avery filled in. "I've never had a patient that works as hard as he does. I could say that's from his military training, but he's always been like that." She glanced over at him and held his gaze.

"How long did you serve?" Nichole asked.

"Eight years."

"Wow, that's amazing."

Ready for a new topic, he grabbed the beer the waitress set in front of him and took a drink, unaware of her lingering eyes.

Nichole snorted out a laugh. "Geez, take a picture."

It was entertaining to the others, but Avery was aware of the way women reacted to Jackson. She'd witnessed it many times when they were younger, and Will would entertain her with elaborate stories about how women practically melted at his feet when they went out. Hell, she had been one of them. The man was a rare specimen, and the fact that he had no idea made him irresistible.

While they read the menu and decided on dinner, the friends continued to chat. The men talked about sports, excited for the start of the football season, and the women compared movies they had seen or books they were reading. Jackson was grateful they were lost in conversation and focusing on each other. He preferred to stay unnoticed and forgotten.

Soon, the waitress returned, accompanied by a tall man with a muscular build. His long arm was draped over her shoulders, and she appeared to be content with the personal attention.

"Look who I found causing trouble at the bar," the perky waitress announced and swatted the man in the belly with the back of her hand. He didn't flinch. Instead, he planted his lips on hers, bending her backward, before releasing her with a loud smack. As he strutted to his seat, he held up his hand for a high-five, but Brett was the only one to oblige.

The new guy must be Ben, Jackson gathered based on Avery's description.

"Told you," she confirmed, leaning closer with an all-knowing smirk.

"It's about time you showed up," Henry said to Ben.

"Dude, I had something to do."

"What was her name?"

"I can't remember," Ben laughed and slapped the table.

Well, Jackson thought amused, Ben was indeed the character Avery made him out to be.

As the evening progressed, the group's conversations grew louder and more animated, especially now that Ben was added to the mix.

"Everything okay?" Avery asked him, resting her chin on her hand. But before he could answer, they were interrupted by Ben calling for her from the other end of the table.

"You didn't introduce me to your date."

He was six beers in, Jackson observed, and that was only since he joined the group.

"Maybe there's a reason for that," she responded without turning around, her eyes still on Jackson and wide with amusement. Then, she sat up. "Did you ever think of that?"

"Oh, you're the guy who was in that awful accident over in..." Ben rested his elbow on the table and pointed at Jackson that tried to remember what he'd heard.

Henry kicked him under the table, and Ben shot his eyes at him.

"I bet you were in a tank. That would be so cool. What were you hit with? I bet it was a bomb or was it one of those landmines?" Henry kicked him again, harder this time. "Fuck! What the hell, man?"

"Maybe he doesn't want to talk about that, asshole."

"Oh, right. Sorry, man," Ben said to Jackson.

"Don't worry about it."

The group grew quiet and uncomfortable, precisely what Jackson was hoping to avoid. To end the awkward silence, he spoke up. "There were two missiles."

"I knew it! Damn, I have so much respect for you." He raised his beer. "Thank you for your service."

Surprised by Ben's tribute, the others raised their glasses.

"Thank you for defending our country, and..." He paused and beamed at Henry. "For defending our freedom to fuck whomever and whenever the hell we please. God bless the land

of the brave.” Ben slammed down the bottle, then chugged the remaining.

Worried, Avery lifted her eyes to Jackson and was relieved to see him grinning.

“Well, I’m glad our service brings him so much pleasure,” he whispered with a wink.

She laughed, enjoying the rare playfulness. Maybe this was the spark that would finally ignite his heart. God, she hoped so. She was already burning for him. All he had to do was catch up.

As the evening continued, Avery’s patience for the commotion at the table waned, and she was ready to have Jackson all to herself. Leaning over, she let the thin strap of her dress slide loosely off her shoulder. “Want to get out of here?”

On impulse, he nodded because he’d been ready to go for a while, but he hadn’t missed how her eyes went dark. She could have no secrets from him. Her expressive eyes told him everything, and even though he needed a break from socializing, he wasn’t prepared for what was on her mind either.

She motioned for the waitress to bring the check, and before her friends could embarrass her further, she signed the receipt and rushed Jackson out the door.

“Hope that wasn’t too excruciating,” she said and pulled the car out of the parking lot.

“I enjoyed how they interacted and played off each other. Reminded me of...” He was unable to speak their names.

Ignoring the internal warnings, she reached over and took his hand. “I know you miss them. How about a stroll? It’s a beautiful night, and I know a place near here.”

“Sure.”

Suddenly fidgety in her seat, the possibilities of what a romantic evening under the stars could bring was making her blood gush at a reckless pace. A first kiss, fireworks brighter than the stars, new promises, and the start of a lifelong connection.

“This is my favorite spot,” she told him when she parked the car near Gamble’s Hill Park. “It’s quiet, and at night, the city becomes a light show.” A bench overlooking the James River was available along the path, so they headed in that direction.

The air was cooler than a typical August evening but anticipating her next move had Jackson sweating. He shouldn’t have allowed the evening to continue, but the hope in her eyes crumbled his resolve.

While they sat, they chatted about the events from dinner, her friends, and his upcoming sessions. She told him about the new exercises she wanted to try and how she could modify them for outdoor workouts. It was a lot of talking about nothing, and when she ran out of conversation starters, they sat in silence and watched the lights.

It was dangerous, but her mind wandered anyway to the things she wished she could say to him and the words she longed to hear. She envisioned the life they could have together after he healed. They’d travel and cook dinner together. When she’d come home after work, he would greet her at the door and kiss her, excited to have her back in his arms. She would stare into his incredible blue eyes after making love, and her world would finally make sense. All the waiting and wishing would have been worth it, and she’d be unbelievably content for the rest of her life.

With their future in mind, she couldn’t wait another minute for that dream to begin. All her previous relationships had been stand-ins, mere steppingstones, preparing her for this moment. Whatever she had to do, she was going to kickstart their relationship that night.

She reached for her phone and with a trembling hand, launched a music app. Jackson’s head whipping around at the unexpected start of the song, a ballad about long-lost love, ironically, fueled her insecurities. But she took a deep breath

then stood in front of him. After all, dreams can't come true without action.

“Can I have this dance?” she asked and held out her hand.

He looked up, and it struck him how beautiful she was in the glow of the lamplight, surrounded by stars and moonbeams. All sources seemed to point to her, lighting the way, and he reached out to take her hand without realizing he'd done it. Somehow, his body was pressed against hers. His left arm was wrapped around her back while they swayed to the music, making small, intimate movements.

“Look at you, Jackson. You're dancing.” Happy to finally be in his arms where she belonged, she rested her head on his chest. He was getting healthier, stronger, and she took pride in knowing it was because of the work they were doing together. Listening to the steady rhythm of his heart, she shivered knowing it would soon beat for her.

When the player paused to select another song, she leaned her head back to test the waters. It was the perfect setting for their first kiss. She slid her hand from his shoulder to the back of his neck, and gently pulled him to her.

But when his lips brushed hers, her mind went blank. Rays of sunshine, stakes of fire, and shooting stars of varying levels of intensity, blazed through twenty years of waiting and wishing. It all came crashing down around her, and she was unraveled.

Free of all doubts and hesitations, she locked both arms around his neck and gave herself to him. She no longer heard the cars zooming by on the nearby bridge or the soft music playing. She was floating in a daze, lost in him, and she never wanted to be found. His kiss was everything she imagined it would be, and when he pulled back, super-charged tingles continued to circulate wildly through her body.

Her eyes fluttered open to meet his but what she saw in them pierced her heart and rocked her. The quiet beat from the music

pulsed in her ears, and the hope she once had for their happy ever after was now a meaningless fantasy.

He felt nothing.

“I need to sit down,” he said, and shuffled toward the wheelchair.

She sat beside him on the bench, and stared out over the river, letting her vision blur. How could their first kiss leave her feeling... empty? This can't be what she'd waited for, fantasized about. She wouldn't accept it. She must have read him wrong.

He noticed the change in her. It had been a long time since he held a woman in his arms, and he was out of practice. He enjoyed the kiss, but the love he felt radiate from her touch was absent for him.

“Avery, I just need more time.”

Picking at her fingernails, she focused on keeping the tears where they belonged. “I've loved you since we were kids, and when you showed up at the office, I thought it was fate bringing us together. If you can see potential with us, I'm willing to wait.”

“I don't have any answers right now. Every day is a new challenge.” He twisted in his chair and took her hand in his.

At his soft touch, her eyes shot to his and held. It was the first time he'd reached for her, and it meant everything.

“All I know is that I enjoy your company, and I'm grateful to have you in my life. You're more than my physical therapist. You and Eleanor are all I have, and I don't want to lose you.”

The fear in his voice was more than her fragile heart could take. She ached to comfort and give him whatever he needed. But she knew this moment would happen over and over if she let it. A painful cycle of her begging him to open his heart and him being too dependent on her to let her go.

“I'm not going anywhere, but I need more. I can't just be the person you call when it gets hard.”

“I know, and I want to get there.”

“Then, that’s all I need...for now. But at any point, if you determine that you can’t love me the way I deserve, you have to tell me. It will hurt like hell.” She closed her eyes, not wanting to think of how crushed she would be. “But you’re going to have to let me go.”

Holding his hand to her cheek, she prayed for God to give her the strength to let him.

They rode in silence back to the estate. On autopilot, she parked and removed the wheelchair from the trunk. But by the time she pushed it around to the passenger side door, Jackson had already climbed out and was waiting for her.

Despite herself, she smiled, proud of how far he’d come. But then, he reached out. She eyes flew to his as he took her hand and pulled her into his arms. This was what she’d been begging for him to show her—spontaneous romance, raw emotion. Acceptance of her as his.

Her knees softened when he trailed the back of his hand over her cheek.

“Thank you for telling me how you feel and for not giving up.”

“I could never give up on you, Jackson. You’re the only man I’ve ever loved.” *Or ever will.*

Encouraged, she rose to her toes and kissed him, this time with more intention and passion. She wanted him to need her, desire her, and know he could have all of her.

His mouth answered as she leaned into him, plundered, and offered. His strong hands ran up her back and tangled in a fistful of her hair as their lips parted. The feel of his body through the thin dress fabric warmed her, and she was desperate for more.

She knew all too well what it was like to crave him, and his hands, needy and demanding, were forcing her over the edge. When she offered, he took more, and soon, her own greedy

hands found their way inside his shirt. His body was a work of art, and she wished she could see more of him and savor this moment. But his tongue brushed against hers, deepening the kiss and snapping the last shred of control she thought she had.

She pressed hard against him to take more, making his legs shake from the added pressure, but he couldn't stop. He'd forgotten how it felt the heat of a beautiful woman. For the first time since returning, the shambles his life had become didn't register or matter. She desired him despite the wheelchair, mood swings, and depression. Despite having nothing to offer other than his damaged body.

But when his name escaped her throat, he was reminded that the beautiful woman in his arms was Avery, and he was doing the opposite of treading carefully, as Eleanor warned. Internal alarms sounded off, and he drew back.

"I should go," he said and kissed her forehead. "It's getting late."

"Oh. Okay. Need help getting inside?"

"No. I've got it." He hid behind a smile and said nothing as he lowered into the chair.

"See you tomorrow, then."

"See you."

She watched him roll up the driveway and into the house, then let out the breath she'd held while waiting for one last gesture. Something to tell her she had misread his eyes again. He gave her nothing.

Rounding the car, she kicked the tire. The trip to her apartment was going to be an emotional one. She was brokenhearted over their first kiss, but hopeful after the second. Something was holding him back, but he wanted to be with her. She just needed to stay positive and patient. And with a little persistence and plenty of seduction, she should be able to knock down his walls and win his heart.

It was finally happening. Maybe not in the way she expected or wanted, but that was okay. Putting the car in drive, she couldn't wait for the next day—the official start of their love story.

A bullet to the head disguised as a migraine began to rattle inside his skull the second he entered the house. It had to be punishment for what he'd done. He shouldn't have kissed her that way. He was a weak excuse for a man, allowing his loneliness to take over his better judgment.

Somehow, he managed to get himself to his room and out of the wheelchair before the pain, nausea and dizziness incapacitated him. He laid on the bed, his arms out wide and accepted the merciless torture. After all, he deserved it.

Chapter Seven



The lake had become Jackson's refuge. The eye of the storm. Usually, it would calm his nerves, if only for a short while. But that warm October afternoon as he looked out over the smooth water, the storm raged around him.

Even though his thoughts were anything but peaceful and the tranquil landscape only fueled his inner turmoil, he couldn't bear to go inside. One look at him in his current mood, and Eleanor would see right through him. He was incapable of lying to her, and since he didn't care to talk about his predicament, he simply stayed where she'd never venture.

Eleanor's dramatic detest of weather and bugs had a way of lightening his mood. Whenever she began a rant, complaining about the heat or gnats that congregated near the water or her precious garden, he'd grab a drink, park his wheelchair somewhere with a clear view of the show, and bask in the glory that was Eleanor Brown.

But even that couldn't bring him to face her that day.

A pair of geese drifted over the lake, catching Jackson's attention. They circled the lake and landed gracefully on top of the water, and he wished for the freedom to soar above the clouds and move about the earth with ease. Then, maybe, he would be so damn bored all the time. All he could do was sit around and think. Which was dangerous since all that he could think about was his lack of ability to do just about anything on his own, his aching heart, and the never-ending guilt.

Nearly two months had passed since he and Avery officially started dating. While her presence and bubbly personality helped ease his loneliness, his feelings for her were not developing as he'd hoped. He'd give anything to take her in his arms and feel...something.

How could her love be so strong already and seemingly infinite?

It would help if he could look at her and not see Will. The more time they spent together, the more her expressions, laugh, energy, phrases reminded him of what he lost. Sometimes, being with her was too painful to ignore. He also had difficulty separating the woman from the girl he remembered in middle and high school. He hadn't been attracted to her then. She'd seemed young and naive, even though she was only three years younger.

But she was no child now, he was reminded when she tried to spark some intimacy between. She made it clear that he could have her whenever he wanted, but sex would mean everything to her and make promises he wasn't sure he could keep, further complicating their already delicate relationship.

He needed more time. They could take that leap when their relationship was stronger—when he was stronger. Although, she'd been patient, and more forgiving than he deserved. She was satisfied knowing he was trying, but her flirting and affection had advanced beyond his comfort level.

Frustrated, he snatched the fishing rod off the dock with a sigh, jammed the hook into the lure, and tossed the line into the water. He wasn't interested in fishing that day, but he needed a distraction, and there was nothing else to do. He'd finished the book he opened the day before and had already completed an upper body workout. Now, he was waiting for Avery to arrive for their regular Tuesday session and provide the company he needed to pass the time.

God, he hated being bored.

"Hi, handsome," he heard Avery say and soon felt her soft hands on his shoulders.

She kissed him quickly on the cheek, then stood in front of him. To see her, he had to shield his eyes from the late-afternoon sun.

"You're here early. What's that?" He nodded toward the large basket she carried.

"Guess."

"Snakes?"

"Eww. Why in the world would I bring you snakes? Try again, silly."

Jackson pretended to contemplate the basket then squinted when he returned his eyes to her. "Fireworks."

"Interesting idea, but you cause enough of those when you kiss me." She leaned down to press her lips to his. "Boom," she whispered, then stood. "Give up?"

"I never quit."

"True, but it may take all day. How about I tell you?"

"Sure."

She removed the towel on top to reveal food containers, glasses, a bottle of wine, and china.

"You made dinner?"

"Well, Eleanor made it," she rolled her eyes with the confession, "but it's for us to have a little private celebration."

"Oh, yeah? What are we celebrating?"

“You don’t remember?” She poked out her bottom lip and tilted her head in a dramatic pout.

“Of course, I remember. Not only do I never quit, I don’t forget either.” That was the trouble, wasn’t it? He remembered everything in vividly gruesome detail. Setting down the fishing rod, he reached into the tackle box and pulled out a long-stem pink rose. “Happy birthday.”

Gasping, she set down the basket to take the flower and sit on his lap. “You remembered.”

“And,” he leaned over the arm of his wheelchair, “this is also for you.” Holding up a tiny gold gift bag, he laughed when she squealed and clapped her hands together, causing the rose to wiggle in his face.

She reached inside the bag, removed two small pieces of stiff paper, and studied the small print through her sunglasses. “Oh, Jackson. I wanted to go to this so badly. They sold out like the first week. How did you get these?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets.”

“Thank you so much!” She circled her arms around his neck and squeezed before pushing the glasses onto her head to kiss him. “Wait.” Leaning back, she studied him. “There are two tickets here. Does that mean you’re going with me?”

“You know I’m not a fan of stuffy dinner parties,” he said flatly, looking down his nose at her.

“It’s not a party. It’s a gala fundraiser. That’s totally different, and all the money raised goes to the Warrior Angels Foundation.” Tears filled her eyes when Will jumped into her thoughts.

She blinked fast to clear them, then remembered the date listed on the ticket, and looked again to confirm. “Jackson, it’s this weekend. On your birthday.”

“Yeah.” He fiddled with the hem on her shorts, not yet sure if he was ready to face the rest of the world again or the fact that he would soon be another year older.

Placing a finger under his chin, she lifted his face. “When I was little, I believed we were destined to be together since our birthdays were so close. It was my wish every time I blew out the candles.”

“Avery, I...”

“I know you don’t love me yet, and it’s okay. Really,” she added when he frowned. “It’s not your fault that I have drooled over you since we were kids.” She kissed him and lingered, urging him to offer more. When he didn’t, she sat up and fought the disappointment. “Thank you for going through whatever trouble it took to get these tickets.”

“Actually, it wasn’t too hard. I texted Harrison, and he got them for me.”

Avery smacked Jackson on the chest and returned the sunglasses to her face. “Well, either way, I’m excited and can’t wait to see you all dressed up.”

She let out a chuckle when Jackson groaned. He may hate wearing a tux, but he was going to look so handsome in it. For her dress, she planned to wear something sultry enough to make him want to rip it off her as soon as he saw her.

He’d been holding back, keeping her at arms-length for some reason she couldn’t understand. But if he’d allow himself to let go long enough for her to seduce him, it could give him a very pleasurable incentive to keep his walls down. It was what she’d always wanted. Well, she also really wanted to feel him inside her, but Jackson’s heart was definitely top on her list.

“Will Harrison be there, too?” she asked for a distraction. Thinking of being with him in bed, this time without clothes and for reasons other than sleeping, had her blood simmering.

“Yeah.”

“Are you not excited to see him?”

“No, I am. It’s just...we haven’t talked much since losing Billy.”

“I bet you’ll pick up right where you left off. You always said he was like a father to you.”

Jackson’s smile returned. “Billy used to joke about how generous he was to share Harrison with me. I should have been jealous of how close they were.”

“But you loved them both.”

He nodded and looked out over the water. Emotions he wasn’t prepared to face again came bubbling back to the surface.

Recognizing the trigger, Avery slapped her leg and stood. “Why don’t we get started on your workout? I have a fun game for us to play today.”

“Can we eat first? I’m starving, and I smell chicken.”

“Jackson! Did you skip lunch again?”

She stomped her foot and thrust her fists onto her hips, and Jackson tried not to remember that little girl. “Guilty.”

“How are you supposed to build muscle if you don’t eat?”

She let out an extended breath and checked her watch. There were a couple more hours of good daylight remaining, and Eleanor would be leaving at six. With the sunset and some much-needed privacy, it was the perfect romantic setting to execute her itinerary.

“Fine. Let’s eat.”

“All right, mister. No more stalling. We have a lot to do.”

“Slave driver,” Jackson mumbled under his breath, then smiled innocently.

“I heard that, but you’re going to love today’s exercise. I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that. If I don’t, you’re going to have to up your game plan.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’m ready, but it’s the fourth quarter, and you’re down by six points. Are you going to step up Mr. Running Back, or are you going to fall short of the goal line?”

“I always get the touchdown.”

“We’ll see about that.” Leaning on his thighs, she pressed her lips to his and let a soft moan escape to get his blood moving.

“I don’t think the defense kisses the offense before the game-winning touchdown.”

“This team does, and you’re not even in the red zone yet.”

“I’m impressed with your football knowledge.”

“I watched you and Will play my entire life. Picked up a thing or two.” She winked before resetting her face. “Now, stand up,” she demanded, pretending to be a hard-nosed coach.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She watched Jackson push the footrests of his chair out of the way, remove his shirt, and grip the arms of the wheelchair, making his biceps and triceps bulge. Her blood simmered again, but when he grunted on the way up, she stepped closer to help.

“Okay, big shot,” she teased when he held up a hand. Now that he was standing sturdy in front of her with a smug look on his face, she grinned with pride. “Been practicing that, have you?”

“What else do I have to do around here?”

Twisting, she gauged the space they had to work with and estimated there was at least three yards of dock behind her. “Let’s see if you can make it to the edge.”

“Seriously?” He’d rarely taken more than a few steps during their workouts, and now she wanted him to walk halfway down the dock?

“What’s the matter? Scared?”

He groaned and squinted his eyes at her. “Never.” Without waiting for further insults, he strained to lift his leg an inch or two off the wood planks and set it down in front of him. The back leg was harder to lift due to the angle, so he slid it across the rigid surface.

“Good. This time, start with the other leg.”

He did as she instructed, and after a few minutes, he had moved forward several planks.

“I’m so proud of you, but we have a long way to go.” She smiled when he swayed then rested his hands on his wobbly knees. Time to up the ante. “Man, watching you work is making me sweat.” Taking hold of her t-shirt, she pulled it over her head to reveal a lavender and white striped bikini top and her tight torso.

“Going swimming today?”

“Maybe. Now, keep moving. We don’t have all day.”

When several more planks were behind him, he watched her wiggle slowly out of her shorts, paying him no mind. “What are you doing?”

“It’s weird how the temperature out here keeps getting hotter and hotter.”

“Right. I know what you’re doing.”

Closing the distance between them, she tossed the shorts out of the way with a flip of her arm. “Is it working?” She kissed his bare shoulder then moved up his neck before nibbling his ear.

“All right, damn it.” The nibble worked, he had to admit and angled his head to see her. “Are we walking or not?”

“You’re flustered, Jackson.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just ready to get this exercise over with. It’s not exactly a walk in the park, you know.”

She was also ready to be finished since she had more in store for him. “Fine, but don’t forget to take in the view during your stroll.” She spun around and strutted slowly to his next destination. “Three more planks.”

It took more effort to complete the challenge than he expected, causing a spike in his heart rate. He was sweating like he’d run a marathon, but he was moving, and that was all that mattered. He picked up his leg again, but the exertion tipped him over the edge. His eyes glossed over, and when he tried to

focus on what was in front of him through the haze, he saw stars instead of the sunshine and water.

The sound of Avery's footsteps rushing past him echoed in his ears, and the last thing he expected was a splash of cold water on his back.

"Shit!" he yelled, and when she finally came into focus, she was standing inches away and trying, unsuccessfully, he noticed, to stifle her amusement. "What did you do that for?"

"You were about to pass out."

"Oh," he managed before his eyes wandered over her and noticed her bikini top was missing. "Avery."

"Don't stop now," she instructed in a soft sensual tone. "There are only a few more seconds left on the clock, and you haven't scored yet. I'm still winning."

"Since when is stripping part of your lesson plan?"

"Since you became my boyfriend. Plus, I'm in charge of your therapy and get to call the plays."

"Oh, really?" Damn, she looked sexy with her hair tied up loosely off her neck and her cheeks pink from the heat.

"Yep. I call the shots." She stepped back to the edge of the dock and planted her feet. "You have a few steps remaining for the game-winning touchdown." But, if everything goes to plan, they would both win. She just hoped he didn't cancel the game.

Because he refused to back down from a challenge, he kept going, even though he knew what she planned to do next. While he shuffled toward her, he wrestled with how to handle it. He was desperate to end the numbness and pain, but he also needed to be careful with her heart. Sex could ease the tension, temporarily at least, and touching her nude body might be enough for him to get past his hesitation. He wanted their relationship to work. Shouldn't that be enough to make it so?

With every inch he moved toward her, her heart and desire raced faster. Her gaze held a firm grasp on his, daring him to follow through on what his loins were begging for. At least she

hoped he was turned on by seeing her this way. If he wasn't, she wouldn't survive it.

"Touchdown," she sang softly when his toes reached the edge of the dock next to her. She hadn't moved from her spot. Couldn't. She turned her head to him, and he did the same. With eyes locked, shoulders touching, they stood motionless in the silence and breathed.

Needing a distraction, she bent over, removed her bikini bottom then faced him. Vulnerable and bare, she waited for him to make the first move. Every second that passed, she wondered if he was going to take what she offered, torturing her already straining system. Then, he finally shifted and cupped his hands around her waist, and her heart seemed to stop on contact.

"Jackson," she sighed. She wanted to touch him, pull him close, and feel his body against hers, but she was frozen in the moment—too shocked to move. She was about to get everything she dreamed of, wished for, prayed over.

He slid his hands slowly up and down her sides, his eyes following. Her skin was soft as velvet, and he ached to bury all his troubles in her loving embrace. She'd accept whatever he gave, but was it enough?

She'd been waiting for this moment for years. Could he meet her expectations? He was out of practice. So much about him had changed, not only his body, and their relationship was complicated. Although, he was the one making it that way. He was the one holding them back, overthinking everything.

Maybe he should go for it. Maybe it would change how he felt about her. But what if it doesn't? Wouldn't sex make it worse? Shit. Why was it so hard for him to simply live in the moment? Why couldn't he simply feel something?

"Sweetheart." She lifted his gaze to hers with a touch of his cheek. The more he touched the more tense he became, but her body demanded she keep trying before he retreated and left her

wanting again. “Shut out the noise and listen to your heart. What is it saying?”

“It’s torn.”

Her heart cracked. “Why?”

“I haven’t been with anyone in so long. I don’t know if I still can.” And there was also his struggle to give his heart to her, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“Is that what’s bothering you?” Relieved, she rose to her toes and pressed her lips to his. Then, his parted, and it was the surrender she needed. She leaned into him and threw her arms around his neck, drawing him down to her.

Her body begged for more, but the force of it made his already weak legs buckle. He grabbed hold of her shoulders for support, but she hadn’t expected it, and they both stumbled, falling over the edge of the dock into the cool water.

Immediately, she sprung to the surface, laughing at her luck until she noticed Jackson had yet to emerge. Screaming for him, she swam around and searched under the water, panic quickly taking over. She was frantic for a sight of him.

Then, he appeared a few yards in front of her. He dragged himself to the dock and held onto the post underneath while he caught his breath.

“You scared me,” she admitted, swimming to him and reaching for the hand he held out for her. “I’m so sorry, Jackson. I wasn’t thinking. This is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” he huffed. “If my legs worked, it wouldn’t be so awkward.”

“Well, maybe this is better. Swimming is a great way to build muscle, you know.” Gliding closer, she held on to the post he was gripping. “We could try skinny dipping instead of walking next time.”

“But the view was so beautiful.”

Her heart full and giddy from the rare compliment, she wrapped her legs around his waist and shifted so their bodies

were pressed together. “This is the best birthday present ever. But I need you to take me, Jackson. Here, in the grass, your bed, I don’t care,” she managed before retaking his mouth and she wasn’t gentle. Her body demanded it.

“Eleanor will be gone for a while. We have the entire estate to ourselves.”

“Avery, I—”

“I know you’re worried, but you’re safe with me. Whatever you want, I’ll give it.” She pressed her lips to his neck. “Whatever you can give me in return, it will always be enough.” She kissed his jaw then straightened. “Please, Jackson. Can you try?”

When her eyes met his, there was something new in them. He could have ignored her usual fire or playfulness, but he had no power against her plea.

He nodded, unwilling to disappoint her again. “But not here.”

“Okay. How do you want me, Jackson?”

“Inside.”

For the walk from the lake, she’d slipped on her shirt and shorts only so she could seduce him while removing them again. In his bedroom, enough sunset remained to light the room in a subtle golden glow. Perfect for the romance she envisioned their first time would have, and as she closed the door, she could feel his eyes on her.

Crossing to him where he sat shirtless on the bed, her breathing was shallow, her heartbeat erratic, and her face undoubtedly registered her excitement, but she didn’t care. He was giving himself to her, and that’s all that mattered. She combed her fingers through his wet hair and trembled when his hands found the back of her thighs.

“I want you to touch me everywhere,” she whispered and held his gaze. He seemed more confident now, confirming he

was ready for her. “For years, I’ve dreamed of having your hands on me like this. I have a weakness for you, Jackson.”

Her head dropped back with a sigh when his hands moved to her hips, then under her shirt, flaring her desire already burning hot.

With his hands gripping her waist, he slowly slid them up her sides, pushing the tight cotton tank up and over her bare breasts. She lifted her arms and freed herself of the fabric while his hands continued to trail over her skin, smooth and airy as a feather. But the passion simmering inside her was weakened by his gentle touch, and her arms grew too heavy to move. He took his time, and she basked in new pleasures, soaring higher with every inch he explored.

But when his hands cupped her breasts, impatience and desire pierced through her with the force of a flaming arrow.

“My turn.” She climbed onto his lap, straddled his hips, and ran her hands over ridges of muscle. He took her breath away, and the cobalt blue eyes she wished to see hazy with desire were wandering over her body, taking in every detail. “I feel beautiful when you look at me like that.”

His eyes lift to her. “You are.”

Unable to wait any longer, she kissed him and dug her fingers into his hair. Their lips parted instantly, and the urgency of his hands on her body had her hips moving against him. She felt him go hard under her, giving her encouragement to take what she wanted.

But somehow, she managed to stand in front of him again. She missed him already but knew there would be more caresses, pleasure, and overwhelming sensations when they were free of all layers between them. She’d been ready for this moment since she first saw him again, and now, to her relief, he was too.

Her gaze held his as she unbuttoned her jean shorts. Then, she pushed the zipper halfway down, dropped her arms by her sides and waited. Understanding her intentions, he sat up,

hooked a finger in her front pocket, and pulled her to him. As he did with her shirt, he slid his hands over her skin inside the shorts and gently pushed until they dropped to the floor.

Once again, she stood naked in front of him, but he wasn't fighting it this time. Even in the dim light, she could see that he accepted her, wanted her, and was aroused by the sight of her.

"My turn," she said again and pushed him back onto the bed. Grabbing hold of the waistband of his shorts, she drew them over his hips. Her breath caught in her chest when she saw him, and she had never wanted someone so badly.

She tossed the shorts across the room and was on top of him, taking him inside her before he could prepare. The force of it, the pure, unrestrained force of their bodies coming together, was more powerful than she'd expected. The feel of him was better than she dreamed. She sucked in an audible breath and began to move. Slow at first because she wanted this moment to last and make him come undone.

But when his hands moved over her breasts again, everything around them faded away. She was floating in a fantasy world, dizzy from the glorious feel of him inside and out. Then, she lost a part of herself when his hands smacked against her hips. He was gripping for control—as senseless with passion, lust, and hunger as she was.

Sitting up, he pressed his body against hers, his lips quickly finding her neck and her weakness, triggering more explosions and raw need inside her. With abandonment, they moved in hot, languorous strokes. His mouth urgent as his lips trailed down her neck to her breasts. His hands wild, digging into her skin as he held on, and she arched to welcome it. Everywhere he touched, layer upon glorious layer of sensations surged through her and had her body responding with astonishing pleasure.

This was what their love could be, and all she could think was they'd waited too long for this. Then, his warmth filled her. She didn't hear the unbridled sounds that boomed unabandoned

from her throat. Shocks so strong and indescribable that she couldn't imagine them ever being repeated rocketed through her body and had her unraveling.

Nothing else mattered. Only him and what he did to her. She trembled, shivered, and shimmered until drained of all energy. Collapsing on top of him, she laid, breathless and in awe of the magic they were together.

No one else had ever made her feel this way. Sure, she'd enjoyed sex before, but Jackson gave her a multitude of new sensations she'd never experienced with the others. Not that she'd dated much, but she had needs, and she had no trouble finding a good-looking, willing man whenever the need arose. She'd bothered to start a relationship now and then, but they never lasted because, in her heart of hearts, she'd always been waiting for Jackson.

And now, as she laid with him in the dark, spent and satisfied, she knew she'd been right all along. They were meant for each other. Even with all the doubts, pain, and hurdles he was dealing with, Jackson had felt it, too. She was sure of it. The passion between them had been too remarkable to ignore.

"So much for your concern," she nearly purred out, but he didn't respond. Listening to his steady breathing, she rested a hand on his chest. He'd fallen asleep.

I did that, she boasted to herself and snuggled in beside him. Their lovemaking had been unbearably intense, more than even she anticipated, and she wanted to feel that overpowering explosion again and again. To see and feel him lose control because of the love and passion she showed him.

He belonged to her now, and she'd do anything to keep it that way. Thinking of round two and many more to come, she happily drifted off to sleep with him.

When the alarm clock rang loud and proud on her phone the following morning, she fought the urge to throw it across the room. She was warm, comfortable, and her muscles were uncharacteristically languid. Groggy, she hit the snooze and tossed the sheet over her head. Work was the last place she wanted to go. She'd much rather be—

The reason for her feeling so loose and content that morning flooded her thoughts. She and Jackson made love for the first time. Breathing deep, she took in the scent of him, and suddenly, she was ready to seduce him again.

Except this time, it would be in the broad light of the rising sun. Slowly, she lifted the sheet, excited to see his gorgeous anatomy lying beside her, but he was gone. She sat up.

Where was he, and what should she do now? Should she go look for him? Take a shower? Tipping up her phone, she checked the time. There was plenty of time to do both before work. To satisfy her longing, she decided to start the treasure hunt first. And when she found that gorgeous loot, she hoped to entice him to join her for a couple's bath or better yet, round two.

She slipped on shorts and pulled the tank top over her head, not bothering with a bra. Less he'd have to remove when their bodies came back together. With a tremble, she padded down the hall.

Soon, she heard someone in the kitchen and headed that way. But as she passed the gym door, the sound of metal weights clanking against each other had her stopping outside.

"Found ya," she whispered to herself and carefully pushed on the old handle, cracking the door open enough to peek inside undetected. He'd already removed his shirt, to her delight, and sweat glistened on his shoulders as he pushed the dumbbells overhead. Since he hadn't heard her, she watched him work. Muscles swelled in all the right places with every movement.

When he turned the wheelchair around, she opened the door wide and smiled. “You’re up early.”

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

She crossed the room and leaned on a nearby machine, her arms crossed to the shiver his cool greeting caused. “Do you usually get up at the crack of dawn to work out?”

He wiped his face with a towel before lifting a fifty-pound weight off the rack and holding it up. “Usually,” he answered before slowly lowered the weight behind his head.

“Okay. Well,” she began, feeling awkward and in the way. “I guess I’ll leave you be. See you later?”

He cut his eyes briefly to her and forced a smile. “Yeah.”

When he could no longer hear her footsteps in the hall, he dropped the weight beside the wheelchair and ran a hand over his face. *Damn it!* There had been so much happiness on her face when she entered the room, but he managed to squash that like a heartless jerk. What was wrong with him?

“Was that Avery I heard leaving?” Eleanor asked from the doorway, surprising him.

“Yes,” he managed and reached for the weight on the floor. “She has to work today.”

“I see.” Eleanor couldn’t hide her amusement at discovering Avery had spent the night. “It appears things are going well between you.” When Jackson didn’t respond, she knew what that meant. “Sweetie, what is it?”

“Nothing.” He didn’t bother to shade his tone.

“Don’t you dare fib to me, boy. There’s—”

“Eleanor, I know you’re trying to help, but can I please finish my workout in peace.”

“Whatever you want, but I’ll be here if you change your mind and want to talk.” She patted his shoulder, but before closing the door, she looked back at him. He was beating himself up over something that happened with Avery, and she suspected she knew what it was. “Time has the power to fix more than just

muscles, sweet boy. Give yourself that, and your heart will follow.”

When the door shut behind her, he tossed the weight onto the rack then rested his elbows on his knees. “Fuck me.”

He hadn’t had one minute of sleep for days, and all night, he wore a track in the living room rug pacing in the wheelchair. He allowed her to seduce him, and he’d enjoyed it. Thankfully, his manhood worked as it should, but why did their first night together feel more like a mistake than a profound moment between new lovers?

She expected him to welcome her with open arms that morning, and he’d disappointed her. He hadn’t intended to be rude. He just didn’t know what to say, and he was terrified she’d ask him if he felt differently now.

The truth would have hurt them both. But if Eleanor was right, his feelings could change with patience and healing. Hell, if he would stop analyzing every fucking detail of every feeling, action, thought, he may actually enjoy himself.

He had the company of a beautiful woman that loved and adored him. She’d even managed to shock his lower half back to life. The least he could do was show her gratitude and affection. After all, she wasn’t asking for much more than that, and he’d yet to really give their relationship a good, honest try.

He’d been so consumed with all that was missing in his life that he hadn’t appreciated what he’d gained. Well, no more, he decided. Their relationship would officially start over that day. He was going to give her the best of himself, whoever the hell he was now.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she said shyly when he called her that evening after work.

“I wanted to apologize for my sour mood this morning. I’m still learning how to deal with myself.”

“I understand.”

He could tell from her tone that she did, but her disappointment was still fresh. “Will you be coming over tomorrow for our session?”

“Oh, I can’t. Molly and Brett broke up yesterday, and she asked the girls and me to come keep her company. Thursday was their usual date night.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Jackson remembered the couple from when he joined Avery and her friends for dinner. “They seemed so happy together.”

“Yeah. No one saw it coming, especially Molly. All of a sudden, he decided her unconditional love and devotion all these years wasn’t enough for him.”

She sighed through the phone and Jackson hadn’t missed the hint she was sending him. “Well, I’m sure he’ll come to his senses soon and realize his mistake.”

“Maybe. If she’ll take him back by then.” She took another audible breath. “Well, I better get going. I have a lot of work to do around the house.”

“Avery,” he began before she could hang up.

“Yeah?”

“I ordered my tux today.”

“You did?” No matter how upset she had been that morning, she was still excited about their night out that weekend.

“Yes, but I need to know what color you will be wearing.”

“Oh, yeah? Why?”

“That’s none of your concern. What color is your dress?”

“Dark purple.”

“Nice. I’ll pick you up at six,” he said, and didn’t wait for a response before disconnecting.

For hours, he and Eleanor planned out the perfect evening—from the tux to the limousine and everything in between. He was willing to do whatever it took to make up for his behavior that morning and to give their relationship a real chance. But if

a night of romance didn't make his feelings grow, then nothing would.

Chapter Eight



On Saturday, the limo arrived as scheduled with the flowers Jackson ordered from a downtown florist. He insisted on paying extra for the personal errand, but the limo company wouldn't waver.

"There's no extra charge for the son of our best customer," they said proudly, and Jackson had to make a considerable effort not to puke while on the phone.

The last thing he wanted was special treatment and certainly not because of his father, but since he was unsuccessful at talking them out of it, he resigned to doubling the driver's tip instead.

"You look handsome," Eleanor told him, dabbing at the new moisture in her eyes.

"Thank you for your help this week and literally every day." Reaching into the back pocket of his wheelchair, he removed a corsage of tiny white and pink flowers and slipped it onto her wrist.

“Jackson, you know I would do anything for you, but this was so sweet. Thank you.”

“I couldn’t forget my favorite girl tonight.”

“I love you.” She bent down and laid a big kiss on his cheek. “Now, go get your other girl. Oh, I bet she’s stunning in purple. Make sure you tell her how beautiful she looks.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he called over his shoulder and rolled through the side door the driver held open for him.

At Avery’s apartment building, he had the driver park in front so the limo would be the first thing she saw when she stepped outside. After climbing out, he leaned against it with a bouquet of flowers and waited for the driver to retrieve her inside.

When she saw him, she stopped mid-stride and covered her face with her hands.

Goal number one: Move her to tears.

Check.

Despite the thin, strappy heels she wore, she jogged to him, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him hard.

“You look beautiful,” he said when she released him, and he wasn’t just following Eleanor’s orders. The purple satin fabric flowed seamlessly from around her neck to her toes, except for the wide gap down the middle that exposed her tight abdomen and the soft inner curve of her breasts. Holding up her hand, he spun her around to reveal her back was also void of material, and he had no idea how she was keeping it in place. “These are for you.”

“Oh, Jackson.” She held the flowers up to her nose before meeting his gaze over them. “And this is for you.” She reached behind her, then showed him a small package. “Happy birthday.”

“Where did you—never mind. You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I wanted to.” While she enjoyed the scent of her flowers, she took in the view. He’d never looked more handsome or

happy, and her heart swelled. She leaned in for another kiss. “You make this tux look spectacular.”

He growled then turned his attention to the tiny ribbon circling the tiny package. Tucking the ribbon in his pocket, he unwrapped the tissue paper, and his mouth jaw dropped open. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes, but replicas.”

“Doesn’t matter.” There was nothing in the world he’d rather have. The small metal tags could have burst into flames, and he would’ve never let go. “Wait. There are four tags here.”

“I couldn’t leave you out. The four of you must always be together.” Setting the flowers on the trunk, she fanned the dog tags out on his palm. “This one is a copy of Will’s. This one,” she pointed to the second tag and raised her eyes to his, “is yours, and these two, are copies of—”

“Josh and Billy’s.” He didn’t have the words to tell her how much the gift meant to him. “Thank you,” was all he could say.

“Can I put it on you?” When he nodded, she took the necklace and slipped it over his head. “Now, they can be with you everywhere you go.”

“Avery.” Overcome with emotion, he took her face in his hands and kissed her until he could be confident he wouldn’t succumb to the ache that had a firm grip on his heart. “I’ll treasure them always. Ready to go?”

“So ready.”

After arriving at the gala in one of Richmond’s historic hotels, they checked in and marveled at the beauty of the two-story grand ballroom. There were at least ten vintage crystal chandeliers, ornate flower centerpieces decorating every table, three walls of windows, and dual curved staircases leading to a wrap-around balcony overlooking the large dance floor and sea of white linen-covered tables below.

“How about a drink?” he asked her, then led the way to the bar at the back of the large room.

To Jackson's relief, they were some of the first to arrive, and he was able to easily maneuver the wheelchair around without causing too many disruptions. Following a quick search for their assigned table, he shifted into a chair while Avery stored the wheelchair a short distance away. Then, they sat close, sipping wine, and watching the room and the rest of their table fill with guests, activity, and excitement.

"There's the birthday boy," Harrison said when he found them.

Jackson rose from his seat with Avery following for support and accepted Harrison's hug. "God, it's great to see you." They'd spoken on the phone a few times, but that was nothing compared to feeling Harrison's loving and fatherly embrace.

"My goodness," he patted Jackson's cheek, "look at you. So healthy, and you're out of the chair."

"Thanks to Eleanor's cooking and Avery's therapy. You remember Avery, don't you?" Jackson motioned for her.

She shifted to proudly stand beside Jackson, her left hand resting on his back. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Barnes."

"Wow. I haven't seen you since you were probably fourteen or fifteen." Harrison took the hand she offered. "Now, I feel old," he said laughing.

"Where's Sophia?" Jackson asked, sitting down as Harrison did.

"She had a PTO meeting tonight, and as the President, she couldn't miss it. She was planning to come afterward, but Taylor's volleyball game was rescheduled to tonight. So, it's only me here."

"That's too bad. I was hoping to see her, too. How is Taylor doing?" Jackson remembered how much Taylor idolized her big brother and assumed she was struggling with Billy's absence just as he was.

"We spend a lot of time together. She's really having difficulty accepting it."

“I know how she feels. I think about him all the time.” Absently, Jackson touched the dog tags. “How are you and Sophia, you know, handling it?”

“It’s hard. There are times when I have to remind myself he’s no longer here. I’ve gone to call him so many times.” He let out a shaky laugh. “Those moments are the worst. Sophia is unbelievable, though. I don’t know how she does it, but ever since we got the news, she’s handled it all with grace. She keeps me positive and focused on what’s most important.”

“She is a special woman. I’ve always admired her.”

“And she you.” Harrison patted Jackson on the arm then sat back in his chair. “We both love you and think of you as our son.”

“I know. I sometimes wonder where I’d be today without you guys or Eleanor.”

“Well, there’s no need to dwell on that now, is there? We’re here for you always and thank God for those European doctors who took such good care of you so you could come home to us.”

Jackson couldn’t hide his amusement. Harrison sounded so much like Eleanor—another reason why Jackson adored him.

“Oh, I love this part,” Avery said when the presentation of the colors was announced.

Every attendee remained standing and silent as a Color Guard, representing each military branch, gracefully marched down the center aisle. Jackson stood at attention until the flags were set in place at the front of the room. Tears burned his eyes as the band played the National Anthem, and a familiar warmth washed over him.

The flags, the uniforms, Harrison. He was in awe of it all, and somehow, he wasn’t overwhelmed with the thick crowd, and nothing had a hold of his lungs. For once, he was at ease and content. He could breathe, and he’d almost forgotten how that felt.

After an Army chaplain led the convocation, dinner was served.

“I’ll be right back,” Avery announced when they were finished eating.

He watched her cross the room and stop at a table full of men and women that looked to be around her age. She greeted some, hugged others, and shook hands with a man whose eyes never left her face. Even after her attention returned to the woman sitting next to her, he watched Avery’s every move, smiled when she did, and watched her walk to the bar with her friend. It didn’t take long, maybe a minute or two, before the man joined them and stood close, salivating like a dog in heat. Smooth, Jackson mused.

“What are you looking at?” Harrison asked when his conversation ended.

“Nothing. You want another drink?” He waved for the waiter.

It had been a while since he had more than one glass of wine or beer, but he was actually enjoying himself. He hadn’t expected to. Despite coaching himself to make the most of it, he assumed he’d be drowning in this environment. But he wasn’t. He was comfortable and happy. What he wouldn’t do to feel this free every day, and not be trapped on a raging battlefield all hours of the day and night.

He also had high hopes for a lot to change between him and Avery that night, especially on his side. With the sexy dress she was wearing, and the thoughtful gift for his birthday, how could that not spark something inside him? As they traveled there in the limo, he thought it had. She was glowing, and holding her hand, sharing an intimate moment, he thought he was beginning to feel love for her.

Then, another man showed her interest, and nothing. Shouldn’t he be jealous or irritated with the way the man was undressing her with his eyes and clearly pursuing her now? The

flirting was off the charts, and he'd touched her arm or back at least three times while they talked. Was Jackson simply overconfident their relationship, or was his heart so numb that he was incapable of loving her?

He watched her say goodbye, hugging both her friend and the man, before sauntering back with a smile on her face and a drink in hand.

"Who were they?" Jackson asked when she rejoined him at the table.

"A friend from college. We've kept in touch through social media, and I saw her post not too long ago that she would be here tonight with her boyfriend. He's in the National Guard." She took a sip of her drink.

"Was he the guy that joined you at the bar?"

Pinching her lips, she fought back a smile. "Jackson Vane, were you watching me? Are you jealous?"

"Curious."

Disappointed, she raised the glass to her lips again and studied him. "His name is Michael, and he's a friend of theirs."

"He's interested in you."

"Oh, yeah? How do you know?"

"I can read people, but he was anything but subtle."

"Well, I didn't notice anything. Probably because my eyes only see you." With her hands on his thighs, she leaned over, hoping her exposed cleavage would give him a few ideas, and kissed him with a little more fire than before. "How are you reading me right now?"

"That would be inappropriate to say around all these people."

"Mmmm. You are really good at this." After a quick peck and a wink, she returned to her seat. "Where's Harrison?"

"Mingling. It's what he does best," he got out before the band started playing again.

Her face lit up. "How about a dance?"

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Jackson cringed.

“Why?”

“I’m already feeling a little woozy from drinking more than usual. Add that to my weak legs, and you’ve got a recipe for disaster.”

She smiled again. “Woozy, huh? I would love to see you get sloppy drunk.”

Spinning around in her seat, she looked for a waiter. *Jackpot.* She located one carrying a tray of shots and called for him. After selecting two and paying, she held one out to Jackson, then shifted to his lap. “Now, it’s a party.”

“I don’t think you can carry me if I pass out.”

“Not necessary. I have control of the wheelchair, remember? I can toss you in it and take you anywhere I want when I want. Like the limo where I can take advantage of you.” She smiled until he reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I want you so bad right now.”

“I thought you wanted a shot.”

“I want both.” Plucking the slice of lime off the drink she brought from the bar, she held up her shot. “To you, to me, to us.” She clicked the top of her tiny glass with Jackson’s before tossing it back.

He did the same but didn’t notice that she’d slipped the lime into her mouth until she’d taken his. The juice mingled with her kiss, making it both tart and sweet and undeniably sensual.

With her eyes on Jackson, she removed the lime, lingering a little longer between her lips than was necessary. “What would you say if I asked you to take me to the limo?”

“I’d say where’s my chair?”

“Really?” When he nodded, she hopped up to retrieve the wheelchair, and after he was seated, she leaned over his shoulder. “You make me so happy.”

Goal number two: Make her happy.

Check.

Upon locating the limousine, Avery whispered to the driver, and soon, they were alone and locked inside. She filled a glass with the champagne they uncorked on the way there and handed it to Jackson. She poured some for herself, and while they sipped, eyes locked on each other, passion simmered in the air.

But she wasn't interested in subtly or foreplay. Setting down the glass, she reached behind her neck to unbutton the halter of her dress. Slowly, she lowered it, revealing her bare breasts, and felt a twinge of satisfaction when his gaze followed. Then, she turned her back to him.

“Would you mind, darling?”

He drained the glass in one gulp then took the tiny zipper of her dress, now resting just above her tailbone, between his fingers and pressed down. She was wearing nothing underneath. His head may have been spinning and his vision blurry from drinking too much too fast, but his body was suddenly lucid and ready for her. When she looked over her shoulder at him, he trailed the back of his hand down her spine and felt her shiver.

“You have the most amazing skin that—” She had dropped the dress and straddled his lap before he could finish the thought.

“I want all of you, Jackson.”

Frantic to feel him inside her again, she yanked off his pants, and when that feeling came, a scream of primal need was forced from her throat. She arched back, moving slowly at first, but when he ran a hand up her abdomen and between her breasts, the air in the limo snapped from slow simmer to scorching hot.

Her hips began to pulse faster, and with absolute recklessness, she rose and fell over him. Trembling at every new peak, an overpowering wave of pleasure had her losing all control and screaming. They were surely making a scene, but damn, she'd be with him under a spotlight anywhere, anytime if it meant she could feel this way again.

Leaning back, she relished in the glorious vibrations thrumming through her. Even after dropping onto his chest, winded, weak and satisfied, blood continued to race through her veins, filling her giddy heart with love.

“Where have you been?” Harrison asked when Jackson and Avery returned to the table. “You missed the main speaker.”

“Darn,” Jackson said and winked at Avery before ordering them both another drink. He was well on his way to getting drunk, but he didn’t care.

She set aside the wheelchair, and as he pulled a chair out for her, her friend stopped by to invite her to the dance floor.

She introduced Harrison and then Jackson before bending down to give him a kiss that promised more to come later. “Try not to miss me while I’m gone.”

“You two are chummy,” Harrison joked when Avery strolled away, her arm linked with her friend’s. “How long has this been going on?”

“A few months.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you happy for you?”

He looked over at Harrison and considered. “Yeah. Why?”

“You seemed happy until I asked.” Harrison studied him. “I know you better than you know yourself, Jackson. What’s up?”

“She’s amazing.”

“No doubt. She’s a Mason.”

Jackson sighed and gulped his wine. “She loves me.”

“But you don’t love her?”

“No.”

“It’s early. Not everyone falls quickly.”

“I know, and I’m apparently not that type. She wants this to work so badly, but there are times, a lot of times,” he

reconsidered, “that it’s hard to look past certain things and be the person she needs me to be to—”

“Why do you have to be someone else? Jackson,” Harrison demanded his attention, “you’re just as amazing as she is, and your happiness is also important.”

“What if I’m not capable of being happy?”

“Of course, you are, and I’ll repeat. It’s early. Your relationship is new, and you’re still recovering. Why are you putting unnecessary pressure on yourself?”

“I don’t want to hurt her.”

“You won’t, unless you worry so much about the things you can’t control you miss out on the good stuff.”

“She deserves better.”

“Than you?” Harrison scoffed. “Did something happen tonight?”

“What?”

“You two were relaxed and having a great time earlier. What happened?”

Not sure if he should be talking about this with Harrison, Jackson stared into his wine and contemplated how to answer. What the hell. “We had sex. In the limo.”

Surprised by the admission, Harrison finished his drink and cleared his throat. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“I didn’t feel anything.”

“You mean...you’re not...”

“Emotionally. I mean emotionally. Down there is golden.” Jackson flashed him a sheepish grin.

“Oh. So, your heart’s not in it.”

Jackson nodded.

“Does she know you feel this way?”

“No. At least, she doesn’t seem to.” This conversation was torture. “That makes it worse.”

There was a loneliness and vulnerability in Jackson's eyes, and it broke his heart. "You enjoy her company, right?" Harrison asked and set his empty glass on the table with resolve.

"Yes."

"And she helps you feel better?"

"Yes. Well, maybe." She gave him something other than pain to think about when they were together, but was that helping him heal? He wasn't so sure ignoring it and burying it for a few hours here or there was truly helping him move forward. Then, there was the added pressure of her fragile heart in his hands.

Harrison's eyes narrowed, unsure of how to take Jackson's answer. "Well, she's obviously beautiful, and she gets your motor running." Harrison smiled when Jackson looked at him, his face registering his amusement. "And you enjoy spending time with her. No one said you have to love or marry her."

"It's what she wants."

"But it's your life, too. Date for a while and see what happens. If you don't fall in love, or the time comes when you no longer enjoy her company, end it. You've made no promises to her, right?"

Jackson shook his head. "But I don't want to hurt her," he repeated. "She's Will's family."

"So what? Do you think Will would want you wasting your time or hers if you're not happy?" Harrison leaned on the table. "What would he say to you if he was here instead of me?"

Jackson could hear him so clearly. "Life is short, and there are millions of women in the sea. Try them all."

"Exactly. That's what he did, probably a little too literally," Harrison added with a laugh. "He didn't settle and soon caught one his heart didn't want to throw back."

"Nice analogy."

"Thanks. It just came to me, but..." Harrison waited for Jackson to finish the sentence.

"You're right."

“Of course, I’m right. Now, son, what are you going to do tonight?”

“Have fun, live in the moment, and stop overthinking everything.” *More easily said than done*, he thought with frustration.

“Right again. Now, where’s that waiter.” Harrison searched the room. “We’re going to seal that promise with a good, strong drink.”

Avery spent most of the next hour on the dance floor, enjoying being young and carefree. Although he tried not to, Jackson envied her. He’d been the same once and watching her bounce and laugh with her friends ripped open a few old wounds.

The longer she danced, the more he drank, and when Michael pulled her close for a slow dance, running a hand over her bare back, he felt nothing. She giggled when he spun her around, and leaned back when he dipped her, allowing him a long glimpse of her breasts.

Jackson detested the way he salivated over every curve of her body, but it was because he didn’t want the sleaze taking advantage of her. He wasn’t jealous or upset that her attention was focused on another man. If she wanted to be with Michael, he would let her go. Her happiness was more important than anything he needed.

When the song ended, he escorted her back to the table, his hand lingering on her back. Michael watched her while she talked with the others and when she walked away alone a few minutes later. Instead of returning to Jackson, she crossed the room and entered a hallway, leading to the women’s restroom, he assumed. But when Michael rose and followed her, Jackson’s stomach tangled into knots.

The sleaze was on a mission, and Avery was the prize. Or had they made plans to secretly meet somewhere private while

their bodies were pressed together? Either way, it made Jackson uneasy.

“Would you mind grabbing the wheelchair?” he asked Harrison, who had recently concluded another animated conversation about the latest museum art show, Jackson gathered from the few phrases he heard.

“Where are you going?” Harrison asked and held the chair steady while Jackson heaved himself into it.

“To check on something.” He rolled away without further explanation toward the hallway where Avery and Michael disappeared. Along the way, he looked for her, and even as he moved down the hall, she was nowhere to be found. Then, he heard her in the lobby ahead and stopped to listen.

“I really need to get going,” her voice carried down the hall, but she didn’t appear.

“Don’t go. We were having such a good time,” a man, undoubtedly Michael, urged. “You are so beautiful.”

“Thank you, but Jackson’s probably wondering where I am.”

True, Jackson thought, but he was more curious about Michael and his intentions.

“Why do you want to be with him? He couldn’t or wouldn’t even dance with you tonight.”

No answer from Avery. Interesting.

“I have an idea,” Michael added. “Have a drink with me, and if you don’t have a good time, I’ll leave you alone.”

“I should get back.”

“Wait,” Michael called, and although Jackson’s vision was slightly blurred from too much alcohol, he could make out their reflection in the windows ahead of him. Michael grabbed her arm as she tried to walk away, and she whipped around. With his muscles now on alert, Jackson inched closer. “Stay. I like you.”

“Michael,” she sighed. “I’m dating someone.”

“I don’t care.” He raised a hand to her face, and his head moved closer to hers, but Jackson couldn’t see if their lips came together. “Tell me you don’t feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“This connection and incredible passion between us.”

“Michael, I barely know you.”

“But you feel it, don’t you? Let me kiss you and see if you can deny it then.”

“No. Let go of me.”

“It’s only one kiss. You won’t regret it.”

Having heard enough, Jackson pushed the chair into motion when her reflection took off, and Michael’s followed. He was about to intervene when Avery rushed into the hallway and almost stumbled into him.

“Jackson!”

“Are you okay?” he asked, noticing she was upset.

“Avery. Don’t—” Michael stopped in his tracks when he entered the hallway and saw Jackson.

“Can we help you...Michael, is it?”

“You must be Jackson.”

Michael slid his hands in his pockets and planted his feet, the same way Grayson would when he was prepared to fight. It made his blood boil, and he hated the guy already.

“I was telling Avery how beautiful she looked tonight and how she deserved a real man in her life.”

“I’m sorry. Do you know me? Because I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Please, Jackson. Can we go?” Avery pleaded.

“We’ve never met, but I know your father,” Michael mentioned with a twinge of disgust in his voice. “And in my experience, the apple usually doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

She placed a hand on Jackson’s shoulder. “Michael, that’s enough.”

“It’s okay, Avery. Apparently, Michael has a poor opinion of my father. Welcome to the club, asshole, but don’t presume to know who I am because of that.”

“Well, you’ve spent very little time with your stunning girlfriend tonight, treating her as your father would. Like another one of his sluts.”

“How dare you say—” Avery began, her temper flaring.

Jackson touched her hand, which was now squeezing his shoulder, but kept his eyes on Michael. “I’m sure you’ve enjoyed drooling over her and chasing her around like a needy little puppy, but she’s had enough of you. So, tuck your tail and take your leave.”

“And what are you going to do if I don’t?” A sneaky grin sent Jackson a challenge. “Go ahead. Stand up, and let’s handle this man to man.”

“Jackson, let’s go.”

“No.” Despite the room spinning around him, Jackson pushed the footrests to the side, set his feet on the floor, and stood. Damn. Why did he have to drink so much that night? He could make very short work of this asshole if he was sober. He was anything but sturdy on his feet, but there was no way he was going to let him win.

Jackson lifted his foot to take a step, or thought he had before he realized he was toppling over and completely helpless to stop it. He caught a glimpse of Michael’s smug face before he hit the floor, and angry pain radiated through his legs and hips.

Avery gasped and lunged toward him but was intercepted by Michael stepping between them.

“Give me a call when you want a real man, Avery. You know where to find me.”

Michael left but took the path that required him to step over Jackson. That one step was the same as ramming the pole of a victory flag through Jackson’s back. It felt the same.

“Oh my God. Are you okay?” Avery rushed to his side and helped him sit up. “Did you hit your head?” She touched his cheek and ran her fingers through his hair when he didn’t respond. Feeling nothing to cause concern, she pulled on his arm. “Come on. Into the chair with you.”

He lifted himself with her guiding him along the way and plopped down into the chair.

After retrieving her purse from the ballroom, she rushed him to the limo. Neither spoke the entire way to her apartment, but when they arrived, she didn’t move.

“What happened back there?” she asked.

“What were you doing with him?”

“I asked you first.”

Images of Michael’s arrogant smirk, his hands on Avery, and his possessive pleas were beating their angry little fists against the back of his skull. “I was drunk, and I lost it.”

“Why? Nothing happened.”

“You didn’t answer when he asked why you were with me.” He couldn’t look at her. The shame was too devastating.

“You were listening to our conversation?”

“I was worried about you.”

“Why?”

“All night, he looked at you like you were dessert. Why couldn’t you answer?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was caught off guard. Jackson,” she whispered and took his hand. “I love you.”

“Are you sure?”

“What?” On the defensive, her back straightened. “I can’t believe you’d ask me that.”

“I have nothing to offer you. I don’t go out or do the things people our age do. Couldn’t even if I wanted to. My life is limited to that damn chair, and if he had tried to hurt you, there was nothing I could do.”

He slipped his hand from hers and looked out the window at the darkness beyond. His stomach was churning and with the drumming in his head, another debilitating migraine was soon to erupt.

“Jackson, all I want is you and your love.”

He turned to face her. “I’m not sure I can give you that.”

“Can’t or don’t want to?”

“I’m damaged, Avery. I have no idea who I am anymore. With everything I’ve lost and am now dealing with, I don’t even know if I can love anymore.”

“I can help you get that back.” Scooting closer, she placed a hand on his leg. “If you let me.”

“How?”

His eyes begged her to convince him, and knowing he wanted to believe it was possible warmed her soul and reinvigorated her tenacity. “Well, I will love you more and more every day. We’ll work on your therapy until you’re moving on your own again. I’ll make you laugh and lay with you when you’re hurting. We’ll travel the world and make new memories. I’ll be your number one cheerleader and never leave your side. All you have to do is let me.”

“Is that enough for you? What if I can’t match your effort?”

“It’s enough.”

“That’s not fair to you, Avery.”

“I’ll decide that. Our relationship is new, and I’m not ready to give up yet. Plus,” she ran a hand up his inner thigh, “we’re so good together.”

“Avery.”

“Stay with me tonight. I can make you forget it all.”

She kissed his neck, then jawline, but her touch was like ice on his skin, helping to solidify his decision. He tilted his head away. “Not tonight.”

“Okay. Then, I’ll grab my things and come with you. You shouldn’t be alone tonight.”

“Avery, I can feel a migraine coming, and I’m exhausted.” *And embarrassed, ashamed, disappointed, aggravated, hurt.* Taking her hand, he held it to his lips. “Thank you for tonight. I had a great time, especially in here,” he added with a forced grin.

“Yes, it was absolutely amazing, and I wouldn’t mind doing that again soon. Maybe in the steam room after our next workout?” She fought the images and sensations rising fast and raised a hand to his cheek. “Please know that no matter what, you will always be enough for me.”

“See you on Sunday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything. I love you, Jackson.”

He lifted her hand to his lips again because he didn’t have the words, then watched the driver walk her to the door. It was something simple that her boyfriend should be able to do. Michael had been right about that.

Asshole, he huffed but no matter how frustrating and irritating and rude and ridiculous Michael had been, Jackson shouldn’t have lost control. His temper got the better of him, something he never allowed, and he’d made a fool of himself.

He could blame it on the alcohol, but it was a weak excuse. How he acted wasn’t him or who he wanted to be. He should have ignored the challenge and focused more on accomplishing his third goal for the night: falling in love. But it also shouldn’t be this hard to check that one off the shortlist.

He laid back in the seat with a sigh and welcomed the retribution now pounding at a deafening level in his head.

Chapter Nine



What happened? I heard a scream,” Eleanor asked after dashing into the hallway and finding Jackson on his knees near the front door with Avery standing over him.

“Tell her, sweetie.” Avery urged him, her eyes bright with excitement.

He waved off the demand, too winded to speak, and dropped down to rest his back against the door.

“I’ll do it, then. He just walked the entire length of the hallway, twice, on his own.” She held up two fingers for emphasis.

“That’s great. I’m so happy for you, Jackson.” Eleanor patted him on the head before reaching for Avery.

While he suffered, he watched them celebrate and knew they were rooting for him. He was working hard for them as much as he was for himself.

“Ready to do it again?” Avery asked, but his only answer was a growl. “Come on, you big grump. Up you go.” She grabbed his hands and helped him to his feet.

As instructed, he walked down the hallway and back to his cheerleaders, but it took every bit of energy he had left. On his last step, he collapsed into Avery’s arms, pinning her against the door. But his body weight was soon too much for her to support, causing her knees to buckle, and they slid into a heap on the floor.

“Great job, Jackson.” Eleanor clapped her hands. “I’m so proud of you. I’ll go get you some water to help cool you down.” She winked at Avery before rushing to the kitchen.

“If I had known you were going to get frisky, I’d have made you do this exercise weeks ago,” Avery teased him before looking him over. He was lying on the floor, his head in her lap, and she had the sudden urge to touch what she saw. She ran her hand over his bare chest then traced the outline of each defined ab with her finger. “You’re really hot like this.”

“You like the tired, sweaty, I-want-to-kill-you look?”

“Yeah, apparently, I do. But I like you best shirtless and touching me.” She leaned down for a kiss as Eleanor returned.

“Whoops, sorry to interrupt. Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes if you want to wash up first.” She handed Jackson the glass of water and smiled, thrilled to see them cuddled together on the floor.

Sitting up, Jackson ran his fingers through his hair before draining the glass. For an hour, a throbbing pain had been pulsing at his temples and the pain was only intensifying with every sound, movement, light. He grabbed his head with both hands, his elbows resting on his thighs.

Avery rested her arm across his back and tilted her head to see his face. “Another migraine?”

“Not yet, just more of the same.” He rubbed the base of his palms against his forehead and temples, cursing the day and the struggles that came with it.

“Maybe a hot bath will help. I can help you to your room.”

When he nodded, she stood, reached for his hands, and pulled him up. After a few adjustments, he was balanced with his arm around her shoulders, too weak to hold himself up. They shuffled down the hall at a pace he could manage, and when they reached the bathroom, she ran the bathwater and set out a towel. It was a task she did often after his workouts, and he wished he found it endearing. Instead, it made him feel like an incompetent child, and he loathed every second.

On her way out, she softly kissed each shoulder blade, first the left and then the right, and trailed a hand along his lower back before exiting the room. It was a message—the same one she’d repeatedly sent, and he’d been ignoring for the past month.

He leaned on the sink for support but couldn’t bring himself to look in the mirror. The guilt churning in his belly was eating him alive. Since the gala, their physical intimacy hadn’t progressed, despite her frequent attempts. If anything, their relationship reverted to how it was before sex entered the relationship, and he took full responsibility for that.

He didn’t mean to, but after all the progress he’d made the night of the gala, the humiliating incident with Michael set him back two-fold. Determination, energy, drive, reasons to push forward—all of it had dissipated, and the effort he gave their relationship suffered as a result.

She was there for him, happy to be, yet he was lonely beyond measure. Was he really this terrible at relationships? Or was the guilt he felt for his dependency on her to fill the voids in his heart suffocating the love out of him?

Whatever it was, he better snap out of this rut, or he was going to drive himself insane and her out the door.

“Fuck.” His boiling blood pressure had him in a chokehold and more stress was the last thing he needed. No. What he needed was a solution to his dilemma, and a good, long soak to wash away the nagging headache.

In the tub, he slid under the water and held there until his lungs tightened. Irritated, he emerged and laid his head back against the tile. With his training, he should have been able to stay submerged for twice as long, but visions of Avery’s expressive eyes kept flashing through his mind. Hope, love, disappointment, hurt. He’d seen them all in her since they started dating, and he had only one reaction to them all.

Guilt.

The hot water may be soothing his aching joints and muscles, but as usual, his mind was another story, and he didn’t hear Avery slip into the room. It was the creaky hinges that announced her presence when she closed the old door behind her.

He sat up quickly, spilling water over the edge of the tub, and saw her leaning against the door in one of his shirts. Her nipples pushed through the thin fabric, and she had the look of a woman on a mission. How did he let this happen again?

“Avery,” he managed before she strolled forward and released the button between her breasts, exposing more of her smooth skin. She took another step, while he continued to wrestle with competing feelings. Part of him wanted to give her what she wanted to take the pressure off. But the other more persistent part knew it would solve nothing.

Holding his gaze, she loosened another button, then lowered to kneel beside the tub. There was so much more inside her now than when he first kissed her. He activated something in her that she hadn’t known existed, and now that he’d kept her at a distance for weeks, she was desperate for him.

Though she tried not to analyze his clear blue eyes, she couldn’t stop herself. There was no haze of desire. No dark

intensity from anticipating what she was offering him. They hadn't been together since their jaunt in the limo, and all she could think about since was seeing him come unraveled again.

"I want to be with you, Jackson. I miss how you feel inside me."

She leaned on the side of the tub and kissed him, dampening more than just her shirt. Feeling bold, she decided to take control of the situation.

"Will you take me now?" she nearly begged and kissed him harder this time, trying to reignite the spark they once had. To feel more of the urgent and raw sexuality radiate from his lips and hands. Impatient, she ran her hand up his inner thigh until his hand caught her by the wrist.

Her eyes widened, and her face turned stone white. She didn't want to accept what he did, then fire and pain flashed in her eyes, piercing him to the core.

"Avery," he whispered and released her arm. "I can't."

She sat back on her heels and clutched at the shirt to close it. "Why not?"

"I've been trying to give you what you need—" he attempted before she cut him off.

"No, you haven't. You've just been going through the motions, tiptoeing around, trying not to hurt me. You just don't want me to leave. It's not the same."

"I know."

"Do you? Why haven't you tried to kiss me like you did at the gala? Why don't you talk to me, hold me, make any effort to be close to me? What I need is for you to let me in."

It hurt when his only reaction was guilt and pity, but her eyes were dry. The tears would come later, plenty of them, but, damn it, this time, she would decide when.

"Avery, I'm sorry. I thought I was making progress."

"What changed?"

"I'm not sure."

“Well, something happened. You haven’t been the same since that stupid incident with Michael. Are you still mad at me for talking to him?”

“I wasn’t mad.”

“No. I’m sure you didn’t care that I was with another man. Did you?” His silence told her everything. “Why do I bother?” she mumbled mainly to herself before turning on Jackson. “And what’s so wrong with me that you can’t love me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” he began, treading lightly. He’d never seen her so angry, but he couldn’t blame her. “You’re beautiful, smart, funny, loyal.”

“You could say all those things about a dog.”

“Avery, I’ve been in a funk lately, and—”

“It’s not you. It’s me. Is that what you were going to say?”

“No. Not exactly.” The words he needed to say were jumbling in his brain along with his throbbing headache and waning patience. He ran his hands over his face. “Can you give me a few minutes to finish up here? Then, we can talk more in my room.” *Like adults*, he thought against his will.

“Fine. But it’s not like I haven’t seen you naked before.” She spun around and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

He lingered in the tub, hoping to calm his nerves and dilute his frustration before talking to Avery again. He wasn’t looking forward to it, not in the moods they were in, but he climbed out of the tub and dried off anyway.

He ran a brush through his wet hair, only because it allowed him another moment to think, but was distracted by his reflection. Staring back at him was someone he despised—a filtered version of himself or who he thought he was. The person in the mirror was weak, dependent, empty, and so unbearably sick and tired of being weak, dependent, and empty.

It was time for a change. Time to take charge of his life, and he was going to start with his relationship. Resolved now, he

entered the bedroom only to discover Avery hadn't waited for him.

He got dressed, then shuffled to the wheelchair, but he didn't sit. Instead, he stood, looking down at it with disdain. Never again did he want to be the fragile and frightened person he was in that chair. Never.

Deciding to forego the chair, he carefully stepped around it and headed toward the dining room. For safety, he walked near the wall in case he needed to brace himself along the way. He wasn't stupid. Setbacks caused by stubborn pride wouldn't get his life back.

It took a while, and he was out of breath when he arrived, but he'd done it. He was finally walking on his terms, and it was exhilarating. But he didn't have the energy or the time for celebrating.

"Jackson, what are you doing?" Eleanor found him leaning on the door frame when she entered the dining room and rushed to his side.

Ignoring the question, he looked over her shoulder into the empty room. "Where's Avery?"

"She said something came up, and she left."

Out of patience, Jackson shuffled to the table. Every muscle groaned with the same exasperation he felt as he lowered into a chair. "What's for dinner?"

"I'll go get it, and then you're going to tell me what you did to upset that sweet girl." Tossing him a stern look, she sighed at the guilty look on his face before disappearing into the kitchen.

Annoyed to now have yet another disappointed woman to deal with, he ran his hands through his hair and dropped them hard on the table.

"Is there a problem?" his father asked flatly and crossed the room to stand in front of Jackson.

Fantastic, Jackson thought sarcastically. A fight with his father was the perfect ending to a shitty day. "Not in the least."

“Where’s the wheelchair?”

“Don’t need it.” To Jackson’s surprise, his father took a seat but remained silent. Narrowing his eyes, Jackson studied him and wondered when the condescending comments and insults were going to be hurled his way.

“Mr. Vane!” Eleanor was just as shocked to see Grayson. “I didn’t hear you come in. Will you be joining us for dinner?”

The invite seemed to cause Grayson discomfort, Jackson observed, before he reluctantly agreed and sent Eleanor into a frenzy. While she hustled about the room and kitchen arranging the new setting on the table and lighting candles, Jackson continued to watch Grayson with suspicion.

He checked his watch and fidgeted in his seat over and over. Was he in a hurry to escape? Late for a party? Counting down the minutes because it was so unbearable to be with his son? His breathing was shallow, and his eyes skipped from Jackson to Eleanor to his watch as he rubbed his hands together under the table.

This was new, Jackson mused. The Great Grayson Vane was anxious.

“You know what? I can’t. I have to go.” Jumping up, Grayson rushed through the kitchen and out the side door. A few moments later, his car could be heard racing down the driveway.

Stunned, Eleanor and Jackson stared at each other. “What just happened?” she finally asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Well, whatever is bothering him, he’ll come clean soon enough, but I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“Why is that?”

“I can’t explain it. Something with him has been off lately, and I know what you’re thinking.” She waved her finger at him before taking a seat at the table. “It’s not you, deary. He’s been acting strangely since before you came home.”

Jackson didn't know what to say. He hadn't noticed anything unusual with Grayson's behavior, but then, again, he barely knew the man.

"We should eat before it gets cold." Eleanor offered her hand to Jackson and blessed the food. She asked God to soften Jackson and Grayson's hearts toward one another and to watch over her daughter and grandchildren. All the people she loved were going through difficult times, so she prayed for their safety and healing.

After passing Jackson the bowl of roasted brussels sprouts, she picked up the potatoes.

"So, why's Avery mad at you?"

Damn. He'd hoped she would have forgotten. "Eleanor, I love you, but that's none of your business."

"Maybe not, but talking it out might help." She smiled and served herself some potatoes. Although Jackson didn't eat gravy, she made some anyway and poured it on thick.

He grunted in response and accepted the bowl of potatoes she handed him. When his plate was full, he grabbed his fork but couldn't eat.

While he stared at his food, Eleanor was content to eat the fresh vegetables she picked up earlier that day at the farmers market. Fresh was always better, and it was better to wait Jackson out rather than pressure him. He wanted to talk. His patterns and signals hadn't changed since he was a boy. But he'd fight it until his need to get what's bothering him off his chest was too much to bear.

"I'm afraid I'm doing exactly what I was trying to avoid," he confessed suddenly and dropped his fork in frustration.

There it was, Eleanor thought and took a sip of water.

"I'm leading her on by trying to make the relationship work, and I'm hurting her because I can't give her what she needs."

"What is it, do you think, that's holding you back?" Eleanor asked casually before cutting a bite of pork.

He sat back in his chair and contemplated the question. “I don’t know. What’s wrong with me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, sweetie.” She touched his hand resting on the table. “You’re dealing with a lot right now, and just because she’s a wonderful person and has blindly and unconditionally loved you her entire life,” she paused when he scolded her with his eyes, “doesn’t mean she’s the one for you.”

That option had never occurred to him. Although it explained why he struggled to return her feelings, it didn’t make breaking her heart any less agonizing.

“Tonight might have been her breaking point.”

He remembered the look on her face before she ran out of the bathroom. It was going to be difficult to get past the embarrassment on both sides. But the worst part was that she didn’t deserve it. She was the one who gave everything to their relationship. All he’d given her was a merry-go-round of hope and disappointment.

“Reach out to her and tell her how you feel. I’m sure she’s sitting around waiting for you to call.”

Jackson shrugged, doubting Avery would want to speak with him anytime soon. All he knew for sure was that he’d lost his appetite and wanted to brood in private.

“I’m sorry, Eleanor. The food smells amazing, but—”

“No problem, sweetie. I’ll save your plate in case you get hungry later.”

“Thanks.” Standing slowly, careful to set his feet under him, he shuffled into the hallway in time to hear the front door shut.

“Who’s there?” he called down the hall and was surprised to see his father step into view.

The light streaming through the large window above the door fell on his back, casting his face in shadows and depriving Jackson of the opportunity to read his face and gain the upper hand.

“We need to talk.”

“I’m not in the mood. I’ve had a long and trying day.” Not interested in gaining permission, Jackson shifted toward his room.

“I’m not here to argue, and this can’t wait.”

When Grayson disappeared into his office, Jackson sighed and followed. What could possibly be this important? He’d barely seen his father in the seven months since he’d returned, and whenever Grayson came around, they did very little talking. Only flung insults at each other until someone stalked away. Now, late in the evening and unannounced, he wanted to have a *conversation*. Ridiculous, Jackson puffed.

It took him a while to reach the office at the end of the hallway, but it was enough time to get Jackson’s blood boiling. Dealing with his father’s constant need to tear him down was the last thing he needed. He’d been doing enough of that to himself already. Then again, his mood couldn’t possibly get any worse. So, bring it on.

When he arrived, his father was standing by the bookcase holding a small black box. Since Grayson called his urgent meeting, Jackson waited by the door for him to explain the reason for it before deciding if he was going to stay.

“This was your mother’s,” he finally said, turning the box over in his hand and opening it.

Jackson took a step forward, his breath catching in his chest when he saw the large diamond ring sitting up in the box, and mentally kicked himself for the gut reaction.

“I remember the day I gave this to her. We were walking on the beach at Hilton Head Island before dinner. The sunset had cast a rainbow of pinks, oranges, and purples across the sky behind her. She looked so beautiful, as she always did.” He smiled and closed the box before taking a deep, audible breath. “She was so happy that day.”

Crossing the room to a small table by the dual picture windows, Grayson set down the box and filled two glasses with brandy from the crystal decanter.

He held one out, and Jackson considered telling him to ‘fuck off’. But his curiosity got the better of him, and he stepped into the room and accepted the glass. Always suspicious, Jackson watched his father as they both lowered themselves into a red leather chair on either side of the serving table.

The way Grayson was staring at him had Jackson on alert, but he held his gaze, daring his father to say the wrong thing. Maybe a good screaming match would release the tension that had been building since his therapy session that afternoon.

“I’m proud of you, son,” Grayson announced.

Choking on the drink he’d been sipping, Jackson coughed to clear his throat. The absurdity of those words coming out of his father’s mouth had a smoldering fury rising from the pit of his stomach. He threw back what was left in his glass, expecting it to calm the rage, but it only set the fire to blaze. What in the hell was his father trying to start with saying something like that?

“Let me get this straight,” Jackson finally said, skepticism and irritation evident in his voice. “After all the years of your absence in my life and the horrible things you’ve said to me, you’re suddenly proud? What the fuck are you doing?”

If he could, he’d pace the room to keep his hands off his father’s throat.

“Jackson—”

“Don’t you know my head is messed up enough right now?” Jackson interrupted. “No, of course, you don’t, because you have no idea what I’ve been through or who I am.”

He slammed the empty glass down on the small table and stood anyway, ignoring the pain. After a few wobbly steps, he leaned on the back of the chair.

“I’ve been to war, nearly died, and lost my career and my three best friends in the process. Now, I’m living day by day on

a shred of sanity, all while having to learn to fucking walk again.” His raised voice and raging blood pressure drummed in his ears.

“You’re right. I haven’t been there for you lately.”

“Lately? Don’t give me that bullshit. You’ve never been there.”

“Jackson, please sit down.” When he didn’t move, Grayson sighed. “You’ve always be headstrong, like your mother. Here.” He picked up the tiny box and held up. “I want you to have this. She wanted you to have it.”

Confused, Jackson reached over the chair, took the box. He thought about throwing it across the room, a little exercise in tension relief, but opened it instead. The pang he felt when he saw the square-cut diamond engagement ring was enough to knock the urge out of him. He could still picture it on his mother’s delicate finger and hated how much he still missed her.

“Why are you giving this to me?” Jackson managed, suddenly unsteady.

“Before she died, she took it off and asked me to keep it for you.”

“Why?”

“She hoped you’d give it to the woman you plan to marry.”

“Why would she care?” The longer he held the ring, the more his anger compounded and consumed the unexpected sadness he felt.

“What?”

“Why would she care if I kept her ring? You so proudly told me that she never wanted anything to do with me. Explain to me why I should take it and not toss it in the lake.”

“Son...”

“I told you never to call me that.”

“Jackson,” he corrected. “I never should have said those things about your mother. I’m sorry.”

Taken by surprise, Jackson tightened his grip on the back of the chair and braced for the next bomb to drop.

“Is it true? Or were you just trying to hurt me?”

“Both,” Grayson answered honestly, then explained. “She didn’t want children, but she fell in love with you the moment you were born. It was me she hated, resented. Me and that boytoy of...” He closed his eyes and reset his face. “I was the reason she was never around after you were born.”

“You didn’t feel the need to tell me that before?”

“I wasn’t in the mood then.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“I know.”

Unable to look at him, Jackson turned his gaze to the window. The darkness outside only provided a somber reflection of them in the room, and it did nothing to calm the rage and emotion swirling inside him. “What changed?”

“Well, two things. I heard you’re dating.”

Jackson lowered his head to the little box in his hand and thought of Avery. He couldn’t give her that ring. Not now, not one day in the future, not ever. At that moment, when he least expected it, he was done trying. Finished with torturing them both while he attempted and repeatedly failed to be the man from her dreams.

With the idea of marriage on his mind, he knew what he had to do. It wasn’t going to be easy, but he had to let her go.

Suddenly, Jackson’s attention was yanked back to the room when Grayson started hacking, violent and loud. Stunned, Jackson watched him grab a handkerchief from his pocket and hold it against his mouth. In between coughing fits, Grayson reached for the decanter, poured a double shot of brandy, and drank. It seemed to soothe his throat enough to catch his breath, but he labored over every inhale. When he leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes, Jackson took the seat across from him.

“I’m dying.”

Jackson scoffed. “Right.”

Using the armrests, Grayson pulled himself up and set his eyes on Jackson. "I'm dying," he repeated and sighed. "It's stage four lung cancer. I have six months, maybe less. Now you know reason number two."

Jackson could only stare at him. What was he supposed to do with that information? He'd despised his father for years. They'd argued, said miserable things to each other, and disregarded each other in the process.

"What about radiation or other treatments?"

"They weren't working and when it spread to my liver and stomach and who the hell knows where else, I stopped going." He finished off the drink and tossed the glass onto the table. The sound of the glass clanking against metal echoed through the stale room.

"What are you going to do?"

"Live my life the way I want for as long as I'm able. Then, I guess, I'll have to go into a care facility until..."

He trailed off, his expression telling. He didn't want to think about the end or living his final days in a sterile facility at the mercy of strangers. Jackson could relate.

"This is your home. Why not move back here? Eleanor and I can help with whatever you need."

Grayson nodded, then stood. "Well, that's all I came to say." On his way to the door, he stopped beside Jackson and placed a hand on his shoulder. "This is your home, too, you know, and I meant what I said. I am proud of you. You're a good man, Jackson, despite having me as a father. Fill Eleanor in, will you?"

And then he was gone, leaving Jackson alone, shocked, and downright confused. He sat motionless, replaying the short conversation in his mind. He was used to being angry or unconcerned when it came to his father, but it was difficult not to feel sorry for the fate Grayson was dealt.

With one quick motion, he returned his glass to the table and pushed to his feet. Between Avery, conflicting emotions about

his mother, his father's news and change of heart, and the usual chaos, he felt beaten. He'd give anything for just one moment of peace and headed to his room to find it.

But as expected, sleep eluded him that night. The house was too quiet to dull the noise in his head long enough to relax, and the pain was relentless. After a few hours of staring at the ceiling, he gave up and decided to get in another workout. The sweat and hard work were soothing to his waning spirit, so he exercised until he heard Eleanor in the kitchen. Then, he returned to his room, took a bath, and dressed for breakfast.

Entering the kitchen, he found Eleanor humming and cooking at the stove, her back to the door. He sat on a stool at the island and enjoyed the happy scene. Her hip bounced to the song in her head as she transferred sausage to a serving dish.

"Jackson!" she yelled when she turned around and waited for her heart to drop out of her throat. "You scared me." Setting down the dish, she looked behind him. "Did you walk here again?"

He nodded with a grin and sampled a piece of sausage. "Haven't used the wheelchair since yesterday morning." The possibilities of what that could mean were exhilarating.

"Good for you." She grabbed the carton of eggs, cracked several into a mixing bowl, and whisked. "Did you talk to Avery last night?"

"I meant to but was interrupted," he said, picking at the placemat in front of him.

The hot pan on the stove sizzled when she emptied the batter into it. She glanced over her shoulder as she added salt and pepper. "Something happen?"

"Grayson came back."

"Really? I didn't hear him. When he left so abruptly at dinner, I didn't expect him to return."

"Me either, but he had some news that couldn't wait. I guess he wanted to tell us at dinner but chickened out."

“That doesn’t sound like him. What was worrying him so?” She tossed the eggs one last time, turned off the stove, and then scooped them into a serving dish.

“Maybe you should sit down.” He patted the stool next to him.

“That doesn’t sound good.” Placing the eggs on the warmer along the way, she joined him.

He told her what he knew about Grayson’s condition and plans. But when she sucked in a breath and tears filled her eyes, he pulled her into his arms and fought his own. He could handle most anything except seeing Eleanor cry.

After breakfast, Jackson went for a walk to clear his mind. It took a while, but he circled the house to the backyard, then sat on a porch step to catch his breath. Days like these were growing on him, and he was learning to appreciate the mild Virginia seasons.

It was fall now. The November air was chilly, but the blue skies were tall and bright. Most of the trees along the edge of the nearby woods were bare, and the ground was covered in dry, brittle leaves, their bright red, orange, and yellow colors now faded to brown.

Breathing in the cool air, he stood again and headed toward the lake. He moved slowly, careful not to slip on the wet ground, and stopped often to pick up a rock to skip it across the water as he would when he was a child. Then, the sound of footsteps in the dry leaves had him shuffling his feet to turn around.

It was from Avery approaching with an oversized bag. Narrowing his eyes, he attempted to read her expression. Most was hidden behind the dark sunglasses she wore, but her pronounced frown told him all he needed to know.

“Hi,” was all he could say, and waited for her to join him. After their argument the night before, he was surprised to see

her. Grateful, but surprised. Although, he'd yet to figure out what to say to her and nothing he could possibly said was going to ease the blow.

"Ready for your workout?"

There was only business in her frigid tone. No emotion or inflection to give him any hope of an easy start to the conversation he'd been dreading.

"Avery, it's good—"

"I'll get set up over there." She pointed over her shoulder and walked away from him.

She worked quickly. If she kept focused on setting up the exercises, maybe she could keep her emotions in check and prevent from melting into a puddle at his feet. He looked so handsome with the lake behind him and the morning sun on his face. She wanted nothing more than to go back to the way things were between them.

It took all she had to face him that day. Every instinct told her to protect herself from more heartache, rejection, and embarrassment, but her love for him couldn't easily be swayed.

"Avery," he called but she continued unrolling the yoga mat as if he'd said nothing. "I wasn't sure if I'd see you today."

"Me either," she answered but kept her back to him.

"Avery, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know."

"Will you look at me?"

She took a deep breath and fidgeted with the equipment until she could gather the nerve. She'd promised herself when she decided to come that she'd be strong, but her world always came undone when he turned those gorgeous blue eyes on her.

"Avery." He took her hand and gently spun her around.

The first thing she saw was the sorrow in his eyes, and instantly forgave him. He needn't ask or say a word. Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him close and was shocked to feel him trembling.

“Jackson, I’m sorry for pushing you.”

A breeze tossed her hair into her face when she leaned back, and he tucked it behind her ear before pressing a kiss to her forehead. She was looking at him with so much compassion and expectation, and it broke his heart to know he was about to shatter hers.

“Can we sit?”

She helped him down to the mat then joined him.

“The wheelchair is now in storage, and this morning, I walked the full distance around the house.” Her eyes widened in surprise, bringing a smile to his lips. “I was able to do that because of you.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m so happy for you. You put in the work, and after all you’ve been through, you deserve for things to finally go right.”

He thought of the news he received from his father and the decision he’d yet to give Avery. Neither of those relationships were going right, and he would soon lose them both.

Resting against him, she could feel the tension return to his muscles and placed her hand on his chest. His heart was beating fast and hard. Why wouldn’t he look at her? When tears pooled in his eyes, she moved swiftly and wrapped her legs and arms around him.

“Is everything okay? What can I do?”

He blew out an extended breath. “You’ve done everything for me, for our relationship. I don’t deserve you.”

“This is about us, isn’t it?” Her heart sank, and she sat up with a new realization. “You’re breaking it off.”

When he couldn’t look at her, she had all the information she needed. Glancing toward the house, she blinked back tears. It was going to be a long humiliating walk to the car. Why had she made him promise?

“I want you to know,” he took her hand in his. “What happened between us last night had no weight in my decision.

Grayson said some things after you left, and it brought forward feelings that I had been ignoring. Selfishly, I don't want to lose you." He paused when her head snapped to face him, her cheeks now soaked with fresh tears.

"Then don't."

"Avery, it's not fair to you." He trailed the back of his hand over her cheek. "You said it yourself, life is short, and I won't allow you to waste any more time on me. You deserve more than I can give, and one day, you'll find someone who will make you happier than I ever could."

Impossible, she thought, and shook her head, unwilling to accept that their short relationship was over. She knew his care for her was sincere, but he hadn't given them enough time. She needed more time.

"Jackson, I love you." Saying the words hurt. "I've always loved you."

"I know." Closing his eyes because he couldn't bear to look into hers, he brought her hand to his lips. He was ready for the torture to end for them both. "You've been my rock all these months, but I won't continue to lead you on."

"So, that's it? I don't get a say?" Scooting back from him, she stood on shaky knees and swatted at the steady stream of tears burning her face. When he joined her, he took her in his arms and stroked her hair. Emotion flowed through his fingers, making it infinitely harder to let go.

A familiar pang of guilt balled in his gut. "Please, Avery. Live your life and forget about me. Please. If not for me, do it for yourself. You deserve to be happy."

She stepped away from him, only because shock had taken control and she stumbled backward. After a lifetime of loving him, he wanted her to forget? Just like that. He was in the process of shattering her dreams and breaking her heart and had been for over two decades. She'd sabotaged healthy relationships and wasted years waiting for him to come to her.

And when he finally did, he couldn't love her. Any of that should have her screaming how unfair it was, wailing her fists on him, or walking away with her dignity intact, but none those reactions came to mind. No longer in his arms, all she could think about how much she missed him already.

Desperate to get away, she gathered her things and left her broken heart in a pile at his feet. "Goodbye, Jackson."

He watched her jog away and when she rounded the corner of the house, he doubled over to rest his hands on his knees. The twist in his stomach was tighter now and the ache was spreading like wildfire with every minute that ticked by in her absence.

What had he done?

He gulped in air, trying to refill his empty lungs while the world around him spun out of control. Every devoted gesture she'd shown him over the last six months flashed through his mind at a nauseating pace.

The way her face would light up when she saw him. Her playful smile when he was grumpy. The sweet words she'd whisper when they were alone. Her unconditional patience, forgiveness, and love. The soft caress of her hand on his skin.

He had appreciated it all and her, but he couldn't help that he didn't feel love, devotion, or excitement for their future when he looked into her eyes. The decision he made had been the right one, he reminded himself, and she would someday be grateful that he'd given her back her life.

With a deep breath, he stood and looked around the grounds. He needed to let off some steam, think, and forget as he used to when he had legs that worked. He needed to run.

About twenty yards away was an old tree stump. It was a short distance, but if he could jog to it now, maybe he'd be able to jog longer distances soon. That's what he wanted more than anything—to run again. And now was a good time to start. No

matter how much it hurt or how long it took, he wouldn't stop until he reached that damn stump.

Resolved, he picked up his right foot, but his left knee gave out on the push-off, and he fell face-first on the brittle grass. *Fitting*, he puffed, but he was undeterred. Rising to his feet, he tried again, taking off in a limping run toward his goal. This time, he made it several steps before tumbling to the ground. With every new attempt, he made it farther and farther, and soon, he collapsed at the base of the stump.

Short, labored breaths burned in his lungs as he dragged himself up to sit on the flat surface. While he recovered, he rested his elbows on his thighs and watched the sweat drip off his forehead, darkening the dirt below.

"Are you *trying* to beat yourself up?" Eleanor called from the back porch.

Ignoring her, he tossed his hair out of his face to search for a new destination. His eyes locked on a tree, and he took off as best he could, making it halfway before falling hard on his hands and knees. The scrapes on his legs and palms stung in the mixture of blood, dirt, and sweat, but he couldn't stop now. It was working.

He practiced until dark, jogging back and forth across the yard. Each time, setting a goal and laboring until he reached it. He was out of breath and bleeding, but he felt alive.

Several times, Eleanor brought him water and begged him to take a break. But the challenge took his mind off all that haunted him—Avery, Will, his father, regrets—and he couldn't stop. Not when he was making such rapid progress. And even though the war in his head still raged, he was able to suppress it while he worked.

An hour later, when he could barely move his legs or see the yard in front of him through the night, he stumbled back to the house. He was grateful for Eleanor, who met him at the door and helped him up the porch steps. Fumbling with every step,

he leaned on her to walk, his sweaty skin dampening her shirt. She could support his body weight long enough to reach the kitchen, so she deposited him on the stool at the island.

“Drink,” she placed a tall glass of red liquid in front of him. “You’re probably dehydrated.”

Her tone was a warning. He’d heard it too many times to count during his youth, and it brought a smile to his face. He knew when he could test her and when it was best to do as she said, so he raised the glass and drained it.

“Why are you punishing yourself?” she demanded and refilled his glass.

“It’s not punishment. It’s practice.”

“Bull. Practice is not what I saw out there.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw a man, broken and suffering, torturing himself for hurting someone he cares about. I saw a man who is vulnerable, lonely, and afraid. Someone who wants to forget.”

When he raised the glass to his lips and couldn’t bring his eyes to hers, she knew she’d hit the mark.

“I also saw a man who doesn’t give up and always does the right thing, no matter the pain it might cause him. That man has a beautiful soul, and I’m very proud of him.”

“You think I was right in breaking it off with Avery? You adore her.”

“I do.”

“She was so hurt. Like I rammed a dagger into her back.” His empty stomach churned when he thought of the agony on her face. She was blindsided, and he wished he had been more articulate in relaying his feelings. But regrettably, he’d never been good at that.

“Yes, you did the right thing. It’s going to hurt for a good while, but she’s young and will bounce back stronger.” She grabbed a plate from the cabinet and several containers of leftovers from the refrigerator. He was going to get some

nourishment, even if it took tying him down and feeding him herself. His sore muscles would thank her later.

She filled a plate with vegetables and pork and tossed it into the microwave. When it was ready, she placed the food in front of him and demanded he eat. Not willing to fight her, and because he was famished, he ate until the plate was empty.

“Good boy. Now, go wash up. You stink.” For the first time that day, he laughed, and it felt amazing.

While he soaked in the tub, he tried music for the first time to drown out the noise while he attempted to relax. So he wouldn't disturb Eleanor, he used earbuds and turned up the volume. It helped, but it didn't erase Avery's face or her expressive eyes filled with shattered hopes from his thoughts.

At least he could say he gave their relationship a chance. It just wasn't meant to be, and now, after years of putting her life on hold, she could finally move on. Maybe with time, as Eleanor suggested, the heartache and disappointment would start to heal for them both.

Chapter Ten



Jackson, honey,” Eleanor called from the hallway. He wasn’t in his room, the gym, or the kitchen, so she checked the backyard, shivering in the frigid December wind when she stepped outside.

Walking back through the house, she searched for him through the front windows and found him walking up the driveway. She watched him labor over each step and pride filled her heart.

He’d come so far, and his tenacity was back. Since Avery stopped coming by for his physical therapy nearly six weeks ago, he was doing the exercises on his own and growing stronger and more agile every day.

He exercised four to five days a week for hours, only stopping to eat lunch and dinner with her. Since reaching his original goal to walk again, his new goal was retraining his body to be the premiere athlete he once was. No matter the weather, he was content outside, and she was grateful he found something to occupy his troubled mind.

“What’s wrong?” he asked through ragged breaths when she met him on the driveway.

“Nothing, dear. Good workout today?”

He turned his wrist to check his watch. “Well, I walked two miles, got in over 300 push-ups and sit-ups, and I found a great tree for pull-ups. Oh, and I also was able to sustain a jog for more yards than yesterday. So, yeah, great workout.” Her playful yet dramatic eye roll put a grin on his face.

“Glad you had fun. But you should get cleaned up.” She folded her arms against the wind. “Your father’s coming for lunch.”

While Eleanor hustled about the kitchen and dining room, dusting, and cleaning between mixing and dicing, Jackson retired to his room. Because he could, he took a shower. Baths reminded him of when he was too weak to stand on his own, and the unfortunate incident with Avery. Both were memories he’d rather forget.

Once he was dressed, he went back to the kitchen and paused in the doorway to watch Eleanor. She moved about the room swiftly and intentionally, cooking multiple dishes at once while preparing her signature dinner presentation. It would have been an entertaining way to pass the time had it not been for the frantic look on her face. Before he could speak, she noticed him and tipped her head toward the dining room.

He knew what that meant. Leaving Eleanor to her controlled chaos, he entered the dining room and found his father seated at the head of the table, reading the newspaper. There was natural light streaming through the windows, and the crystal chandelier scattered the sun rays in brilliant rainbow patterns on the walls, but the stately room still seemed dark. The air heavy and stagnant.

It was the first time he'd ever seen his father look out of place anywhere. Something was off, and it didn't sit right in Jackson's stomach.

"Can I get you a drink?" Jackson asked to announce his arrival.

"No. Thanks."

Grayson folded the newspaper, exposing his face, and he was almost unrecognizable. He'd lost weight, and his skin was dull and pale. The dark bags under his eyes were a sign he hadn't been sleeping. His hair was also messy and thinning on top.

So much had changed since Jackson last saw him—the cancer undoubtedly taking a toll on his body. But the one change Jackson couldn't comprehend was the fact that Grayson was wearing a solid white t-shirt and jeans—strange attire for someone who wore a tailored suit seven days a week.

Setting the paper aside, Grayson motioned for Jackson to join him at the table. "You seem to be moving around a little better."

Jackson nodded and sat in a nearby chair, unsure of what to say. Years of distance and hurtful arguments hindering his ability to make small talk. The awkward silence was unbearable, and he was relieved when Eleanor joined them to lead the conversation.

After they were finished eating, and he and Jackson were alone, Grayson finally spoke. "I didn't stop by only for lunch."

Grayson's smoky gray eyes were expressionless, providing Jackson no information about his intentions or emotional state. Then, Grayson reached over the arm of his chair to retrieve a leather bag and pull out a long, blue folder. It was neatly organized, with several tags of varying colors sticking out of a stack of paper. He set the folder on the table, crossed his hands on top, and raised his gaze to Jackson.

"This is my will. I'm working on cleaning up a few things, and as my only child, I need you to sign some forms. Since

tomorrow is the anniversary of your accident, I thought I'd stop by today." He paused when Jackson's face went blank and pale.

"I didn't realize it was..."

The memories came rushing back, consuming and smothering him. Grayson continued to talk, and the sound was deafening. He could read nothing when Grayson put the forms in front of him. His limbs, fingers, and mind went numb as he sunk deeper into darkness.

When an object was thrust into his hand, he recoiled, shocked by the feel of cold metal in his hand. His heart was racing. Visions he worked so hard to suppress tore through his mind, and he was transported back to the edge of the explosion. His blood pressure spiked, and shallow, rusty breaths scratched his dry throat.

Sand. It was everywhere. Rubbing it from his eyes, he was startled by a hand on his shoulder. If they said anything, he couldn't process it. Then, they tugged at his arms and pulled him to his feet.

Mechanically, he walked where he was led, but the hallway seemed to tilt left and right. Bright beams of light flashed in front of him, pulsating with every step. Every heartbeat. His hand flew to his head and squeezed when an unexpected blow radiated inside his head and stole his strength. He couldn't see. Couldn't move. He was paralyzed again, drowning in a sea of agony, and the last thing he remembered was grasping for Eleanor as he collapsed.

When he awoke stiff and weary, the only light in the room was a faint moonbeam shining through the sheer curtains. Why did he feel like an old, battered punching bag instead of someone who'd slept through the afternoon? Pushing up to his elbows, he looked around, but the room and his stomach spiraled out of

control. Deciding to wait it out rather than lose his lunch on the rug, he laid back down and covered his face with a pillow.

The next time his eyes opened, the sun was high in the sky, and Eleanor was running a vacuum in a nearby room. Thankfully, the queasiness and headache were gone, allowing space for his brain to talk to his stomach. He was famished.

He shot up, ready for one of Eleanor's hearty breakfast creations, but was quickly reminded of his woozy head. Cautiously, he got dressed, and by the time he reached the kitchen, he was feeling—disappointed. Eleanor wasn't happily humming at the stove, and there was no delicious aroma of bacon frying.

"Oh, my heavens." Eleanor slapped her hand on her chest when she entered the hallway and saw Jackson. "You have to stop doing that."

"I don't smell breakfast. Is it early?"

"Honey, it's two o'clock in the afternoon. You've been out cold for twenty-four hours."

"What?" How could he sleep for that long and not know it? Especially when it was so difficult for him to get just a few hours of sleep most nights.

She locked the vacuum in place and went to him. She placed the back of her hand on his forehead as she did when he was a kid and frowned.

"You don't have a fever. Are you sick? I was worried about you but didn't want to disturb your sleep."

"I'm fine."

"Come. You're probably starving. I'll fix you something to eat." She led him into the kitchen and removed a large bowl from the refrigerator. "How did it go with your father yesterday?"

"Okay, I think. I don't remember most of it."

"How can you not remember what you talked about?"

“I don’t know. He mentioned something about his will, and the rest is a blur. Did you hear anything?”

Eleanor scooped a large spoonful of vegetable soup into a bowl. “No. But I saw he brought his briefcase. Does that jar any memories?”

His mouth watering, he watched her place the full bowl in the microwave. “I think I signed something now that you mention it. Hey, what’s today’s date?”

“December twentieth. Why?”

“He mentioned something about today’s date being the reason why he stopped by yesterday. Does today have any significance that you know of?”

“Well, it’s several days before Christmas. Oh...I’m surprised he remembered,” she added absently, removing the bowl from the microwave, and setting it in front of him.

“Remembered what?” Jackson’s stomach growled when he took the first bite. It was the best soup he’d ever tasted.

“Honey,” she rested a hand on his. “Today is the day Josh and Billy died.”

That was it, and why all they endured came rushing back and knocked him unconscious. He set down his spoon and slumped back in the chair.

“Oh, honey. Is that what got you so upset yesterday?” Automatically, she wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “I know it’s been a hard road, but it would do you good to focus on the good things in your life.”

She kissed his hair when he didn’t respond and leaned on the counter to see his face. “Jackson, look at me.” Her heart ached when he turned his mournful eyes on her, missing their usual radiance. “I want you to tell me one thing you’re grateful for. Go.”

He recognized that tone. “You. I’m grateful for you.”

With a tilt of her head, she squinted. “Are you buttering me up, so I’ll leave you alone?”

“No. You’re all I have, and without you I wouldn’t still be here.”

Her teasing smile was soon replaced with fresh tears. “I love you too, sweetie, and yes, you would. You are stronger than you give yourself credit for.” She kissed his forehead. “Give me something else that makes you grateful.”

“My progress so far and being able to walk again.”

“See? All part of His plan. Thank you, Jesus.”

Jackson smiled, admiring her faith. Sometimes, he wished he had a touch of it to get him through each day with a little less hardship. His belief in a higher power had waned since coming back, and he often wondered why God, if he existed, was constantly testing him.

“One more,” she demanded.

He thought for a moment. “I’m grateful for having this second chance.” Although the journey so far had been grueling and he still had a long way to go, he meant it. “It’s something my friends didn’t get, so I’m not going to waste this opportunity.”

“That’s my boy.” She stroked his hair, admiring the man he’d become. “Hey! I have an idea. Why don’t you go visit their parents?”

The thought of seeing his friends’ parents, after all they’d been through and on this day, had his chest tightening again.

“Jackson, you can and are going to do it,” she insisted when she felt the tension return to his body. “Finish your soup. You’re going to need your strength.”

In less than an hour, Eleanor and Jackson arrived at Billy’s childhood home to visit his parents, Harrison and Sophia. “Go on. They’re expecting you,” Eleanor said putting the car in park.

“I don’t know about this. What if seeing me today is too painful? I can’t do that to them.”

“Maybe seeing you would help ease that pain, at least for a little while. Did you think of that? They love you, and you need this. Now, go.”

When he exited the car, he noticed Sophia was waiting for him on the front porch. He had so many fond memories of her growing up. She was witty and kind, and he always felt safe and welcome in her home.

Sophia stepped off the porch of their elegant two-story brick home and jogged to meet him halfway up the driveway. With his legs unsteady on the sloped ground, she nearly knocked him over when she wrapped her arms around his neck. Burying her face in his shoulder, she sobbed, and as he held her, he was suddenly grateful he came.

When she could catch her breath, she pulled back and took his face in her hands. “Jackson, I can’t believe you’re walking.” She held him at arms-length and pushed at the hair that had blown into his face. “You look incredible. So handsome, as always.” Draping her arm over his, she escorted him toward the house. “Harrison is going to be so excited to see you. We’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” More than he realized.

Once inside, Harrison appeared in the doorway of his home office and took Jackson in his arms. “My boy. It’s so great to see you again and without the wheelchair. I can’t believe it. How are you?”

“It’s been a tough couple of months,” he answered honestly.

“I’m sure. Come on, let’s sit.” He led Jackson and his wife to the nearby formal living room.

Sitting on the soft, plaid settee next to Sophia, Jackson looked around. “It feels so strange being in here.”

“That’s because you were forbidden from stepping foot in here for a lot of years. You boys couldn’t be trusted.” Sophia squeezed Jackson’s hand and nudged his shoulder, flashing him a weary grin.

“I think we agreed with that. We claimed it was too girly, but we were more terrified of what you might do to us if we broke something.”

“Smart boys, you all were.”

“I still can’t believe you’re walking already,” Harrison chimed in. “Avery must really be good at her job.”

“She is. How are things with you?” Jackson asked to change the subject and avoid having to explain his many failings in their short relationship.

“Pretty good,” Harrison answered. “Your father’s keeping me busy, and I’ve been thankful for that. It’s given me something to focus on.”

Harrison had been Grayson’s right-hand man since the beginning and provided well for his family. Grayson affectionately called him the company janitor since he cleaned up the failing companies they purchased. Then, Grayson would do his part and sell them for a hefty profit, which they both shared. Harrison had a special way with people and was a trustworthy business partner—the perfect complement to Jackson’s reckless and ruthless father.

Sophia had also been close friends with Jackson’s mother. She and Harrison knew first-hand how Jackson was treated and had gone out of their way to make him a member of their family. They took time to attend his races when his own parents were absent, and he often stayed at their house for dinner or overnight when going back to the estate was too much to bear.

But Jackson hadn’t gone there to talk about Grayson. He came to talk about Billy and feel the warmth and healing power of two people he adored and hadn’t realized he desperately needed in his life.

Before Harrison could inquire about Grayson or his illness, Jackson diverted the conversation back to Billy and their childhood together. Billy was the group’s mischief instigator. He was fearless, and of the four boys, he suffered the most injuries

due to his lack of respect for the body's limitations. Most of the trouble they got into was because of Billy and his grand schemes.

He also enjoyed competing with Will for the biggest personality in the room. He was always at the ready with a joke or prank, usually inappropriate for the situation. Like Will, he was electric, but he was also unpredictable. It was why Eleanor had affectionately called him a firefly.

"Please don't be a stranger," Harrison insisted when Eleanor returned to pick up Jackson and accepted another hug. "We're here for you, always."

Jackson took Sophia in his arms and wished he hadn't waited so long to see them. "Thank you. I'll see you soon."

"Good visit?" Eleanor asked when Jackson was back in the car with a smile on his face.

"I love them almost as much as I love you. You were right. I needed this." He turned to face her. "Thank you. I might not have done this if you hadn't pushed me."

"Strongly encouraged," she corrected and patted his leg with the love and wisdom of the mother she'd always been to him. "And yes, you would have. Eventually." She put the car in motion. "Next stop, the Wilson's. I called Josh's parents, and we got lucky. They both took off today for—well, you know."

He nodded in response, knowing this day was hard for them as well.

"Where are we going?" he asked when Eleanor missed the turn toward the Wilson's neighborhood.

"We're not meeting them at their house."

He was about to ask where when he saw it, and his heartrate quickened. A new instinct to retreat suddenly had him sweating. He couldn't fight it, no matter how much he detested the feeling, and it made him question who he was now.

Eleanor drove under the black iron archway and through the cemetery until locating the Wilson's car parked in the shade of a large Oak tree. Jackson's heart was still racing. He wasn't ready

for this. How could he face them for the first time there? Jackson squeezed his hands together when he noticed they were shaking.

“Look at me, Jackson.” His eyes were filled with tears, and she knew where his thoughts were taking him. “What happened to Josh was not your fault. His path was his own. They understand that.”

He turned his attention to the cemetery beyond and saw Josh’s parents exit the car. Running his hands through his hair, he took a deep breath before opening the door.

Eleanor watched him stagger down the drive, his emotions stealing his strength, and collapse into their open arms. For several minutes, they held him while a year’s worth of regret and sadness poured out. His body shuddered, and she quickly said a prayer asking God to help him understand how lucky he was to have so many people in his life that loved him.

Soon, the trio walked to Josh’s grave a few paces away and sat on the grass around his headstone. Eleanor tried not to watch, but the sight of the three of them sitting together in the dappled shade of the tree was heartbreakingly touching. It took some time, but sobs finally gave way to laughter, and to her delight, Jackson returned to the car with a smile on his face.

“One more to go,” Eleanor announced as she took off, waving goodbye to Josh’s parents. “I wasn’t able to get ahold of Will’s parents, but we’ll drive by to see if they’re home.”

The Mason’s house was located across town from the cemetery, and by the time they arrived, the sun was below the tree line. Several lights were on inside the house, so Jackson knocked on the door.

On a high from the previous two visits, he waited impatiently on the porch. In a few moments, he heard footsteps approaching from the other side and braced for impact. He couldn’t wait to be swallowed in their embrace and feel the familiar comforts of another home he grew up in. But when the

door opened, he was surprised and rendered speechless to see a stranger staring back at him.

“Can I help you?” The woman asked when he didn’t speak. She had short bright blonde hair and was holding a baby on her hip. A red sauce covered the child’s chubby cheeks, and it was also smeared in the woman’s hair. She was frazzled but had a friendly smile.

“I’m sorry, I thought...” He trailed off, leaning back to look at the house number affixed to the brick beside the door. He’d spent countless hours there but seeing the woman had him second-guessing his memory.

“Are you looking for the Masons?”

“Yes, actually. Do you know them?”

“They were the previous owners of this house. We purchased it from them back in August. They were selling it themselves and gave us a great deal.”

“Do you know where they moved to?” Jackson interrupted, beginning to lose his patience.

She shifted the toddler to her other hip. “They moved to North Carolina. Murf, Murphy-something or other,” she attempted, seemingly unaware of his growing frustration.

“Murfreesboro?”

“Yes, that sounds right. Such wonderful people. How do you know them?”

Ignoring her question, he apologized for the interruption before returning to the SUV, devastated and confused.

“That was quick. Were they not home?” Eleanor asked.

“No, they weren’t. Did you know they moved?”

“I had no idea. Did someone answer the door?” She wasn’t able to see Jackson talking with the young mother through the trees in the front yard.

“Yes, the new homeowner. They sold the house a few months ago and moved to North Carolina.” How could he not

know they left, and why hadn't Avery told him? It didn't make any sense.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to track them down, and maybe, when you're fully mended, you can go for a visit." Thinking nothing of it, she started the engine and headed back to the estate.

But Jackson couldn't put it out of his mind. Something must have happened for them to up and move, without a word, so soon after losing their son. For the first time since their breakup, he wished he could talk to Avery.

On the way home, he began to feel the effects of the rollercoaster ride of emotions he endured during the visits. A dull throbbing had begun around his temples, and he rubbed it with his fingers.

"We're almost home, sweetie," Eleanor said, noticing his anxiety and stress rising. "I want you to go lie down while I prepare dinner, got it?" Eleanor commanded with that tone he couldn't refuse.

Once in his room, he collapsed on the bed and tried to focus on the positives from the day's visits, as Eleanor would suggest, to keep the migraine and memories where they belonged. Not in his head.

He enjoyed seeing his friends' parents. In addition to Eleanor, they were his family in every sense of the word that mattered. He was thankful they didn't have to see him broken and bound to his wheelchair. He was proud to be walking and be able to show them the progress he'd made. Of course, they didn't know all he'd been through to get to that point, but he knew, and being on his feet again meant everything.

Then, his thoughts returned to Eleanor and her love and devotion to him. It was her idea for him to make the trips. She called ahead, encouraged him when he was anxious, and spent her afternoon transporting him around town. She kept him sane and moving forward.

He wanted to do something to thank her for her help and being his foundation over the past year. He ran through ideas of possible gifts and gestures, but nothing seemed to be enough or suitable for his Eleanor.

When she called him for dinner, he resigned to brainstorming more later. For now, his empty stomach was taking priority.

Chapter Eleven



It was early April, and another month with an anniversary Jackson would rather forget. It had been one year since his homecoming, and although his mobility had improved drastically, he still had a long way to go in his recovery.

His body had changed as well. All winter, he spent hours walking, jogging, lifting, and doing calisthenics, which resulted in a new chiseled physique. He could jog for a mile now before needing to rest his legs, but his upper body knew no bounds. So, while he waited for his legs to recover during his workouts, he built muscle through push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, and more.

He'd much rather run for twelve to fifteen miles as he once had with the muscle-building exercises built into the run, but he was working toward that pace one day at a time. Recovery was a process, and running a mile was longer than he could go last fall when he first tried to jog across the yard.

As he rounded the corner to the estate and entered the gate, two vehicles, a little red sports car and a white van, were parked in the driveway. Both could only mean one thing—the cancer

had taken over, and his father was moving in. Heading inside, the tension Jackson released during his walk knotted in his neck and shoulders again.

“Oh, Jackson. I’m so glad you’re home,” Eleanor said when Jackson entered, then turned to the tall man in blue scrubs sitting next to her at the kitchen table. “This is Grayson’s son.”

The man rose and crossed the room to shake Jackson’s hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Reese with Hospice of Virginia. Will you join us?”

He nodded and followed Reese to the table, taking the seat next to Eleanor.

“Where is he?”

“In his room,” Eleanor answered, tears pooling. Using the tissue she was clutching, she blotted the corner of her eyes. “He looked so fragile.”

Her face was red from crying, and Jackson instantly wished he had been there for her.

“Reese is here because your father has decided to spend his final days at home with his family. Isn’t that great?”

Jackson nodded, not knowing what to say and accepted the hand she offered.

After a mountain of paperwork and even more explanations of what all parties would be responsible for, Reese went upstairs to give the same information to Grayson.

“How was he? His mood and energy, I mean,” Jackson asked Eleanor.

“Not good. They brought him in the van and had to wheel him in on a gurney.”

When she began to cry again, Jackson wrapped an arm around her.

“Someone else brought his car and dropped it off. I didn’t see who.” Sitting up, she tapped the tissue under her nose. “We’ll need to pack up his apartment and bring his belongings here.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of it.”

While Eleanor composed herself and organized documents, Jackson wondered about Grayson’s will. Who was he leaving the apartment, the estate, and his business to? Harrison, a friend, a colleague, a woman he was seeing. There was no reason to waste time assuming or speculating about his father’s wishes or will since he barely knew the man, his life, or the people in it.

Giving his attention back to Eleanor, Jackson sat with her while she read over every detail of the information Reese provided. The contraption hospice set up in his room, and their staff would do most of the treatments someone in his condition required, but they weren’t going to be there around the clock.

She began to explain what she and Jackson would be doing when the doorbell rang.

“Were you expecting someone?” he asked Eleanor.

“No. Would you mind getting it, dear? I need to gather myself.”

Jackson patted her on the arm, jogged to the door, and opened it. On the porch stood a bald, stocky man in a navy suit and shiny brown shoes. He was holding a briefcase and already sweating in the late morning sunshine.

“Can I help you?”

“You must be Jackson. I’m Adam Dufrene.” When Jackson didn’t invite him in, he explained. “I’m your father’s attorney. He asked me to stop by.”

“Sure. Sorry. Please, come in, Mr. Dufrene.” Stepping aside, Jackson shut the door behind him.

“Call me Adam,” he said slowly, distracted by the awe and wonder of what he saw.

“First time?”

“Yes.” Adam cleared his throat and straightened his tie. “You have a beautiful home.”

“Thank you, but it’s not mine. Follow me.” Jackson led Adam upstairs to his father’s suite and knocked before turning

the knob. He motioned for Adam to enter but before he could escape, Grayson called for him.

“Yes, sir?” he answered from the doorway.

“Come here, son.”

Reluctantly, Jackson entered the large room. He hadn’t been in his parents’ bedroom since before his mother died, and seeing it brought back more memories than he was prepared for.

The four-poster antique bed centered the room, and it was his favorite hide and seek spot when he played with his friends or Eleanor. To the left was the master bathroom where he’d sit with his mother at the vanity between the dual sinks. They’d talk while she got ready, curling her hair or applying makeup. Jackson would often tell her she didn’t need any of it, and he could still hear her light, airy laugh in response. She’d smile and look at him through the mirror with eyes that matched his own. He treasured those rare moments with his mother and would have liked more of them.

Then, Jackson glanced at the double windows looking out over the backyard and instantly wished he hadn’t. He remembered every detail of the day he found his mother lying under them on the hardwood floor. She looked agonizingly delicate. He yelled for his father, who scooped her up and rushed her to the hospital. She died less than a week later.

Turning his attention away from the memory, he stopped at the foot of the bed. His father was propped up with several pillows against the ornate wood headboard. An IV bag was hooked to a tall silver pole on wheels, and an oxygen tube was wrapped around his face. He was thin, and his skin was a transparent lavender color.

“We have some things to go over with you,” his father announced, his voice hoarse and labored.

Adam pulled a folder out of his briefcase. “Jackson, your father is naming you his power of attorney. If he becomes incapacitated, you will be responsible for all decisions regarding

his care.” He pulled a pen out of his jacket pocket. “I’ll need your signature on these forms,” he said flatly and handed over the open folder.

Jackson reviewed the information and scribbled his signature despite not wanting the responsibility. Now, he was responsible for his father’s life and death. A nagging headache began to pulsate behind his eyes.

Without further instructions, Adam tucked the folder in his briefcase and said his goodbyes. But as he stood to leave, he placed his hand on Grayson’s shoulder and squeezed. It was a gesture of unspoken understanding and rapport that was undoubtedly established from years of both trials and triumphs.

“I’ll show myself out,” he said to Jackson, leaving a void in the room.

“I need a promise from you,” Grayson began slowly, his voice barely a whisper. Breathing seemed to torture him, and he had to pause often to force air into his lungs.

Jackson nodded and waited.

“No interventions, treatments, or resuscitations,” he puffed and closed his eyes. Then, after a few seconds, his eyes opened again and focused on Jackson. “Promise me.”

“Whatever you want.” His voice sounded hollow in the large room, the echo vibrating in his ears. The walls seemed to close in around him, squeezing the oxygen out of the room. He could hear his own heartbeat like a fist against metal.

He needed to get out and didn’t wait for permission. Escaping, he closed the door behind him, leaned against it, and took several deep breaths. Surviving was at the forefront of his mind, and at that moment, he wasn’t sure how.

Instead of returning to the kitchen where Eleanor and Reese were still huddled over more paperwork, he headed to his father’s office to get a drink—preferably a strong one. Teetering dangerously between punching something and a nervous breakdown, he poured two fingers of Scotch and tossed it back.

Closing his eyes, he waited for the liquid to coat his dry throat before pouring another. In one swig, he drained the glass and hoped he found the courage he needed to face whatever test came next.

Every day for the next two weeks, his father slept. Rarely did he notice the hospice staff that stopped by twice a day to check equipment, change sheets, or check his vitals. But with each passing day, Grayson grew weaker and more irritable.

He barely acknowledged Jackson's presence or Eleanor fussing over his every need. The more he ignored them, the less Jackson cared. He had questions, but after several failed attempts to talk with Grayson about his wishes, Jackson gave up. He just hoped the will was provided enough detail to direct him when the time came.

Eleanor was a nervous wreck and constantly worried about Grayson's care and comfort. She checked on him often and prayed over him while he slept. No matter how terrible he treated her or how ungrateful he acted, she handled him with grace and compassion.

Jackson envied her patience, but he just didn't have it in him. Maybe if he and his father had a relationship once and they had simply grown apart over the years, he might have been able to muster up the effort. But the man lying in bed upstairs was a stranger who preferred to die alone, and Jackson was happy to give him what he wanted.

One cloudy afternoon after returning from a long workout, Jackson found Eleanor sitting at the island. The cordless phone was resting on the counter in front of her, and her eyes were red.

"What's wrong, Eleanor?" he asked, rushing to her side. "Is it Grayson?"

She shook her head and wiped her wet cheeks with a towel.

“Jackson, I’m so sorry,” was all she could say before the sobs stole her voice.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Whatever it is, we’ll face it together.” He held her, hoping his support would calm her, but it only made her cry harder.

Stepping back, he looked her over. “Are you hurt?” He didn’t spot any blood, and his worry was relieved with a shake of her head. “What is it, then? Please tell me, Eleanor. You’re killing me.” He’d gladly take any burden or pain she felt if it would stop her tears.

She took several deep breaths to gather the nerve to look into his eyes, now deep with worry. “Can we talk in the parlor?”

She was stalling, but her heart ached with regret for what she was about to do to him. They walked in silence together to the front room and sat on the small beige couch. She breathed in some courage and cursed the clouds for casting a solemn glow through the room.

“Heather called while you were out. She and her husband have officially separated and are getting a divorce.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“They’ve been struggling for a while and now she’s having to return to work to put food on the table and pay the bills.” She took another deep breath. “Jackson, they need me.”

Understanding she had already made her decision, he nodded. “When do you leave?”

“I feel like I’m abandoning you and Grayson at the worst possible time. I’m being ripped in half having to choose between my two families.” Tears spilled over her lashes. “I love you so much.”

“I know that, and I love you too, but you shouldn’t feel bad about this. I’m going to miss you, more than you know, but your daughter and grandkids should be your priority now.”

It took everything he had not to beg her to stay, but he knew it would only make the transition more painful for them both.

She needed his support, and it was the least he could do for her. After over twenty years of caring for him and his parents, she deserved to live the next stage of her life guilt-free and how she pleased.

Holding her, he knew how he could thank her for all she'd done for him. But unfortunately, he needed his father's help to pull it off.

"So, when do you leave?" he asked again.

Grimacing, her eyes pleaded for his forgiveness. "Next week."

He swallowed hard. "Okay. What do you need to do to get ready?"

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes again while she considered. "Well, I need to pack, of course, so I'll have to find some boxes. I need to buy a car, something that I can haul my belongings and run the kids around in. There are a few things I'd like to take care of around the house, and I also want to visit a few friends."

"Make me a list of the things you want done around the house, and I'll take care of those while you visit and pack. I'll ask Harrison and Thomas to bring over some boxes from work. Then, we'll go car shopping for that car this weekend. How's that sound?" He smiled and was knocked backward when she jumped out of her seat to give him her signature hug.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said, laughing. "Now, let's get to work."

As Eleanor crafted her list, Jackson went upstairs to talk to his father. He needed to be a part of this going away gift for Eleanor since she'd been a loyal and hard-working employee of his for decades. Although, Jackson would never call her that. She was family to him, but Grayson had never taken the time to build that relationship with her.

Upstairs, Jackson found his father sleeping. Not wanting to wake him, he went to close the door when Grayson's coughing

resumed. It was violent and relentless, causing Jackson to rush to his side. Sitting him up, he snatched the small towel off the bedside table, and held it up to his mouth until the compulsions stopped. Grayson's eyes locked on Jackson as he strained to breathe and held on to Jackson's arm. His hand was trembling, but he wouldn't let go.

"I've got you. I'm not going anywhere," Jackson soothed and set the towel, now covered in blood, aside.

Lost at seeing his father so frightened, frail and dependent, he laid Grayson back on the pillows and pulled a chair to the bed. To fill the silence, Jackson began with the reason he'd stopped by.

"I have some sad news. Eleanor is moving in with her daughter in Stony Creek. She leaves next week."

No reaction.

"I thought we should do something nice for her since she's been so loyal all these years. She needs a car. What do you think about giving her the SUV?"

When Grayson continued to stare at him, his eyes blank and unresponsive, Jackson grabbed his hand.

"Dad, can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me," he demanded, fear creeping in until his father's hand weakly squeezed his.

"Good," he exhaled. "Now squeeze my hand if you agree to give Eleanor the car."

Grayson squeezed again.

"Thank you, she'll be so happy after I convince her to take it," he grinned, determination setting in.

He set his father's hand down on the bed and tried to pull his away, but he held on again.

"What is it?"

When he didn't respond, Jackson tried more questions.

"Do you want to see Eleanor? Are you in pain? Do you want me to get something for you?"

Grayson squeezed his hand.

“Is it in this room?” Another squeeze. “Is it in the bathroom? Dresser? Closet?” *Bingo*. Even though he had to play Twenty Questions, at least they were finally communicating.

As Jackson stood, Grayson attempted to speak. He pinched his lips and opened his mouth over and over. Jackson leaned closer, but Grayson wasn’t making any sounds. He grabbed his father’s hand when signs of frustration consumed his face.

“It’s okay. We’ll get this. Pocket? Is there something in your coat or pants pocket?”

No squeeze.

“Box?” *That’s it*. He was getting better at the game. “Let me go look, and I’ll be right back.”

Jackson searched the large walk-in closet for a box. It took a while to search the built-in drawers, shelves, and cabinets, but he found three boxes of varying sizes and carried them to the bed.

Grayson pointed at the medium box covered in black felt, and Jackson opened it. Pinned to the matching felt inside was a silver necklace with a heart-shaped locket. The outside of the locket was decorated with engraved flowers and tiny diamonds.

“Was this mother’s?”

Grayson slowly rolled his head left then right.

“No? Interesting. Don’t tell me you bought this for one of your mistresses.” Jackson cast a disapproving glance at his father, who closed his eyes and rolled his head. “Good. Who, then? Was it Grandma’s?”

Grayson blinked hard to indicate Jackson had guessed correctly.

“It’s beautiful. What do you want done with it? Give it to Eleanor?”

Another hard blink.

“Thank you. What about these?” Jackson asked and picked up other two boxes.

Grayson pointed to the larger box made of sturdy white cardboard and then to Jackson.

“You want me to have this one?”

He lifted the lid. Inside were newspaper clippings, photos, certificates, and programs from his high school years, but the clipping on top tore him to pieces. It was a newspaper article written about him and his three friends when they announced they were choosing the military over playing college football. All four of them were recruited by schools around the country, but their shared dream of fulfilling a more selfless goal caught the attention of a local reporter.

Jackson had forgotten about the interview and never saw the article after it was published. The large color photo accompanying the article was of all four friends in their football jerseys holding small U.S. flags. It was now one of the most precious things he owned. He touched the dog tags resting under his shirt and set the paper on the bed.

He shuffled through the rest of the stack. All the clippings were articles and stats from his football games and track races. Mixed in the stack were photos of him at games, birthday parties or holidays. At the bottom, he found sport banquet programs, certificates, ribbons, and medals.

The accolades meant very little to him when he was competing. It was the experience, development, and challenge he cared about. So, who would have collected all this? He couldn't imagine either of his parents taking the time, especially since they hadn't attended any of it.

It must have been Eleanor, he decided. Despite her hatred for most types of weather, she was always there dressed from head to toe in school colors. Sometimes, she'd even paint her face with all four of their jersey numbers. And there was usually a cowbell, pom pom, or homemade sign with glitter in her hand. When she got home after the game glitter would be plastered all over her skin, giving Jackson a laugh every time.

Yes, Eleanor would have wanted him to have these memories one day, and he was grateful for them, as she undoubtedly knew he would be.

He put the contents back in the box and closed the lid. “Thank you for this,” he managed before Grayson closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He returned the small box to the closet, put the dirty towel in the hamper, and placed a clean one on the table beside the bed. Standing over him now, Jackson worried about the unnatural amount of blood on the towel. If someone wasn’t there to sit him up when the coughing took over, his father might drown in his own fluid.

Accepting that he would have to be that someone, Jackson grabbed some blankets and a pillow from the hall closet. *No one*, he thought, against his will as he arranged a bed for himself on the floor of his father’s room. Soon, the two people he’d had in his life since birth, good or bad, were leaving him either by choice or by fate.

Growing up, and even when Jackson was in the military, he’d been Eleanor’s focus, and it was hard for him to imagine not having that steadfast support. On the opposite spectrum, he’d always believed he’d be better off without his father looming in the shadows of his life. But now that Grayson was dying, Jackson just couldn’t hate him anymore.

After Eleanor drives away and the earth claims his father, he would officially be alone for the first time in his life. It wasn’t something he wanted to think about, so he snatched up the boxes and hurried downstairs to find something to distract him.

Chapter Twelve



The next day, Jackson joined Eleanor while she ran errands and did the grocery shopping. It took several trips to carry in all the bags from the garage, but every load lightened his heart. She'd bought enough groceries to last more than a month—her way of taking care of him in her absence.

As he placed the last of the bags on the counter, the afternoon hospice nurse paused in the doorway.

“What is it, Marc?” Jackson asked.

“I just wanted to let you know that I increased his morphine dosage. He should sleep more comfortably now.”

“How is he?” Eleanor asked, closing the pantry door, and wiping her hands on her apron.

“He shouldn't feel any pain, but he doesn't have much time left. If you haven't already, you should start making arrangements.”

Eleanor looked to Jackson when Marc went upstairs. “Have you talked with Grayson about what he wants?”

“I tried. He doesn’t want to talk to me about it.”

“Me either.”

There was nothing they could do. Grayson wasn’t talking, or couldn’t, so Jackson stored that issue away for another day, and returned his attention to Eleanor and her move.

Over several days, Jackson completed the home repairs Eleanor requested. But with all the maintenance and preparations needed, it didn’t leave much time for exercising, and his stress and anxiety were suffering as a result.

Nights tortured him like a domino line—every hour was one tragic event after another, crashing into each other and building toward a grand finale. Except there never seemed to be an end in sight or a way to stop them from coming.

And with the increase in medication, Grayson had fewer coughing fits. For his father’s sake, Jackson was grateful. Selfishly, he was at loose ends over it. No coughing meant no distractions for his feeble attempt to soldier on through the night.

The cold, hard floor didn’t bother him. He’d slept in far worse conditions. It was the agonizingly quiet darkness that tortured him and forced him to relive the chaos in high-definition surround sound. Domino after relentless domino tumbled without his permission, fueling his already robust hatred for the night.

On early Saturday morning, Jackson was relieved to see daylight and was bustling around the house even before Eleanor.

“What’s this?” she asked, her eyes wide and animated when he placed a small gift bag on her plate at breakfast.

“Just a little going away present from Grayson and me.”

She squeezed his hand. “Jackson, my dear. You shouldn’t have gotten me anything.”

“Yes, we should, and we did. You deserve this and more for all the years you’ve been there for us. I owe you my life, Eleanor. You’ve saved me more times than I can count, and I love you so much.”

Tears burned her eyes as she reached out to place a hand on his cheek. “Oh, sweetheart, I love you, too, but I didn’t save you. That was your doing and God’s. I just had the honor of being your loyal cheerleader.” With a pat of his cheek, she winked then peeked inside the bag.

“Open the larger box first,” Jackson instructed. “It’s from Grayson.”

Surprised, she lifted a brow before slowly removing the lid to expose the delicate silver necklace. She ran a finger over the heart, and her curious smile quickly faded to unrestrained emotion.

“He said it belonged to my grandmother and wanted you to have it.”

Her eyes, overflowing now, snapped to Jackson before a hand sprang to her lips. “Louise was an amazing woman. She and my mother were best friends growing up, and she was so kind to me. If it wasn’t for her, I might never have been hired here. She recommended me, and the rest is history. Oh, I’m going to treasure this.”

Still smiling, she closed the lid and grabbed the second box. The contents rattled inside, so she held it up to her ear like a kid on Christmas morning.

Pure joy swam through Jackson while he watched her. This feeling must have been why his mother was involved in charitable causes, and why Eleanor gave so much of herself to others, he realized. Whoever said giving was better than receiving was spot on. It was liberating.

“Is this what I think it is?” Eleanor asked, pulling out the keys.

“It is. Keys to your favorite monstrosity,” he announced, using her nickname for the enormous SUV. “It’s yours if you want it.”

“Jackson, this is too much. I can’t accept it.”

“Yes, you can. And you will also accept what’s in that envelope.” His tone was a warning that he would not waiver. “It’s from me.”

Her eyes widened before her gaze shifted to the remaining contents inside the bag. Setting the keys aside, she pulled out the envelope and ran a finger under the flap to reveal the contents inside.

“Jackson.” A hand sprang to her cheek. “I can’t take your money.”

“It will help you get set up at your daughter’s, and you’ll have enough left over for unexpected expenses.” He patted her arm. “I need you to take it.”

She knew why he was insistent, and she couldn’t refuse him the peace of mind he sought. Covering his hand with hers, she smiled. “Okay, my sweet boy.”

By mid-morning on the day of the dreaded move, all chores had been checked off the to-do list. Harrison and Thomas had come through with the necessary boxes, and Jackson had Eleanor pack whatever she wanted from the house. After all, it was her home too, and she loved it more than anyone.

Then, when neither could think of another task to further delay her departure, Jackson loaded the boxes into the monstrosity while she cried. She sobbed uncontrollably when she hugged him goodbye, and the tears continued flowing as she drove away. All of it was torturous, miserable, difficult, painful, heartbreaking.

Now what, he thought when his own eyes were dry again. After a year of spending every day together, he had no idea how

to function without her. Completely lost, he exercised around the house because he could think of nothing else to do. When Marc arrived for the afternoon shift, Jackson took the opportunity to get away.

For over two hours, Jackson wandered wherever the road took him. Anything was better than roaming around the estate without purpose or having a single thing to do. Although he tried to think of literally anything else, his mind kept drifting back to Eleanor. She should have arrived at her daughter's house by then and was probably playing with the kids or fixing them lunch before unloading the SUV. Family first. Always.

Although she was only an hour away, he doubted he'd see her much. She would soon be busy taking care of her three grandchildren, and he would be...doing what, exactly? Besides maintaining the estate and watching over his father's last days, Jackson had no idea what to do with his life.

The idea of going to college was overwhelming. He might be able to get a recruiting position with the Marines, but he'd probably be terrible at it. And why would they want someone with his discharge reasons promoting the service life? A desk job sounded unbearable.

Brainstorming his future made his head hurt, so he finished off the smoothie he made after his walk and washed the cup.

"Mr. Vane."

Jackson spun around from the sink to find Marc had entered the kitchen. "How is he?"

"He's incoherent, weak, and it's becoming increasingly difficult for him to breathe on his own. I recommend a thoracentesis be done immediately to remove the—"

"No." Jackson didn't hesitate.

"He's not getting enough oxygen. We need to extract the fluid so he can breathe."

"As his power of attorney, I can't authorize that."

"Jackson, think of your father."

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. He made me promise not to intervene and accept whatever course the disease took without treatments.”

“He’s suffering, Jackson.”

“I understand, but if you can’t, maybe it’s time we got someone else to take his shifts.” He waited as Marc considered his options.

“All right. If that’s what he wants. But you must know, at this rate, he may have only days left.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

With a sigh, Marc nodded and left the room.

Later that afternoon, Jackson stopped by to check on his father. He was paler than the week before, his lips were a light purple, and he wouldn’t respond to Jackson’s voice. He was dying, and Jackson was helpless to stop it.

There was no way of knowing if Grayson could hear him, but in case he could, Jackson wanted him to know he wasn’t alone. He grabbed a book from the dresser and began reading aloud. It was a story about Theodore Roosevelt, a man his father admired. Although Jackson hoped it brought him comfort, the easy rhythm of his own voice reciting the words on the page transported him to another time and helped him forget.

And that’s all Jackson needed to get through each day—a short memory.



Every morning, the first thing that crossed Jackson’s mind was whether that day would be the day his father would lose the fight. Whenever he wasn’t exercising, he read aloud and listened to Grayson’s tortured breathing. It was a lonely time.

The only person he talked to, other than Eleanor when she called to check on him, was Marc or the other hospice staff, and it was beginning to affect him. He attempted to stay busy to keep the demons at bay, but that quickly morphed into avoidance.

He didn't mean to be unsocial, it was just easier, and he couldn't talk about his father's suffering anymore. He witnessed it himself every day and laid awake at night listening to the disease torture his frail body. It was taking a toll, and he lost all interest in accommodating others or engaging in meaningless small talk.

One hot afternoon in late April, while Marc was tending to his father, Jackson attempted to clear the overgrowth around the lake. It was back-breaking work, but in a way, it was therapeutic. As he chopped and pulled the brush from the bank, he could set his mind on the task and take a break from the stress and hopelessness he felt when he was in the house.

He took hold of a large vine and tugged, yanking the roots from the soft, wet soil. Tossing it aside, he bent down to pick up the ax for the next chore, catching a glimpse of Marc waving at him from the back porch.

Shit.

Flipping the ax into the ground, he jogged to the house.

"You should be with your father." Marc held open the back door as Jackson hurried inside. In Grayson's room, all the equipment and tubes had already been removed.

Was he too late? He placed a hand on his father's chest and was relieved to find he was still breathing, albeit slow and shallow.

Unsure of what to do, Jackson pulled a chair up to the bed and took his father's hand.

"I'm here. Eleanor would have been here, too, but you know." Jackson looked down at his father's hand in his and sighed. "I should have said this sooner when you could hear me. I'm sorry for all the miserable things I said or thought about you. There were a lot of nasty things that crossed my mind at times, but I kept them to myself...most of the time." Jackson cut his eyes to his father's face.

“You weren’t there when I needed you after mom died, or when I almost died. You should have been there. You should have wanted to be there. It would have been nice to hear that you didn’t actually hate me and have the opportunity to forgive you long before now.”

Jackson took a deep breath. “You did get one thing right. You were right when you said I should thank you. All I ever wanted was for my father to love me, but since you didn’t, that meant I got Eleanor. If the consolation prize was Eleanor’s unconditional love, support, and encouragement, then I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Jackson dropped his head on the bed. “You were right,” he whispered, but Grayson’s hand squeezing his own had him shooting up again.

“Dad? What is it? I’m here.”

Frantic, Jackson fumbled for the book on the bedside table while keeping hold of Grayson’s hand. He flipped it open and immediately began reciting the words aloud without comprehending a single word.

“I’m here, Dad,” he repeated and focused on Grayson’s shallow breathing until the only sound in the room was his own voice.

By then, the sun was beyond the horizon, and Grayson was gone.

He laid his head on the bed and wept, a river of tears, soaking the quilt and draining him until he could take no more. Standing on wobbly legs, he wiped at his cheeks with the back of his hand, and took one last look at his father.

Anger, hurt, and indifference, compounding layer by layer, day by day for over twenty years, was a heavy burden to carry. Yet, all that came to mind as he stood over his father’s lifeless body were three little words.

“I forgive you.”

Feeling lighter, he moved to the hallway and called for Marc, his voice echoing through the big empty house.

“It’s over,” was all he could say when Marc entered the foyer below. He stumbled down the stairs and into his father’s office.

Why did he feel so numb? The weight of resentment was lifted. He’d been anticipating this day and preparing for the inevitable. He knew what to expect but thinking about it and surviving it had been two totally different experiences.

Somewhere, he had a list of tasks to accomplish upon his father’s death, but he needed a good, strong drink before getting started. Maybe a shot of whiskey would deliver a jolt to his hollow soul before he tackled the first task on the list. The one he dreaded doing most. Telling Eleanor.

After draining a shot, he poured another, slumped into the desk chair, and dialed her number. Once he got the words out, they cried together, and by the time he hung up, the medical transport had arrived. Jackson stood in the hallway while they placed his father on a gurney and carried him downstairs.

The sound of the door closing behind them symbolized the end of another chapter in his life. No father to tend to. No Eleanor to lift his spirits. No hospice workers and meaningless conversations to fill the hours. No one to distract him when the memories smothered him.

Right where he was standing at the bottom of the stairs, Jackson dropped to the floor. Clutching his head with both hands, he folded his knees to his chest while nausea churned in his belly. He closed his eyes to the blinding light, resigned to wait however long it took for the misery to release him and a new chapter to begin.



Waking up to darkness, he was disoriented and drenched in sweat. The familiar sounds of the old house settling in the cool

night air rang all around him. Other than his aching muscles and an empty stomach, he felt as hollow as the house.

Hoping food would settle his stomach, he forced himself to the kitchen. He searched the refrigerator and pantry, but nothing was appealing enough to take the risk, so he checked the clock on the microwave.

3:35 AM.

Since the day ahead was going to be difficult and full of decisions, phone calls, and meetings, he headed to his room to dress for an early morning workout. He was going to need the calm it provided to help him get through the lengthy to-do list.

The fresh air was soothing as he headed toward town instead of his usual route. It was the first time in a while that he'd escaped the confines of the house with full freedom—no time constraints, traffic on the streets, or strangers waiting for his return.

Later, when he reached the city, the rising sun was reflected in the windows of Richmond's tallest buildings. The bright shades of orange and pink lightened his mood. So, instead of heading back to the estate, he purchased a bottle of water and took a shortcut to the Barnes residence, arriving a few minutes before seven.

The spring heat was unusually stifling that early morning, and it left him breathless. He sat on the curb for a moment to rest before knocking on the door.

"Jackson?" He heard Harrison call from behind him. "What are you doing here, buddy?"

Standing, Jackson found comfort in Harrison's embrace. "I apologize for coming by unannounced."

"You're welcome anytime." Harrison patted him on the back before releasing him. "You're all sweaty. Did you walk here?"

"Yeah. I needed to clear my head." Harrison was wearing a dark blue suit and holding a leather briefcase. Heading to work, he assumed. "Do you have a minute?"

“Of course. Please, come in.” He led Jackson to the small table in the kitchen, then handed him a glass of water. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sure you are aware of the reason for my father’s absence at work over the last month.”

“Yes. He worked longer than I expected. Every day he was getting worse, and when he said goodbye, I figured he wanted to be left alone.” Harrison placed his hand on Jackson’s shoulder. “Does your being here mean he passed?”

Jackson nodded and soothed his dry throat with a long gulp of ice water.

“I’m so sorry, Jackson. I knew he’d gone home, and I should have reached out to you. You shouldn’t have had to go through that on your own.”

“It’s okay. I never expected you to, and he probably didn’t want you to see him like that.”

“I appreciate you letting me know. Your father was good to me, and I considered him a friend. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Jackson thought about all that needed to be done for the funeral and dreaded it. “I would appreciate your help with making all the arrangements. You knew him best, and he wouldn’t tell me what he wanted.”

“It will be my honor. Just tell me when and where, and I’ll be there.”

“Thank you. I’m heading to Adam’s office now to see if he has anything in writing, and I hope to get an appointment at the funeral home today.”

“All right. Just let me know when to meet you. Can I give you a ride to Adam’s office?”

“No but thank you. I’m not finished with my workout yet, and I need it to stay sane.” Jackson forced a grin before emptying his glass.

With his lips pressed together, Harrison shook his head. “I don’t know how you do it. I would have passed out halfway here.”

Standing to part ways, Harrison lingered through a long hug. “Are you okay? I mean actually okay?” Harrison asked, resting his hands on Jackson’s shoulders.

It was the sincere, fatherly tone that made Jackson want to give him an honest answer. “Yeah. I think so.” And as he headed back down the driveway, he hoped he stayed that way.

Jackson continued his exercise routine the six miles to Adam’s office. It was a modern building with corridor after corridor of light gray walls, rooms of glass, and metal accents and sculptures. Sterile like a hospital.

Since Adam was in court until later that afternoon, he made an appointment and headed back outside where he could breathe again. He called the funeral home, scheduled a time to stop by after his meeting with Adam, and texted the information to Harrison.

A few blocks down the street, he came to the building where Avery worked and considered going in. He wondered how she was doing and if she was still upset with him. She had been a great friend throughout the months they spent together, and selfishly, he could use a friend that day.

Stopping in front and shielding his eyes from the sun, he looked up at the tall building, tormented between doing the right thing and soothing his pain and loneliness with her smile. But would she be happy to see him? While he considered his options, the promise she asked of him tugged at him.

If he didn’t want a relationship with her, and he had already told her as much, he must let her go.

Since he’d given his word, he pivoted to return to the estate. No matter how lonely he felt, reentering her life now would only

confuse and hurt her all over again. And that was something he would not do.

After a long shower, he heated up the chicken and vegetables he cooked the night before only to discover he had no appetite. He scaped the food into the trash and wandered around the house until it was time to leave for his first appointment.

Without bothering to look, he snatched a set of keys from the pile in the drawer and entered the garage. He pushed the unlock button on the key fob and the BMW answered with a flash of its lights.

He tossed back his head and looked up. “You think I should drive this one, huh?”

It wasn’t his style, he thought instantly, but it was a ridiculous gut reaction. He had no idea what his style or preference was at that point in his life. Something else he’d have to figure out, but that day he didn’t have time to waste on such frivolous things. With Billy, Will and Josh on his mind, he slid inside the sleek white sedan and started the engine.

It sputtered at first, probably due to years of neglect. Then, it revved and jerked as he pushed the gas to exit the garage—a sign that his driving skills were a little rusty. But by the time he reached the main road, he and the vehicle were working in tandem.

He arrived early since traffic wasn’t as congested as he’d expected and followed the receptionist down a hallway to Adam’s oversized office. He was sitting behind a traditional cherry wood desk that stood out among its industrial surroundings.

Adam shot to his feet when he saw them. “Jackson, I’m glad you stopped by today. Please, come in.” He motioned to a table in front of a wall of windows overlooking the city, grabbed a folder from his drawer, then sat opposite him. “I’m so sorry to hear of Grayson’s passing. I’m going to miss him.”

“Thank you. We didn’t get to talk about his funeral or burial wishes. I was hoping you had something that would tell me what he wanted.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. We created a document soon after he was diagnosed.” He thumbed through the folder, pulled out a piece of paper, and pushed it across the table to Jackson. “Your father does not want a traditional funeral. As you know, he loved a good party, so that’s what he wants. A celebration of life, if you will, and to be buried at the estate. In lieu of flowers, he requests donations to cancer research.”

Genuinely surprised, Jackson could only stare at him. “That’s it?” It seemed too simple for the Great Grayson Vane.

“Yeah, that’s all he requested. But knowing him, he’d want that party to be lavish.”

Jackson nodded, snatched the document off the table, and stood. “Thank you for your help.”

“Jackson, please.” Adam motioned for him to return to his seat. “We have more to discuss.”

With a deep sigh, Jackson did as requested.

“Did your father discuss his will with you?”

“I’m not sure,” Jackson answered honestly. When Adam angled his head in confusion, he waved it off. “It’s a long story.”

“Okay. He owns several companies, the estate, a downtown apartment, several cars, and a mountain cabin in north Georgia. Add that to his investments and cash, your father’s net worth is more than \$62 million.”

“He’s worked hard for it.”

“Not quite the reaction I was expecting.” Adam tried to read his expression and suddenly realized the problem. “I was under the impression you knew.”

“Knew what?” Jackson asked, annoyed and ready to get out of there, so he could get his next meeting over with.

“Jackson, he left it all to you. You’re his sole heir and now, a very wealthy man.”

“Excuse me? What about Harrison or any of the women he was seeing?” He wouldn’t have been surprised if his father made plans to divvy up this fortune to charities, to have his name carved on a building somewhere, or designated it to those he worked with, slept with, met in passing—anyone but his son.

“Nope. He told me when we updated the will that after all you’d been through, you deserved it.”

“When was that?”

“December of last year. You signed the paperwork to transfer all his accounts, companies, and properties into your name upon his death. Don’t you remember?”

Jackson sat back in his chair and shook his head. “Unbelievable. I signed something, but it was a terrible day for me, so I couldn’t focus on what it was. He may have told me. I can’t remember.”

“The long story?” Adam asked with an understanding smile, but Jackson wasn’t listening. “Look, I’ll take care of the remaining paperwork. All you have to do is live your life. It’s what he wanted for you.”

Jackson shot up to pace and to think, but it was a little difficult when his stomach had crawled back into in his throat again. “Adam, I know nothing about running his business or managing stocks or an estate, for that matter. I’m a Marine. I don’t know how to do anything else.”

“Then sell them and do what you want. That’s the beauty in all this, Jackson. If you want, I can help you handle the legal side of whatever you decide to do.”

Jackson stopped and faced Adam, his hands on his hips. “Thanks. I may take you up on that.” He ran his fingers through his hair and continued pacing while Adam explained more documents.

“Wait. What time is it?” Jackson interrupted an explanation of the estate’s deed transfer.

Turning over his left wrist, Adam checked his watch. “Two-thirty, why?”

“Damn it.” Jackson said and rushed out the door.

When he arrived at the funeral home, he found Harrison and the director deep in conversation. “I’m sorry for being late. Lost track of time talking with Adam.” Jackson said as he took the empty chair next to Harrison.

“No problem. We were just going over the options for caskets and seating in the room across the hall. If that’s not big enough, we can look into renting a space at the—”

Jackson held up his hand and informed them of Grayson’s requests.

“Well, that’s one detail addressed. I’m Wesley, by the way.” The funeral director held out his hand to Jackson. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“Jackson, I hope it’s okay, but I picked out a casket for your father,” Harrison began. “If you’d like to change it, you won’t hurt my feelings.”

“No, I trust you.”

Over the next hour, they decided on displays, photos, the obituary, and the burial ceremony. Harrison suggested that Jackson hire an experienced party planner and staff to help with the estate.

“Since Eleanor is gone, I hate the idea of you living in that huge house alone, and you’re going to need help with the maintenance.”

“I’ll think about it.” *Add it to the growing list of things to figure out*, Jackson thought and wished Eleanor was there. She’d know what to do.

“Well, how about I take care of the details for the burial and obituary while you get the estate ready to receive guests,” Harrison suggested, making quick decisions like the true leader that he was.

Grateful, Jackson nodded.

“Perfect. I can work with both of you along the way,” Wesley said, opening the calendar on his desk. “Now, the only thing left to decide is the date. We can have everything ready on our end by Friday. Is this Saturday a good day for you?”

Saturday was only four days away. There were so many tasks remaining, and Jackson still wasn’t sure what to make of what he learned—a common occurrence these days. He looked to Harrison for guidance.

“I think we can do that,” Harrison confirmed.

“Great,” Wesley said and scribbled something into his notebook. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Please tell me you drove here,” Harrison asked Jackson with a smirk after leaving the director’s office.

“Yes, I did, but can I buy you an early dinner?” Jackson didn’t want to wait another minute before settling the matter of his father’s multi-million-dollar conglomerate, if that’s what it was called. “I’d like to thank you for your help, and I need to talk to you.”

“Sure. Let me call Sophia and tell her I’ll be late.”

When the pair was seated at a booth overlooking the patio and had ordered drinks, Jackson recounted what he learned about the will.

“I need your advice,” Jackson confessed and took a drink of the ice water the waiter set in front of him. The more he talked about the will, the dryer his throat became. “I know nothing about running a business, nor do I want to. What should I do?”

“Are you sure? I can teach you everything you need to know, and you can continue your father’s legacy. Build one of your own.” Working alongside Jackson would be thrilling. They would make a powerful team.

“I appreciate it, Harrison, but I don’t think I can do it. It’s not me.”

“Maybe not, but after you’re fully healed, you may feel differently.”

Before he could respond, the waiter returned to take their orders. Jackson couldn’t remember the last time he ate, but he still wasn’t hungry. He settled on the safe choice—a salad.

“Well, if you don’t want to work with us, what are you going to do?” Harrison asked, concerned that Jackson might lose his way, especially now.

“I don’t know. That’s what’s bothering me. I have no purpose.”

“Well, what do you like to do?”

Jackson didn’t have to think long. He had only one passion. “I like to run and exercise.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” Harrison laughed. “You’re nothing but muscle, man.”

Jackson shrugged. “I’m not interested in a desk job. I feel alive when I’m outside and active.”

“What if I purchased the company from you?”

Jackson froze, surprised by the question. “You want to buy Dad’s business?”

“I do, but I think you should keep a portion to maintain some ownership and share of the profits. We can work together to sell the smaller companies currently on the books when they’re ready. Then, you’ll be out of the day-to-day responsibilities.” By then, Harrison hoped Jackson would have caught the bug and changed his mind.

“You make one hell of an offer,” Jackson considered. It seemed to be the perfect solution. “Can you put together a proposal and send it to Adam?”

“Absolutely, buddy. I’ll get it to him next week.” He raised his glass, and Jackson followed. “To my friend, Grayson Vane, his ingenious mind for business, and his amazing son.”

When their meals arrived, so did Jackson's appetite. Having a potential plan to sell his father's business to someone he loved settled both his stomach and his nerves.

"What?" Jackson asked between bites when he noticed he was being studied.

"I'm still worried about you."

"Why?"

"You've been through a lot over the last year, and I heard you and Avery broke up. Why didn't you mention it before?"

"Not a great conversation starter."

Harrison frowned. "I don't like you being so alone all the time."

"I'm getting used to it."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Why don't you get out and meet some new people?" he suggested and took a bite of his sandwich.

"You sound like Eleanor."

"Smart woman. Seriously, I'm a firm believer in what friends and companionship can do for spirit, mind, and body." He added a wink for good measure.

"Funny, but I need to determine who I am before I can think about dating." It was true. How could he give himself to anyone before he knew what they'd be getting?

"Who said anything about dating? I said companionship. But a beautiful woman could help you spend some of this free time you have."

"Now, you really sound like Eleanor."

"I knew I liked that woman. See, even she thinks you need to put yourself out there."

"I tried. It was a disaster." Damn, he said more than he intended. Harrison was sure to have questions, and he had no interest in talking about his shortcomings in the relationship department or how Avery was hurt as a result.

"Who ended it?"

“I did.”

“Why?”

Jackson dropped his fork and sighed, frustrated by the unexpected shift in the conversation.

“Come on, man. I’m on your side,” Harrison persisted. “I just want to know what’s going on with you. I’m worried.”

“Fine,” he sighed out. “I realized that no matter how hard we tried, I would never be able to reciprocate her feelings for me. So, I ended it, as you suggested.”

Damn it. That ripped a fresh wound. Since breaking it off, he tried not to think about Avery or what he did to her, hoping that it would be easier to live with himself. It wasn’t working. “She deserves better.”

“You’re a bigger man than most, Jackson. You tried, and it didn’t work out. Couples break up all the time.” When Jackson’s eyes met his, they were sad and uncertain, and Harrison knew the reassurance he needed. “And I can promise you that Will is not mad or disappointed or cursing your jaded heart from above. You did the right thing. It’s time you forgive yourself.”

All Jackson could do was nod and trust that Harrison was right, but he’d feel better if he knew Avery had moved on and was happy.

Chapter Thirteen



Ms. Beasley?” Jackson called, entering the kitchen. “Do you have everything you need?”
Ms. Beasley and her grandson Brian were preparing small sandwiches in an assembly line on the island.

She looked up from her work to give Jackson a wide smile. “We do. Don’t you worry.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Jackson plucked a tiny sandwich from the lot and took a bite.

The more time he spent with the duo, the more grateful he was for Harrison’s advice. He hired Ms. Beasley and Brian to help with the estate several days prior, and they’d become fast friends.

“So, Brian, how’s school going?”

“It’s great. I’m learning so much now that I’ve settled on a major.”

Jackson leaned on a stool. “What are you studying again?”

“Agriculture and animal science.”

“Really? What do you want to do?”

“Not real sure yet. I just know I want to help farmers.”

“Farmers?” Jackson didn’t bother to conceal his surprise.

“It took him long enough to come to that conclusion,” Ms. Beasley fussed.

Brian blushed at the familiar scolding. “I had a lot of fun in college.”

“As you should. The real world will always be there.” He laughed when Ms. Beasley shot him a disapproving glare.

How comfortable it was chatting in the quiet kitchen instead of dealing with the crowd of strangers outside. It was Saturday, and his father’s celebration of life was in full swing and getting along just fine without him.

“When do you finish up?” he asked Brian, content to continue the easy conversation.

“I have about one more year, and then I’ll need to find some real-world experience somewhere.”

“Well, if I can help, please let me know.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vane.”

“Enough stalling. Brian needs to get back to work and you need to go be with your guests.” Waving her hand in the air and rounding the island, she shooed Jackson out of the kitchen, forcing him to mingle with his father’s friends, partners, and curious acquaintances. Something he was avoiding, and she knew it.

While crossing the yard he scanned the large group. He didn’t recognize most of the faces, but they all seemed content to stay a while, cheerfully mingling and emptying wine bottles. At least a wide cloud had glided in front of the sun, casting a much-needed shadow over the grounds and a break from the heat.

Jackson wasn’t accustomed to wearing a full suit, especially not in the middle of a hot spring afternoon. Loosening his tie, he pulled it out from around his neck with one fluid tug. Then, he released the top two buttons of his stiff white shirt, and finally, he could breathe again.

Avery saw him as soon as he exited the house and cursed herself for watching, but she was so proud of him. Each step he took was strong, secure, and more agile than when she last saw him. And she'd always loved the way he looked in a suit.

Despite her better judgment, she couldn't look away and fought the temptation to call out to him. His eyes were nearly translucent in the sunlight, and as he walked toward her, a gentle breeze tossed back his silky hair, now streaked with blonde from the sun. God, he was heartbreakingly beautiful.

She also couldn't help but notice his hard, tan body was another transformation. He'd gained a significant amount of muscle, and suddenly, the afternoon heat was stifling. Absently, she fanned herself with her hand. No matter the weather, he had the power to melt her to the core, and after he shattered her hopes and dreams, she was a fool for letting it happen again.

It took months and even more wine for her to accept that their relationship wasn't meant to be, but she could no longer lie to herself about one thing. Her love for him hadn't changed. And in the spirit of being honest with herself, the only reason she went to the celebration was to lay eyes on him, and he did not disappoint.

But seeing him and feeling her heart flutter wasn't what had it breaking again. It was that nothing had changed between them. After the months they spent together, how could he come within a few feet of her, and still not see her?

Her sad, pathetic life set on repeat. Always in his shadow, invisible and irrelevant.

Screw that.

"Hi, Jackson," she said, stepping into his path. But when his eyes landed on her face, her show-him-what-he-gave-up confidence dissipated and left her hanging by a thread. It melted away just as quickly as her resolve to forget him had.

“Avery, I didn’t realize you were here.” Caught by surprise, he didn’t know what to do. Should he hug her, shake her hand, continue to stand there awkwardly? “How are you?”

“I’m great.” Damn. Why did he have to look at her that way? Like he could see into her soul, exposing her innermost desires. She lowered her eyes, or he may learn more than he wanted to know. “You look good, and you’re moving around much better now.”

“Yeah, and I’ve been jogging too. I’m up to about two miles now. All because of you.”

That last comment had her gaze springing to his again and rendering her speechless.

“You look—” He stopped when someone called for him from inside the crowd. “I’m sorry. Maybe we can talk later?”

She caught a scent of him as he hurried past—sweet, rustic, and undeniably Jackson, and cursed the weak excuse for a woman she’d become. There she stood, alone and in the same yard where he broke off their brief relationship, breathless in love again. And all it took was a glance and an airy brush of his hand on her arm. Was this her life now? Would she forever crave his attention and touch? Was there no end to this torture?

“Avery?” She heard someone say, snapping her out of her pity party.

She spun around to see a gift from the heavens sent to save her from herself. “Eleanor! Oh, it’s so great to see you. I’ve missed you so much.”

After a tight squeeze, Eleanor studied her. “You look magnificent in this outfit. How have you been, child?”

“I’m good.” She forced a smile, but Eleanor wasn’t buying it. “Okay, I can’t lie to you. I’m struggling, Eleanor. I talked with Jackson for the first time since...” She trailed off, incapable of saying it out loud.

Since he dumped me and shattered my heart.

“I’m not moving on as I thought I was. Help me, Eleanor.” Avery was desperate, and she no longer understood the person she’d become.

“I know it’s hard, sweetie, but think of this as a learning experience. You have a better idea of what you want in a partner and what you don’t. There’s someone out there for you, and don’t you ever settle.” Eleanor ran her hand over Avery’s hair and smoothed the strands that were blown astray by the breeze. “You deserve to be happy and treasured by someone who loves you. Don’t ever forget that.”

Avery went to hug Eleanor but stopped when she saw Jackson approaching over Eleanor’s shoulder.

“Eleanor?” Jackson called and jogged to her, his arms wide and ready for her embrace.

Avery moved to the side to give them space and watched the reunion, her heart swelling with competing joy and jealousy. She loved them both and was happy they would have time together. But deep down, she wished Jackson was that happy to see her. She wanted to be snug in his arms and feel his reluctance to let her go.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” he said, pulling back, his hands staying on her shoulders.

“Well, I didn’t either. It took some maneuvering, and I was late, but I couldn’t miss Grayson’s...whatever this is.” She let out a puzzled giggle.

“It’s a celebration of life, and, apparently, what he wanted.”

“You solved the mystery. Good boy.” She placed a hand on his cheek. “I’ve missed this handsome face.”

“Have you seen Harrison yet? Come, I know he’ll be excited to see you.” He led Eleanor away, leaving Avery to wallow in her misery...alone again.

After a while, the crowd began to disperse, and Avery considered leaving as well. Jackson was busy, Eleanor was visiting with friends, and she knew no one else that remained.

She felt out of place, hopeless, and lonely, waiting for Jackson to notice her.

Accepting that this may be the last time she ever saw him, she headed to her car parked in the front yard. But as she grabbed the handle of the driver's side door, she heard quick footsteps approaching and someone calling for her.

"Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?"

She whipped around, her short, pleated skirt billowing with the sharp movement. The late afternoon sun seemed to shine only on Jackson as he sauntered toward her—a vision straight out of her dreams.

Be still my heart.

"You were busy," she managed and swallowed hard. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"Thank you for coming today."

"He was your father. I wanted to pay my respects." Although, she knew it was best, she couldn't look away. She'd missed him more than she wanted to admit.

They stood in awkward silence, neither knowing what to say. Whether she prolong the torture by continuing the conversation or found a way to say goodbye, it didn't matter. She was doomed either way.

"I'm happy to hear you're jogging now." She blurted out, her longing heart winning the battle.

"Yeah, it's been my therapy, emotionally."

"That's wonderful."

"What about you? How's work?" It was difficult trying to make small talk with an old friend. A friend that just happened to still be in love with him. Her eyes always give away her secrets.

"It's busy but good. I got an offer to transfer to the Arlington office. It would be a promotion, but I don't know if I want to move. Then, sometimes, I think I should, you know, start over." She looked down and brushed the grass with her shoe.

“A promotion is exciting. You deserve it. You’re really good at what you do.”

“Thank you, Jackson. That means a lot.”

“I passed by your building the other day. I almost stopped by to say hi,” he added, and immediately regretted it. He was only trying to make conversation, but he saw new hope flash in her eyes.

“You should have. It would have been nice to see you.”

“It was the day after my father died. I wouldn’t have been very good company.”

Trying to figure a way out of the hole he dug, he looked over the grounds and remembered the guests in the backyard. Then, when he turned back to make his exit, her lips crushed against his before he could react. The unexpected force of her body pinned him against the car behind him.

For a brief moment, he considered following Harrison’s advice. Wouldn’t having her by his side help him get through the challenging months ahead? No, he decided when he touched her soft, familiar skin and remembered how much he’d hurt her. He wouldn’t lead her on again.

Gently, he took hold of her arms and pulled them from around his neck, discharging her lips from his.

“I need you, Jackson. More than I need air to breathe. Please give yourself to me.”

“I can’t do that, Avery. If I said yes now to satisfy both our needs, I’d only break your heart again later. I won’t do that to you.”

“Why do you fight it? If you would only give our connection more time to grow, you may feel differently. Why can’t you try?” She was beginning to whine, but she couldn’t drag herself away from him. He felt too good.

“Avery, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Jackson, please don’t do this.”

“I should get back to the—”

“Why, Jackson?” She stomped her foot and dug in. “If you want me to move on, I need to know why you can’t or won’t try.”

With his frustration mounting, he caved. If speaking the truth would help her move past this ridiculous obsession, then he wouldn’t hold back. “All right, if you really want to know.”

She stumbled backward when danger brushed across his face. There was no more hesitation or worry over hurting her feelings. Empathy and care no longer shone in his eyes. She had crossed the line, and he was about to say things she would soon regret making him say. What had she done?

“Jackson, I’m sorry,” she blurted out and took another step back.

“No. You wanted to hear it. So, here it is.”

He closed the distance between them as tears sprang to her eyes and spilled over her cheeks, adding layers to his guilt. She may have started this, but he was going to finish it.

“I’m not attracted to you in the way you want me to be. I care about you as a friend, but I don’t love you.” He could almost hear the shards of her heart shattering on the ground, but it was too late to pull any punches. “And I don’t think I can get there no matter how long, or hard I try.”

She sucked in a breath, devastated by his admission. But when anger replaced shock and pain, he was proud of her. Her fire was back, and that was what he wanted to see.

“Jackson, I...”

She paused, her mind and heart battling over the contrasting love, hurt, and rage she was feeling. Then, her posture straightened, signaling that her victory was near.

She raised her hand and pointed at him. “I’ve wasted so much time waiting for you.”

She paced in front of him, lost in thought. Then, shaking her head, she grabbed the car door handle then stopped. She turned her eyes on him and flicked him a brittle smile.

“Thank you. Thank you for helping me see that my life doesn’t revolve around you. I deserve better than this. To be loved and cherished by someone who appreciates me and can’t live without me.”

“Yes, you do,” he murmured after she closed the door and sped down the driveway. Hurting her again wasn’t easy, but it was necessary. She could never be happy until she was over him.

With his hands in his pockets, he strolled back to the party. The sun was behind the trees now, and it would soon be dark. When the last person departed, this phase of his life would officially come to an end. Suddenly, he felt eighteen again, having to decide his future with one loaded question: What now?

But the choice at eighteen had been a lot easier than the one at twenty-seven. There were so many options then, and he’d had hopes and dreams. At the time, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life.

Now, almost a decade later, he had no plan, no prospects, no dreams. Just living day by day on survival mode. But that was okay, Jackson decided. Harrison, Eleanor, and his father were right. He’d been through a lot in the past sixteen months, and he needed time to heal.

With his mind on the future, Jackson set two new goals. By next April, he would rebuild his body back to normal. No, he corrected. Better than normal. By then, he should have a plan for his future. How did he want to spend the rest of his life? What was important to him? What did he want to accomplish?

One year. Plenty of time to think, plan, heal, and grow.

Feeling another weight had been lifted and with spirits high, he rejoined the few lingering guests in the backyard.

Chapter Fourteen



Moving through the city, Jackson turned onto a path or street whenever the mood for a change struck, and he enjoyed the freedom. He paused several times during the run to work his upper body, and after the third stop, he checked his watch. It was nearly four o'clock, and he'd already gone ten miles. A far cry from where he was a year ago.

His endurance had improved, and the recovery period needed between long-distance runs had decreased steadily over time. Now, he exercised at least five times a week, and the mileage he could accumulate each day was in the double digits.

This run, he predicted, would be his longest by the time he was finished—although, he had no idea where he was. Eventually, as he usually did on these random routes, he'd see a landmark he recognized, and choose a route home from there.

Home, he mused. The idea of settling into a rhythm at one location was once a foreign and unwelcomed prospect. In fact, he avoided it most of his adult life. He'd grown up at the Vane estate, appreciated the childhood it provided, but he never

thought of it or Richmond as home. Too much of his father was in the walls, the grounds, the city.

But the estate was his responsibility now, and he had carved a rhythm of calm there after two years of ups and downs, triumphs and challenges. At least the rollercoaster was no longer moving at a pace he couldn't handle.

But now what?

He was free to do whatever he wanted, and he had the means to be and do anything. Shouldn't that make the decision infinitely easier? But he was no closer to deciding his future than he was when he made the vow—a realization that frustrated him more with every passing day.

While he ran, he thought about the deadline he gave himself, which was only weeks away, and scowled. Damn, he despised the month of April. Despised might not be the right word, he considered as he stopped at an intersection and waited for a truck to pass. Loathed, dreaded, detested. All words he could use to describe how he felt about the month.

He also despised, loathed, and detested the fact that he still knew very little about himself. No matter how much he searched, he always came up empty. It didn't help that he felt misplaced. Like he was supposed to be somewhere else.

Most nights, while he laid awake staring into the darkness, something would pull at him, telling him to leave Richmond. After a year of running in and around the city, could he merely be bored with his surroundings? If only it could be that simple. Maybe he was just craving a change of scenery.

The adventures he experienced while traveling with his friends were defining moments. Each one provided an opportunity to learn about himself, what he was capable of, and the type of man he was. Maybe that was what he needed—to seek similar moments that would shake up the monotonous rut he was in. A little adventure might help him find a purpose and meaning for his life.

But traveling was out of the question. Busy airports, crowded airplanes, cabs, and hordes of people in every corner were too overwhelming, too risky. Plus, he wasn't ready to travel without his friends. Not yet.

What about something that involved running? After all, it was his passion and the only thing he truly enjoyed doing. But he ran so much now that the challenge had to be monumental for it to be life altering. It also had to matter. In this new adventure, he needed to push himself beyond comprehension, and the reason for doing it had to motivate him.

But what motivated him these days? Now that his body was restored, he lacked reasons to get up in the morning—motives to keep pushing forward.

Damn it. Getting sidetracked on the negative was a dangerous habit, and it rarely ended well. Resetting the direction of his thoughts, something he trained himself to do over the last year, he maneuvered through the traffic on autopilot. He searched for activities, challenges, adventures that had a running component, but his mind was frustratingly blank.

All his life, he'd never been short on ideas. Before the first quest was completed, he had already thought of and planned out the next. But now, he could think of nothing but the busy street in front of him.

Stopping to wait at a traffic signal, he stretched his legs and looked around. He was in an older, neglected part of the city he hadn't visited in years. Some buildings were brick, others unpainted cinder block, but all were showing their age.

An abandoned warehouse could be seen in the distance, and a small group of kids played basketball in the empty front parking lot. Although the neighborhood needed some repairs, it was alive with activity and had a warmth that didn't match its appearance.

When the light turned, he stepped off the curb and a new billboard caught his eye. It advertised help for PTSD, and Will

came to mind. A jolt of regret, sharp and unforgiving, shot through his chest. With the base of his palm, he rubbed hard against the source of the pain until his heart stopped trying to claw its way out.

If only Will was there. He would have plenty of suggestions, but only after a long, cleverly orchestrated production. Will would have taken him to one of their usual hangouts for a strong drink. He'd ask questions, most of them ridiculous and seemingly off track. A lively story or two would be tossed into the conversation, and after a while, Jackson would begin to wonder if Will was ever going to stop talking long enough to give him the advice he needed. They'd laugh a lot, he'd flirt with the waitress more, and soon, he'd get to the idea he probably had before the merry-go-round discussion was set to motion.

But undoubtedly, Will would have encouraged him to dream big. Otherwise, what was the point? Jackson smiled and continued down the block until he passed the recruitment office where he and his friends officially committed to the Marines.

He stopped out front and watched that unforgettable day replay in his mind. The way they waltzed in together, confident and fearless, would forever be etched into his memory. It was the day after graduation, and when their service was officially committed, they celebrated with a week of camping and cliff diving at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon.

His lips curved at the memory, but his amusement was fleeting. It had to be a sign. Both the advertisement and the recruitment office being on his random route that day had to mean something.

Then it came to him, slapping him hard across the face. The details were fuzzy, but the idea for his big adventure was clear. Resting his hands on his thighs, he took slow, controlled breaths to calm his racing heart. Finally, he had something to be excited about.

He took off with a renewed energy, his pace smooth and swift. He made it back to the estate in record time, blasting through the side door to give Ms. Beasley the good news.

As expected, she was at the sink, wrist deep in soapy water. Her wild blonde-gray hair was tucked up in a loose bun with wavy strands falling around her flushed face.

“You’re going to do what?” Ms. Beasley asked, fear shining in her dark eyes after Jackson explained his idea. Grabbing a towel from the counter, she dried her hands and tossed it onto her shoulder.

“I’m going to run to Orlando.”

“Run? Like with your legs and not on a plane or in a car?”

Dimples bursting into his cheeks when he laughed. “That’s right. You know how much I enjoy running. Why not run to someplace?”

“I could think of a million reasons why not.”

“I want to do something big for myself and honor my friends, and all veterans, really,” he continued, ignoring her skepticism.

When his dimples faded, she searched his eyes for something to silence her fears. They only begged her to understand. Crossing her arms, she leaned against the counter. “How is running that far going to help you do that?”

“Well, that’s what I’m hoping to figure out along the way. All I know is that I can’t stay here. I can’t keep living this way.”

“You have a beautiful life, sweetheart.”

Frustrated, he took a seat at the island and tried again. “I’m not used to being so stationary. It’s been for two years of merely going through the motions of my life. I’m not living here, just existing, and it’s time. It’s time I did something to figure out what my future holds and if it’s here or somewhere else.”

“You want to get rid of the estate?”

Disappointment flashed across her face sending a sharp dagger of guilt through into his stomach. She loved the estate as much as Eleanor.

“I don’t know. But something is pulling me away from Richmond, and I need to find out what and why. The only way to do that is to follow it.”

“Follow what, dear?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, how are you going to know when you get there?”

“I don’t know that either,” he had to admit, and it was killing him.

He always knew what to do in every situation and could make decisions quickly. It was why he rose through the ranks quickly in the Marines, but with this trip, the details were blurry, his purpose unclear. The only thing he knew with uncertainty was that he had to go.

“I think the answers will come to me while I’m running. I can’t explain how, but I can feel it. This trip is going to help me find my future path and ways to give back. It’s what I need to do to hopefully feel whole again.”

With a sigh, she placed her hand on his cheek, looked into his eyes, so lost and lovely, and surrendered. “How can anyone argue with that? What can I do to help?”



Over the next several weeks, Jackson prepared for his trip. He trained on different terrains to test his limits, gathered supplies, practiced running with a full backpack of essentials, and planned out how he’d refuel and recuperate. On giving back, he had fewer ideas but hoped opportunities presented themselves along the way. Finally, he decided to leave on the first day of the God-forsaken month of April to give him one good thing to balance out the weight and sorrow the month carried.

One morning after a run, he sat at the kitchen island, his favorite spot in the house, and briefly researched a possible route. To add to the adventure, he selected only a few places to visit. He planned to stop in Stony Creek to see Eleanor, Murfreesboro to surprise Will's parents, and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

Myrtle Beach was a place he and his friends often talked about visiting but never got the chance. He needed to finally go for them. After that, he'd find a way to Orlando; however, the adventure took him there.

After calling Eleanor to give her the news, he leaned back in his chair and let out a long breath, satisfied with the plan. He'd thought through as much of the process as he could in advance, but there was one more thing he had to do before he could leave.

Two days before the start of his journey, he made plans to meet Harrison for a drink. After Grayson's funeral, they'd spent a lot of time together since Harrison was uncomfortable with Jackson's perpetual solitude, and like Ms. Beasley and Eleanor, he worried constantly.

He arrived at the restaurant near Harrison's office on time and grabbed an empty table in the bar. When his beer arrived, he drank deep before checking his watch. It was unlike Harrison to be late, even by only a few minutes.

"Jackson Vane? Is that you?" A man around Jackson's age with light brown hair and a broad smile towered over the table. "Wow! You look so different."

"Do I know you?" His face was vaguely familiar, but Jackson couldn't place how they knew each other. Without an invitation, the man took the empty seat across from Jackson.

"It's me, Ben Stevens. You dated my friend, Avery."

Shit. Their first date with her friends all came back to him, including Ben's random spurts of laughter, cringe-worthy comments, and loose lips. How could he forget?

"You don't remember me, do you?" Ben leaned his elbows on the table, his hands wrapped loosely around a bottle of beer, and smiled accusingly.

"I remember."

"Good. Did you know we also went to high school together? It hit me later that night after you left. I think we had English together our junior year." Thinking about high school was not his favorite topic, especially sitting across from Jackson, who was the envy of every kid. Jackson was even voted Most Likely to Change the World their senior year. All the while, Ben couldn't get out of his own way, and it was a disaster, to say the least.

"Wait. You were the one that created a video for the final project in Ms. Brady's class." Ben had been scrawny but very artistic. His appearance was unorganized, his thick hair always wild like he crossed a windstorm on the way to school every day, but he had serious talent. "You don't look like that kid anymore," Jackson admitted. He had put on some muscle, his clothes were neat, and his hair was precisely styled.

"Well, the ladies love muscle. You obviously know that. Man, you're ripped. You must workout, what, every day?"

Jackson shrugged and took a swig of his beer.

"So, what are you doing now? You're walking, I see." Ben asked, sitting back in the chair.

Obviously planning to stay a while, Jackson resigned to having Ben in his space until Harrison arrived. "I'm not doing much, other than working out." He grinned, quick and charming. "Seriously, that's all I do now because I have too much time on my hands."

"I know what you mean. I was laid off two months ago and haven't had any luck finding a job. My savings account is

drained.” He tried to laugh it off, but it was beginning to become a concern. The last thing he wanted to do was move back home and listen to his parents lecture him about his choices.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What do you want to do?”

“My passion is photography. I did a little of that with my last job, but my time was spent mostly designing print and social media ads, which is okay, just not what I’d want to do.”

“I would imagine it’s hard to find jobs in that field.”

“So, Jackson Vane, why are you sitting here all alone? Want to come join us? The crew is all here, and there’s plenty of room for one more.” He waved in the direction of his friends in the back of the restaurant. “Don’t worry, Avery’s not here,” he added when Jackson hesitated.

“How is she?”

“She’s good. Rebounded with some Michael guy.”

“What? You’re joking?”

Caught off guard, Ben frowned. “Ugh, nope. Apparently, he’d been chasing her for a while, and she finally caved.”

Chasing was an accurate enough word. Stalking was probably better. “Well, I’m glad she’s happy.”

“I don’t know about that, but at least she’s moved on, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That obvious?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. I know how she felt about you. She confided in me after your breakup.”

“And you’re still talking to me?”

“You didn’t do anything. Relationships are tricky and one hundred percent miserable. That’s why I avoid them at all costs.” With a hearty laugh, Ben snatched his beer from the table and held it up. “Here’s to being single and free to do as we fuckin’ please.”

Still trying to figure Ben out, Jackson forced an uneasy smile and raised the bottle to his lips.

“You’re sure you don’t want to join us? Drink away your troubles with some awesome company?” Leaning back in his chair, he smiled.

“Thanks, but I’m meeting a friend. He should be here soon.” Irritated, Jackson looked at his watch.

“Something wrong?”

“No, I just really wanted to talk to him before I left,” Jackson said absently while searching for Harrison near the entrance.

“Where are you going? Vacation?”

“Not really.” Not knowing how to describe it, he waved it off. “It’s complicated.”

“Hot chick?” Ben grinned with eager suspicion.

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Come on, man. Tell me. I need to live vicariously through other people right now. My life sucks. What’s so important that you need to talk to this dude about?”

He leaned forward again, and Jackson studied him. What harm could it do? “Fine.” Jackson sucked in a breath before explaining his plans to honor his friends and fellow veterans.

“Woah. That’s deep.”

Jackson motioned for the bartender to bring him another beer.

“Changing the world,” Ben murmured, shaking his head.

“What?”

“Nothing. Are you going by yourself?”

“Yeah. Being alone is another thing I’ve had to get used to since coming back. I’m getting quite proficient at it.”

“Shit, man. You shouldn’t make that trip alone. It can’t be safe or healthy. What if you get injured? How are you going to carry the things you’ll need along the way? Who’s going to keep you company. Although, I bet you wouldn’t have any trouble with that.”

“I’m used to surviving in the unfamiliar on the bare minimum. This will be nothing. All I need are clothes, shoes,

and food. I'll grab a hotel when I get tired of sleeping outside and—" He stopped when Ben suddenly clapped his hands together and pointed a finger at him. He obviously hadn't been listening.

"I know! I'll go with you." A road trip, new places, and separation from his depressing situation was exactly what he needed. He could envision it all, including the women they would meet. With his movie star looks, Jackson would make a very productive wingman. Whatever it took, he had to convince Jackson to let him tag along. He chugged the rest of his beer for encouragement and set aside the empty bottle.

"Excuse me?"

"I'll go with you, not the running part, of course." He dismissed that task as ridiculous. "I'll follow you in a car and carry the supplies you need. You're going to need more clothes than what you can carry and who wants to sleep outside in the heat and bugs?" He grimaced.

"Actually, it's not that—"

"With my help, you can sleep in a nice hotel every night and get recharged for the next day. I can make the hotel reservations while you run and keep you company when you're not." He paused to wait for Jackson's decision, until another exciting idea came to mind. "Oh! And I can document your trip on social media with photos and videos. You want to honor veterans, right? This could show the world how you're doing that." It may also help get his name out there and find a job, but he'll keep that benefit to himself for now. "What do you say?"

He had a point, but Jackson studied him, trying to decide if he could tolerate his personality for the next several months. He'd intended to make the trip on his own. No distractions to get in the way of the mission.

"Oh, thank goodness," Harrison interrupted. "I wasn't sure you'd still be here. I'm sorry I'm late." He then turned to Ben and reached out his hand. "I'm Harrison Barnes."

Pushing back the chair, Ben stood and shook his hand. “Ben Stevens. Nice to meet you. Hey, you’re Billy’s dad. We all went to high school together.” He pointed a finger to himself and Jackson with his other hand.

“Guilty,” Harrison confirmed, pulling his hand free.

“Cool. I’ll leave you two be, but Jackson, think about what I said. I’ll be back in a few for your decision. I’m so fuckin’ excited.” Ben pumped his fist in the air and strutted across the restaurant to rejoin his friends.

“He has a lot of energy,” Harrison laughed when he saw Jackson’s stunned expression and waved for the bartender before taking a seat. “What does he want you to think about?”

“I’ll fill you in after I recover,” he joked. “Rough day?”

“No, thrilling. I finalized the sale of the last of your father’s companies. You’re officially free and clear.”

“That’s great. Was it the offer you showed me last week?”

“Yes, and I was able to get the price up another fifty grand,” he added with a wink.

“How’d you manage that?”

“Tricks of the trade, my boy.” A sly smile graced his face before he gave the bartender his order. Loosening his tie, he leaned back in his chair to release the stress from a long workday. “So, what’s on your mind?”

“Well, I wanted to tell you that I’m taking a trip to Orlando in two days.” To calm his growing jitters, wondering how Harrison would react, he took a long pull of his beer. He was a grown man, but he still needed Harrison’s support and approval.

“That’s wonderful. How long are you staying?” he asked, picking up the glass of wine that was set in front of him.

“I don’t know. Depends on how tired I am, I guess.”

“What?”

“I’m not just going to Orlando. I’m planning to run there.”

Harrison lifted the glass to his lips and froze before setting it down again. “You’re running to Orlando? That’s what, 700 miles?”

“Around 750, actually.”

“Why? Why not just go there like everyone else? Safely, in a plane?”

“I have such wonderful memories with the guys there when we were young, and you know how much we loved to push ourselves as we got older. We never played it safe. The risks and adventures we took shaped us, and I miss that in my life. I miss them, and if I don’t do something soon to figure out who I am without them, without the military, I’m going to go crazy.”

“I get that, but please don’t tell me you are going by yourself.”

“I’d planned on it.”

“Damn it, Jackson. You’re alone too much as it is, but at least Ms. Beasley, Sophia, and I are nearby, if needed. Now, you’re telling me that you want to run halfway down the east coast alone. I’m going to worry myself sick thinking that you’re stranded on some deserted back road with a broken ankle or passed out somewhere.” He laughed, but the worry lines were deep around his eyes.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. I’ve survived worse.”

When Harrison glared down his nose at him, unamused by the joke, Jackson held up his hands, his eyes sorrowful. “I wasn’t talking about what happened to us. Look, I’ve prepared my entire adult life for this. I know how to survive in situations far more dangerous than this, and I enjoy being outdoors. Spending a few months running and pushing myself doesn’t sound all that bad to me. It sounds like a dream.”

“I know. I do believe that you can do anything you put your mind to, but I’m still not comfortable with you doing this by yourself. Can’t you take someone with you?”

“It never occurred to me to ask anyone until Ben stopped by tonight. That’s what he was talking about earlier. He wants to go with me.”

“Really? That’s great. He seems like a handful, but I’m sure he could be useful along the way.”

“I don’t know.” Jackson ran his hand through his hair while he considered Ben’s offer. He and Harrison both made points he couldn’t ignore.

“You should say yes. If not for yourself, do it for me and Sophia, Eleanor, and all the people who love you.” He took a sip of wine before tipping the glass toward Jackson. “Who knows, maybe he’ll prove to be a great friend once you get to know him better.”

“Or another headache.”

When the drinks were empty and Jackson’s trip thoroughly explored, Harrison paid the tab before rising to wrap Jackson in a hug. “Whatever you decide to do, for my sanity,” he added with an uneasy smile, “text me often to let me know you’re safe.”

“I will.” He hugged Harrison goodbye but couldn’t leave. With a sigh, he headed through the crowded restaurant. Several of Avery’s friends watched him approach with disapproving eyes then Molly tapped Ben on the shoulder.

“Hi, Jackson,” Ben exclaimed when he turned around, the only one happy to see him. “Are you coming to join us?”

“Thanks, but not tonight. Can we talk? Privately?” He led Ben away from the table, continuing to second guess what he was about to do.

“Well? What do you say?”

“I’m leaving on April first at six AM. Can you be ready?”

“Absolutely. My lease runs out tomorrow, so I’m good to go. Thanks, man. I promise you won’t regret this.”

We'll see, Jackson thought and turned to leave. He'd invited Ben to set Harrison's mind at ease, but it would be convenient to have a way to carry more clothes and supplies during the long trip. Regarding Ben's company, Jackson wasn't sure he wanted it, but he'd already opened that can.

"Oh, Jackson?" Ben called and waited for Jackson to face him again. "My truck was repossessed. Can I borrow a car?"

When Jackson simply dropped his head and continued toward the exit, Ben beamed.

"I'll take that as a yes," he yelled over the crowd noise to Jackson's back, then returned to the table and raised his glass. "Kids, I'm going on a field trip!"

Chapter Fifteen



Early on April 1st, Jackson checked the weather outside his bedroom window. The sky was clear and streaked with the bright warm colors of dawn. Perfect for starting the journey of a lifetime.

That beautiful morning, he felt rested, which was bizarre since he hadn't slept a minute in days. Yes, he was excited and impatient to get out of Richmond, but it was more than that. After enduring two years in survival mode, damn it, he deserved this. He deserved happiness, and this trip was going to help him find it.

"What are you doing up at this hour," he asked when he found Ms. Beasley cooking in the kitchen. Parking his suitcase next to the garage door, he strolled over to her and draped an arm over her rigid shoulders. "I'd planned to fix my own breakfast so you could sleep in." After kissing her hair, he grabbed a piece of bacon from the warming plate.

"I couldn't let you leave without cooking you one last meal," she said with a forced grin and tears in her eyes.

“Don’t do that.” He rested his head against hers. “I’m not going away forever. I’ll be back before you can miss me.”

“Not a chance.” She sniffed and wiped her cheeks with a towel.

She’d only been taking care of the Vane estate for a year, but it didn’t take long for their friendship to grow and fortify. “I’m going to miss you too, but I have to do this. You understand, right?”

She nodded and patted his chin. “Such a sweetie, you are. Now, go get whatever it is out of your system and come back to us.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He kissed her again, this time on the cheek with a loud smack.

Giggling, she swatted him with the towel. “You’re in a great mood this morning.”

“I’m excited to get—” He stopped when the doorbell sang through the house. Checking his watch, he headed to the front door. Ben was early. A promising sign.

Opening the door, Jackson pinched his lips closed when he laid eyes on Ben, leaning his forehead against the frame. There were dark circles under his eyes, the color of the wisteria behind him, and his clothes seemed to have been pulled from the bottom of the hamper.

“You look like shit.”

“And you’re too chipper at this ridiculous time of day.” Ben ran his hand over his face, then perked up when he stepped inside. “Is that bacon I smell?”

“Yep. Come get some breakfast.”

“Bless you,” Ben exhaled, and as he followed Jackson to the kitchen, he wished he’d brought his camera. The early morning light added a fascinating ambiance to the beautiful shapes and colors he saw in every room he passed.

Entering the bright kitchen, a short, older woman with gray hair and a lavender dress stood in front of the stove. She smiled

over her shoulder and waved with a wooden spoon before placing it on the counter. And live-in staff, too, Ben mused. *Jackson certainly had it all*, he thought with a tinge of jealousy.

Jackson introduced Ben to Ms. Beasley then handed him a plate. “Go ahead. I’m sure you could use a good meal. What’d you do? Stay up all night?”

“Yes.” Ben scoffed and scooped a hefty spoonful of scrambled eggs onto his plate. Overcome with hunger, he didn’t see Jackson and Ms. Beasley wince when he grabbed a few pieces of bacon and sausage patties from the tray with his fingers. “Yesterday was the last day on my lease, so I had to get everything packed and moved out.” He took a heaping bite of eggs and nearly groaned with pleasure. It was the first decent meal he’d had since he was laid off. “Then, after all that manual labor, I deserved a few drinks and the company of a female or two.”

Ms. Beasley shot him a disapproving glance, making Ben slump back in his seat.

While they ate, Jackson and Ben discussed the trip’s logistics. Ben would be responsible for finding the hotels and checking them in and out at each stop. They developed a coordinated system for communicating and transferring Jackson’s hotel keys and suitcase. Then, they’d meet up for their meals and prepare for the next task.

“Is this how you were in the military?” Ben asked, his mouth full of a second helping of eggs.

“What do you mean?”

“We just made some pretty detailed and regimented plans for clothes and a plastic hotel key. I can only imagine what you’d come up with for the transportation of weapons and shit.”

“You have no idea.”

“Yeah, no doubt, but I have a question. How should I pay for the hotels? Unemployed, remember?” he asked, pointing the fork at himself.

Jackson grabbed the small backpack he planned to carry while running and removed a credit card from his wallet. When Ben's eyes widened and he reached out to grab the card, Jackson yanked it back. "This is for hotels, food, and supplies only. Understood?"

"Got it, Boss. Or should I call you Captain? Sergeant? General?"

"Boss will do," Jackson joked and handed over the card.

When they had their fill of breakfast, Jackson led Ben to the garage. "Take your pick."

"No way?" Strolling around each sparkling new car, Ben's enthusiasm for the upcoming adventure grew with every touch of metal. His own rusted excuse for a pickup truck was repossessed shortly after the paychecks stopped coming, and he'd grown tired of riding a bicycle. It was impossible to get laid when he'd have to take the girl to his parents' house on his childhood bike.

"I can drive any of these?"

"You can drive any except the one on the end." The tiny red sports car his father preferred was off-limits. It was too small for their needs, but he knew he just couldn't bring himself to sit in it. Those wounds were slow to heal.

"This one," Ben decided, opening the door to the sporty silver hatchback before dropping into the driver's seat. "It looks like it's never been driven." He ran his hand over the smooth leather steering wheel.

"Probably hasn't. My dad only drove one car. I have no idea why he bought all these." Jackson snatched the keys from the hook on the wall and tossed them to Ben before opening the garage bay door. "Get your things packed up. We'll leave in ten."

Instead of starting his journey at the estate, a place where he had mixed emotions, Jackson chose Will's gravesite instead. Since he

saved Jackson's life, making this trip possible, it was an obvious choice for the starting point.

From there, he planned to run fifteen miles before stopping for lunch and a rest. Then, if he felt up to it, he hoped to run another ten miles or so before stopping for the night. At that pace, he would reach his first destination, his beloved Eleanor in Stony Creek, Virginia, the next day.

At the cemetery, Jackson wandered the grounds until locating Will's grave. He sat on the grass nearby and leaned against the headstone, his eyes burning.

"I still can't believe you're gone. I see your name carved into this cold stone, but it just doesn't seem real. We had so many plans and places to go. You wanted to kiss a girl in every country." A laugh escaped despite the pain lodged in his throat. "All those girls have probably cried themselves to sleep every night since. Damn you. Why did you have to leave? Why didn't you come to me? You didn't have to go through it alone."

Trembling, he wiped his eyes with his shirt and leaned on the headstone.

"I miss you so much. I'll never be able to repay you for what you did for me. All I can do is honor your memory by helping others. I'm not sure how yet, but I promise I will. I love you, buddy."

Brushing his hand over Will's name, he stood, clicked his heels together, and raised a hand to his temple in a sharp salute.

Now, he was ready. Ready for his life to begin.

Mile zero.

That day was unusually sweltering for April. There were no clouds to provide a break from the sun, but he was comfortable in the heat and sweat. It didn't take long before the streets were bustling with the morning rush, causing him to often stop for traffic signals or impatient drivers. When he exited the city, he

paused on the side of the road for his first upper body workout. The shade of a nearby tree provided the space he needed for pushups and a strong branch for pull-ups. When his arms failed, he took the water bottle out of his backpack and checked his watch.

He'd gone twelve miles and felt amazing. After tossing the empty bottle into his bag, he continued down a narrow rural road until he came to a small town with little more than a single traffic light and a few dusty storefronts lining the street. Except for the neon sign blaring the diner's name, the area appeared to be abandoned and forgotten.

With his phone, he checked the location on the map. He was several miles north of Petersburg and had only twenty-five miles remaining to reach Stony Creek. Standing outside the lonely diner, he texted Ben the address before going inside to wash his hands and face.

The cool water rejuvenated his energy and washed the dust and sweat from his skin. The first leg of his journey went better than he expected, and all he needed now was a hot plate of food before starting the second.

He claimed an empty booth by the large windows that framed the front of the old building and looked around. The old-fashioned diner hadn't changed since the 1950s. There was a wide opening in the wall between the kitchen and the tall counter at the center of the dining area, and the jukebox played a happy tune quietly from the back corner. The place smelled of old cooking oil and dusty antiques. If he wasn't so hungry, he might have snuck out and continued down the road to the next town, but his empty stomach took priority over his skepticism.

"What can I get...oh, hello, sweetness." The waitress leaned on the back of the booth opposite Jackson and batted her eyelashes. "Can I get ya a drink?"

Jackson ordered ice water, opened the tall, laminated menu, and paid the young waitress no mind. He'd worked up an appetite and had the urge to eat everything he saw.

When she returned with the water, she helped herself to the empty bench across from Jackson, propping her chin on her hand. She said nothing, only continued to stare at him with a smile.

She looked to be in her early twenties, Jackson guessed. Her bright blonde hair was pulled up in a thick ponytail on the top of her head, and she wore more makeup than she should.

"So, what brings you to our little town, handsome? You're obviously not from around here."

"I'm just passing through with a friend."

Unfortunately for him, he was her only customer, and she gave no indication that she'd be leaving soon.

"Oh, yeah? Does that friend happen to be female?"

"No."

"Lucky for me. Is he as good lookin' as you, sweetie?" she asked and bit her lower lip.

So much for subtleties, Jackson mused, and took a sip of water.

"Jules, get back to work," a man yelled through the opening behind the counter.

Ignoring the command, she rolled her eyes and held out her hand until Jackson took it. "I'm Julie," she said with a southern drawl, and as she stood, she trailed her fingers lightly across Jackson's palm. "I'll be back to take your orders when your friend arrives." Spinning on her heel, she strolled to the main counter.

He could feel her watching him as she pretended to wipe the counter with a rag. Unphased, he returned to reading the menu, struggling to find anything that wasn't deep-fried or smothered in gravy.

Ten minutes later, Ben dropped into the seat across from Jackson with a sigh. “Man, you sure know how to pick ‘em. Where the hell are we?”

“No idea, but I’m starving.”

Soon, Julie returned, and was thrilled when Ben joined in the flirting game. He ordered a sweet tea, his eyes never leaving her face, and watched while she sashayed across the room and back. When she placed the large plastic cup full to the top on the table, she sat in the booth next to Ben.

“So, you fellas in town for long?”

“No. We just stopped by for lunch.” Ben leaned back in the booth and rested an arm on the top of the seat behind Julie. He liked the way her eyes sparkled when she looked at him, and she had smooth, plump, kissable lips that made his mouth water. “Jackson, here, is running to Orlando, and this fine place is his first stop.”

“You’re kiddin’,” she blurted out, revealing her wad of gum.

“Yep. It’s your lucky day.”

“Hey, Earl,” she yelled across the diner to the man in the kitchen. “This guy here is runnin’ to Orlando. Isn’t that wild?”

Earl looked at them through the opening behind the bar, then, returned to his work without a word.

“Earl never gets excited, except when I don’t do something right, which is like every day.”

“You live around here?” Ben asked before sipping his tea. It was the best damn tea he’d ever tasted.

“Yep. I live on my daddy’s farm about a mile from here. Got a little trailer all to myself.” She took a lock of hair, twisted it around her forefinger, and smacked her gum.

Jackson was barely listening to what she and Ben were going on about, but it was apparent young Julie hadn’t been outside of that small town her entire life.

“You two handsome fellas ready to order?” She took out a notepad and pencil from her apron and set the pad on the table.

Jackson ordered the grilled chicken and vegetables, and when she turned her big brown eyes on Ben, he smiled. He hadn't stopped studying her flawless skin long enough to look at the menu.

"What's your name?" he asked and held out his hand. She slid her hand in his, but when her knuckles touched his lips, her dramatic gum smacking came to a halt.

"Julie," she managed, fanning herself with the notepad.

"What do you recommend, Julie?"

"I...uh...I like the...uh...barbeque and fries."

Jackson's stomach was growling, and he'd already had enough of this ridiculous spectacle.

"Great. I'll have that. How long will it take to cook? My buddy here has some more running to do, and he's hungry." He traced a thumb over the top of her hand.

"I'll tell Earl to put a rush on it. Just for you."

"Thank you, my dear." Ben kissed her hand again and held on as she stood.

"I'll be back real soon."

When she was gone, Ben shook his head before taking a long drink of his sweet tea. "Man, I love country girls."

What had he done? Jackson thought. There was no telling how long it would take him to get to Orlando, and he was putting a lot of trust in Ben. He barely knew anything about him other than he liked taking photos and country girls. He probably loved all types of girls, Jackson mused.

"What's that look for?" Ben asked when he turned his attention back to Jackson.

"Nothing."

"Man, I really appreciate you letting me join you. I promise you won't regret this. Look," Ben reached inside his pocket for his phone. "I've already created the social media pages and started documenting your trip." He opened an app and showed Jackson a page titled 'Jackson Vane-Memorial Run.'

The first picture was Jackson kneeling by Will's grave, his head down and his hand on the headstone. With the sun rays shining through the leaves, covering him in a dappled shade, it captured exactly how Jackson was feeling at that moment.

"What do you think?"

"It's perfect," were the only words that came to mind. The photo explained why Jackson was taking the journey, without saying a word. But under the image was a well-written and surprisingly accurate paragraph about Jackson's service and friends. His resourcefulness was impressive.

Encouraged and relieved by the compliment, Ben pointed at the phone. "Scroll up to the next one. It symbolizes the official start of your journey."

Jackson scrolled to a photo of him in mid-stride, lightly blurred in the distance, and Will's headstone in the foreground, the focus of the shot. Under the photo was a description of Jackson's goals for the trip.

"I don't know what to say. They're very good."

"I'm glad you like them. I'll text you the links so you can give them to your friends. Maybe if they follow us, it will help them understand and set their minds at ease."

When Earl called for Julie, his deep voice echoing through the small diner, she rushed to the opening and delivered the overflowing plates to Jackson and Ben. Jackson's mouth watered at how delicious the food looked. But then again, with his empty stomach, he'd have eaten dirt if she put it in front of him.

"It looks amazing, Julie. Thank you." Ben complimented and grabbed a napkin.

"If you fellas need anything, just holler."

As she walked away, looking over her shoulder at them, Jackson paid her no attention. The chicken was so tender that he could slice it with the dull butter knife he found secured in a

paper napkin. With the first bite, he sighed. Earl was a mastermind in the kitchen.

“Man, she’s hot. Don’t you think so?”

Jackson shrugged and took another bite.

“Seriously, man? Look at her.” Ben picked up a french fry and dipped it in the small container of ketchup without taking his eyes off Julie. “I suppose you’ve had plenty of women who are way hotter.”

Ignoring him, Jackson continued eating, his growling stomach a priority over entertaining Ben’s absurd questions.

“What? Don’t you date?”

“No.”

“Jackson Vane, the guy who could have any girl in high school and looks like you do, doesn’t date?”

“No.”

Ben leaned over his plate and whispered. “When was the last time you got laid, man?”

Jackson raised his eyes to him over a fork full of broccoli he was about to pop into his mouth and glared.

“I get that you’re not ready to divulge all your secrets. Me?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“It’s been about a week, and you know what I’m thinking?”

“I can only imagine.”

“I’m thinking a little taste of Julie in the cornfields out back would be a nice dessert.”

By the time they’d finished their meals, every table in the place was full with more people waiting outside. Where all the people came from was a mystery since the diner was off the beaten path and the surrounding town was desolate. But after tasting Earl’s cooking, Jackson decided he, too, would travel for a taste.

With his energy restored, he was ready to get back on the road. He paid the bill and tipped Julie handsomely, but before he could escape, Ben positioned him under the neon sign,

proudly displaying the diner's name even in the sunlight, and had Julie place her hands on his shoulder. Something she was happy to do. Like an experienced model, she leaned in until Ben was satisfied Jackson's first stop was properly memorialized.

"Thanks, Julie," Jackson said, but before he could avoid it, she kissed him on the cheek and did the same to Ben.

"Good luck on your trip," she yelled, hurrying back inside.

Jackson grinned at the dumb look on Ben's face as he waved like a lovesick schoolboy. "I'm going. Text me the hotel's address when you check in." Ben, who was still staring into the diner, didn't seem to be listening. "Ben."

"Yeah, text you when I get there. Got it." After returning his camera to the car, Ben slapped Jackson on the back and closed the door. "I'll call the hotel from inside. See you in a few."

Shaking his head at the spectacle, Jackson checked his watch and took off.



Later that night, Ben knocked on the door of Jackson's hotel room. "Want to go get a beer? I saw a bar with a live band a couple blocks from here."

He looked Ben over. He was fidgety with excitement, making Jackson wonder if he was up for whatever Ben had planned. Before he was interrupted, Jackson was settled on the bed, resting his sore muscles with a good book. But sitting in the quiet room with his memories no longer sounded like a good time either.

"All right," Jackson finally conceded. "Just keep your lips to yourself."

"What?"

"Nothing. I'll meet you in the lobby in ten minutes."

Letting the door shut behind him, Jackson opened his suitcase and changed clothes. He brought only a few items for activities other than running, so it didn't take long for him to get

ready. After grabbing his wallet from the dresser, he was out the door in five.

“Expecting someone?” Jackson asked after they’d claimed two seats at the bar and noticed Ben was keeping watch over the entrance.

Flashing a guilty grin over his shoulder, Ben took a quick pull from his beer. “I may be staying here while you’re in Stony Creek.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

To pass the time, Jackson surveyed the room, an unconscious habit due to his military training. He watched the band set up on a small stage and hoped they played rock or heavy metal music. Something to help drown out both Ben and the noise in his head.

Around the stage, all the tables were alive with animated conversation. Waitresses rushed this way and that carrying trays of food and drinks. A long line of people waited in the lobby for a chance at a table. Then, he noticed a familiar face talking with the hostess.

Jackson poked Ben with an elbow then tipped his beer toward the door. When Ben’s head whipped around and located Julie among the crowd, her face lit up. Immediately, she took off toward them, her wavy blonde hair bouncing over her bare shoulders. She was wearing a barely-there pink tank top and a short black skirt that outlined her small, shapely frame.

“Hi, good lookin’,” she greeted, circling her arms around Ben’s neck before planting a loud kiss on his lips.

Ignoring them, Jackson waved for the bartender to bring him another beer. He was going to need a few to get through the evening with his sanity. Ben and Julie seemed all too comfortable with each other, and he wondered what happened after he left the diner. On second thought, he grimaced, it was the last thing he wanted to know and quickly put it out of his mind.

He watched the bartender grab a beer from the cooler and pop off the top with a bottle opener attached to his belt. When it was set in front of Jackson, he snatched it off the counter and drank deep. Although he had enjoyed it, the first thirty miles of his journey tested him, as Ben and Julie were, and the cool liquid soothed his edgy nerves.

“Hey, Jackson,” he heard Ben say and turned to see both Ben and Julie smiling at him. “Julie brought a friend.” He motioned to a girl, who looked to be the same age as Julie with straight brown hair standing behind them. She leaned forward and waved. “This is Beth. Beth, this is Jackson.”

With an indifferent nod, Jackson returned to his beer and was grateful when the absurd conversations going on beside him were drowned out by the band. And to Jackson’s approval, it was classic rock and loud.

After the first few songs, the crowd began to sing along, transporting Jackson back to Ireland. At a pub in Dublin while surrounded by strangers, he and his friends sang songs they’d never heard and got sloppy drunk on an endless supply of Guinness.

Not surprisingly, they never made it back to their hotel that night. Instead, they passed out in a field a few miles from the pub until being discovered the next afternoon. The farmer was nice enough to let them sleep off the booze for a while. But when the slumber party interfered with his chores, he crept close with his tractor and laid on the horn.

His howling laugh echoed across the rolling land as he watched the four of them scramble and vomit like drunken idiots. Thanks to that prankster farmer and countless pitchers of fresh, flavorful beer, Jackson awoke to a freight train in his head, a sunburn, and memories he’d never forget.

It was not a proud moment for him now, but at the time, they were young, together, and on top of the world. That trip was one of many during their third year of service before being

deployed to Afghanistan for the first time. They often talked about going back to that crazy pub while huddled around a flimsy card table in the middle of the desert. It was another drop in the sea of regrets he carried.

When the band took a break, he saw Julie's friend climb down from her stool out of the corner of his eye. What was her name again? Wasn't important, he decided and sighed when Ben and Julie moved over, vacating the seat beside him. Without the band, the room noise was degraded to the conversations of the crowd. Way too quiet.

"Hi," the girl said again as she pulled herself into the tall stool, exposing the pocket seams of her ripped jean shorts. "Julie told me what you're doing. My dad was in the Navy for four years in California before I was born. How long did you serve?"

"Eight," Jackson responded and wondered how long he was going to have her in his ear.

"You don't say a whole lot, but that's okay." She grabbed her drink in one hand, the straw with the other, and studied him under her lashes while she sipped. "I can do all the talkin'."

As promised, she talked about random topics without Jackson's involvement or encouragement. There was no purpose or pattern to her thoughts, and she seemed to say whatever popped into her mind. It didn't matter, Jackson was hardly listening anyway, but when she tried to talk over the band, he began to miss the solitude of his hotel room.

Although he was enjoying the music, he needed to remove himself from this situation before he said something he shouldn't to what's-her-name. He looked over her shoulder at Ben for help, but he was too busy fondling Julie's tonsils with his tongue to notice.

Reaching for his wallet, he rolled his eyes and motioned for the bartender to bring him the tab.

"Are you leaving?" she asked, poking out her bottom lip.

Jackson glanced at her. She was practically a child. Ben may not have a problem with the age difference, but Jackson wasn't interested in meaningless flirting or a one-night stand.

Maybe all that he'd been through had matured him beyond his young age of twenty-eight, but he doubted that was all. He'd never been attracted to girls like these. Yes, they were cute, but they lacked something other than maturity that he would want in a companion. He didn't know what it was, and he couldn't describe it if he tried. Either way, he had no plans to entertain, date, or sleep with any woman anytime soon.

One day, perhaps, he'd find the one for him, but he certainly wasn't searching for her. For now, he had goals to accomplish, a journey to fulfill, and internal demons to defeat, in addition to getting himself out of the uncomfortable situation he found himself in that night.

"Yes, I'm leaving," he answered over the roar of the band and handed the bartender his credit card. He finished off his beer and set the bottle aside.

Placing her feet on the footrest of Jackson's stool, she wiggled to the end of her seat and set her hand on his arm, grabbing his attention. Teeth clenched, he turned his eyes on her and realized he'd stayed too long.

"Would you like some company for the walk back to your room? I sure could use some fresh air." She batted her long eyelashes and lightly ran her fingernails up his arm. The sultry look she was giving him had his patience and interest in being polite, shattering like thin glass.

Without a word, he signed the receipt the bartender handed him, pulled two bills from his wallet, and stood. But when she followed, he placed his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently into her seat.

"I don't know what Ben and Julie told you, but I'm not that guy." Scooting by her, he handed Ben the money he had removed from his wallet. "Enjoy the rest of your night on me.

I'm heading back." He heard Ben call his name, but he didn't stop. The sooner he got out of there, the better.

"Shit." Dragging himself out of Julie's arms, Ben rushed out of the bar. "Where are you going?" he gasped, trying to catch his breath from the quick jog across the street.

"I'm going back to the hotel to relax." He smacked Ben on the side of the arm and stepped past.

"She could have helped you with that," Ben yelled after him with a grin.

Jackson raised his hand in response but kept walking. Solitude definitely had its perks.

Back in his room, Jackson texted Ben the schedule for the next several days. In response, he received a photo of Ben sandwiched between Julie and the other girl. They appeared to be having fun, and he was happy for them. He remembered what it was like to feel limitless and carefree, and feeling that way again was what he wanted more than anything. Hopefully, by the end of this trip, he'd have that and more.

Before turning out the light to rest his aching joints, he responded to Ben's text: *Have fun but don't get anyone pregnant.*

Chapter Sixteen



After breakfast in the hotel restaurant and packing, Jackson stopped by Ben's room to slip his key under the door. But as he bent down, the door suddenly opened to reveal a sleepy, hungover, and startled man that somewhat resembled Ben. He was wearing only boxers and a wrinkled t-shirt turned inside out.

Jackson smiled. "Rough night?"

"What the hell?" Ben combed his fingers through his unruly hair. "Why are you lurking outside my door?"

Jackson held up the key between two fingers and Ben snatched it.

"Right. You headin' out?" he asked, stepping into the hallway.

"Whoa, wait a minute," Jackson held up both hands and mirrored him. "Where do you think you're going like that?"

Ben looked down and laughed. "I, uh, was hungry."

"Ben, who's there?" a female voice called from inside the room.

Jackson raised his eyebrows and looked over Ben's shoulder.

"It's just Jackson."

"Oh, really?" There was a rustling noise inside the room before she joined them at the door. "Hi, there," what's-her-name said.

Ben's eyes widened with his grin. "Jackson, you remember Beth."

"Yes, of course. Beth. It's nice to see you again, Beth."

She had wrapped the bed sheet around her body and her hair was a tangled and wild. Apparently, the night took an interesting turn for Ben, and Jackson wondered what happened to Julie.

Then, as if on cue, Julie bounced to the door. "Hi, Jackson. Want to come in?"

"Absolutely not but thank you. I need to get going." He turned to leave but returned to Ben. "Tomorrow morning," he confirmed sternly.

They had planned for Ben to drop off Jackson's suitcase at Eleanor's the next day. He packed what he needed for that night in his backpack, but he'd need a change of clothes for the rest of his stay.

"I'll be there."

Jackson studied him. "I can't take you serious like this."

"Don't worry," Ben urged and wrapped an arm around the waist of each girl. "Nothing could keep me away," he added before the girls pulled him back inside, letting the door slam behind them.

"I doubt that."

Shaking his head, Jackson headed down the hallway. He looked forward to getting back on the road and seeing Eleanor again. He texted her his estimated arrival time before starting his warmup.



The fifteen miles to Stony Creek passed smoothly, and he was soon wrapped up happily at home in Eleanor's arms. Twelve months had passed since he last saw her and that was way too long.

"You look so amazing," she said when she was able to pull herself away from him. "Sweaty, but amazing." Laughing, she pulled him in for another hug.

"So do you, not the sweaty part, of course. You look happy."

"I am. The kids give me so much joy. Unfortunately, you just missed them."

"That's okay. Gives me some time with you first."

Eleanor patted him on the cheek then led him inside. "Please come in and rest your legs."

The front door of the little rancher opened to the living room, and Eleanor stepped around the couch to let Jackson enter before closing the door. The house was old and cramped, nothing like he was used to seeing her in, but it was clean. Eleanor ran a tight ship when it came to her household, and Jackson would bet that she had the kids on a strict chore schedule as she did when he was young.

The living room was packed with a couch, recliner, toy box, and small television. On the walls were framed photos of Eleanor's three grandkids and daughter along with several bold crayon marks in blue and green. He hoped that crime was committed before Eleanor arrived. She would not have tolerated that behavior and knew the kids would fear her as much as they loved her.

She led Jackson to the eat-in kitchen which was the same size as the living room. Along the way, he hadn't seen a dining room and knew Eleanor would have preferred one for family dinners. The white painted wood cabinets were nicked, dented, and looked original to the house. Some hung crooked on rusty hinges and others wouldn't close all the way. The linoleum floor

was torn in several places and the burners on the ancient electric stove sat at different heights.

She motioned for him to take a seat at the small table by the windows. There were only three chairs and he wondered where the others sat when they came together over meals, as she would certainly demand. If there was one thing Eleanor never wavered on, it was family dinner time. Then, he saw a bright green card table and two colorful chairs folded up and leaning against the wall. The kids' table, he mused.

Eleanor strolled to the sink and blotted the sweat forming on her forehead with a towel. The air conditioning unit in the window was working hard to cool the room, but it couldn't keep up with the heat drafting in. "Can I get you something to drink? Some ice water to help you cool off?"

"Sure, that sounds great."

She filled a glass with ice from the freezer and water from the tap, then took the seat beside him.

"I'm so glad you're here. It warms my heart to see you healthy and strong." She leaned on the table and took his hand. "Tell me. How's it going so far?"

"It's been interesting to say the least. Running's the easy part, and I enjoy the work. It's all the other stuff that I'm having to get used to."

"What other stuff?" Eleanor asked, worry forming in her eyes.

"Ben, the guy I told you about that's helping with the logistics, he's a lot to handle." He rolled his eyes thinking of all that transpired the day before and took a sip of water. "He seems harmless, but I didn't fully think through my decision before I opened my mouth. I just wanted to settle Harrison's worries, but I'm starting to think that I'll be dealing with his antics more than he helps me."

Eleanor laughed and it was music to his ears.

"What is he doing?"

“What isn’t he doing? One minute, he’s taking these amazing photos, and the next he’s making out with the first girl he sees.”

Eleanor’s eyes widened. “No, he didn’t.”

“And this morning, when I stopped by his room, he was with that girl and her friend, who they thought would keep me company.”

Another laugh escaped before she could clasp a hand over her mouth. “That’s a hoot. I take it you turned her down and that’s why she ended up with him.”

“What do you think?” Jackson tilted his head, turned down the sides of his mouth.

“Maybe you should have taken her up on it. You know how I feel about your love life.” She winked as she fanned herself with a newspaper she picked up off the table.

“I do and unfortunately, you’re not the only one.”

“What? Who’s this other incredibly intelligent individual?”

“Harrison.”

“Really? What does he say?”

“Let’s talk about you. How are the kids adjusting?”

“Changing the subject, are we? Fine.” Her expression changed from sassy to delighted in a flash. “They keep me on my toes, that’s for sure. Libby is going to preschool three days a week to get ready for kindergarten next year. She’s finally getting the instruction and social skills practice she needs. She’s come a long way, but she really struggled in the beginning with the routine and interacting with the other kids. Ethan is eight. I’m sure you remember his little spitfire attitude.” She laughed when Jackson raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Well, nothing’s changed, and he’s always getting into something he shouldn’t. I have to watch him or—”

“Or he’ll draw on the walls?” Jackson finished for her.

“Saw that did you? He marked on that wall soon after I arrived—a little act of defiance. I swear that boy is going to be the end of me, but there are times when he’s the sweetest kid

you ever met. Then, there's Whitney. She's thirteen going on thirty and has more sass than I know what to do with."

"Sounds like her grandma."

"It took us a while to understand each other," Eleanor continued, ignoring the comment, "but things are much better now. I can't wait for their reaction when they see you. They're going to be so excited."

"I'm looking forward to it. It's been a while. How's Heather doing now that the divorce is final?"

"She was drowning when I arrived but she's holding her own. Still having to work two jobs, but I'm so proud of her. She's a tough cookie." Eleanor glanced at the clock. "Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie. Are you hungry? I know you usually have a smoothie after your workouts, at least you used to. I picked up the ingredients yesterday just in case. If you want to make one, I can get lunch going."

Touched, he covered her hand with his. "That's very thoughtful of you. Thank you. But how about I take you out to lunch?"

"Such a gentleman. I'd love to." She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek before going to the refrigerator to remove the fruits, vegetables, almond milk, and powdered protein for his shake.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to freshen up and change first," he said, snatching the small backpack he brought with him off the floor.

"Sure, honey. Down the hall, first door on the right."

The tiny bathroom was just big enough for a small sink, tub, and toilet. There were five toothbrushes in a cup on the sink, and he thought about the chaos that must ensue when they all needed to get ready. With a chuckle, he dropped his bag on the back of the toilet and grabbed the knob in the shower to turn on the water only to have it come off in his hand. After reinstalling it, he tried again and discovered the trick to turning

it successfully. He washed, changed, and stuffed his dirty clothes in the bag before heading back to the kitchen.

When ready for lunch, the pair boarded the monstrosity his father gifted her and drove to a nearby restaurant.

“They have the best chicken and dumplings,” Eleanor told Jackson when they were settled into a booth. “I know you don’t eat things like that, but they’re delicious.”

Jackson smiled. “I’ll take your word for it.”

He wondered if her cooking changed when she moved. She’d adapted a lot of her recipes to fit his healthy lifestyle, but she now had to cook for three growing kids and their busy mother, when she was home. He doubted Heather was able to enjoy family dinners with Eleanor and her kids very often.

After ordering, Jackson took Eleanor’s hand, resolved to do something about it.

“Eleanor, you know how much I love you, right?”

“Of course, honey. Why in the world would you ask that?”

The worry was back in her eyes, but he would not take no for an answer. “Is Heather happy here?”

“Yes, I think Heather’s happy. It’s been a tough year for her, but she’s doing better.”

“Are you happy?”

“You know me, I’m happy when the people I love are happy. Jackson, what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“That’s a complicated question, but right now, all I can think about is taking care of you, Heather, and the kids. It would make me happy if you’d let me do that.” He didn’t wait for her to answer since he knew what she would say. “I know you don’t want to be a burden or take advantage of me, but Eleanor, Dad left me more money than I will ever need. Let me do something good with it.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she sighed, thinking about how exhausted her daughter was after a twelve-hour shift and another four at a part-time job. It was difficult to accept and even harder to watch, but it was the path she chose when she decided to divorce her husband. It was the right choice, but that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be consequences. “What do you propose?”

“I want to buy you a house in Richmond that’s big enough for the entire family, low-maintenance, and near the best schools. And I want to help Heather get a better job at Dad’s company. It’s Harrison’s now, but I know he will agree, and she won’t have to work as much to make the same money or more.” He wanted to do this for Eleanor, but part of his plan was for selfish reasons. If she was in Richmond, he could see her more and make sure she was taken care of.

“Jackson, you have the biggest heart, and I love you so much.” She squeezed his hand. “Let me talk with Heather about it.”

The next morning, Jackson worked out until the kids left for school then joined Eleanor for breakfast. Thankfully, Ben made good on his promise and dropped off his suitcase, giving Jackson clean clothes to change into after his shower.

“I talked with Heather about your offer,” Eleanor finally said while she cleared their plates and set them in the dishwasher. “She said you are the kindest person she’s ever met and yes. She’d love to take you up on your offer—like she could refuse.” Eleanor laughed and threw her arms around Jackson. “I’m grateful for you and the joy you bring to my life.”

“You deserve this and more. I’ll give Harrison and Adam a call today and get everything set up. Then, you all can go house shopping when you have time.”

Over the next two days, he spent a most of his time with Ethan since he rarely left Jackson’s side. He showed Ethan his

workout routine and talked to him about listening to his mom and grandmother. They went on a short run together and threw the football in the backyard. Both things neither of them had done with their fathers. Each night, Eleanor had to coax Ethan away from Jackson with promises of ice cream or more time with him later.

His last morning there, Jackson provided Eleanor with links to the social media pages and reluctantly pulled himself from her and Ethan's embrace. Leaving was difficult, but the visit was exactly what he needed to start off the long journey ahead. His spirits were high despite the rainy weather.

His shirt was soaked by the eighteen-mile mark, and he was exhausted. Running in the rain wasn't a bother, but the thunder threatening in the distance was a cause for concern. Standing under an awning of a local restaurant, he texted Ben the address. If he was going to get any more running in that afternoon, he needed a good meal and dry shoes.

Ben soon arrived with Jackson's suitcase he picked up from Eleanor's along the way, allowing Jackson to change before joining him for lunch.

"You look a little tired. Enjoy your stay?" Jackson asked not bothering to hide his amusement. Ben's red eyes were a clear indication that he either hadn't gotten much sleep or had an interesting few days.

"Shut up." Ben ran both hands over his face.

"Julie keep you up all night? Or was it Beth?" Jackson was not ready to slide this one under the rug yet.

"Neither."

"Oh, really?" He couldn't help being curious. Ben looked too miserable for someone who didn't have a care in the world. "Trade them in for someone better?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Actually, that's why I asked."

Ben was not in the mood to be harassed. His head was pounding, and he could still feel the prior evening's festivities in the pit of his stomach. And why was Jackson so uncharacteristically chipper after running through the rain and mud?

"Well? What was her name, or do you even remember?"

Ben chugged his water and motioned for the waiter to bring him a refill. "I just had too much to drink last night, that's all."

"That's all? Somehow, I doubt that, but I'll let it go for now."

Annoyed, Ben rested his head in his hands with his elbows perched on the table and closed his eyes. The room spun slower when he couldn't see it.

Their meals arrived quickly to Jackson's relief, and the pair ate in silence. Jackson sent emails to inform Harrison and Adam of his plan for Eleanor and her family and promised to call that evening to discuss it further. In addition to purchasing a house, he decided to set up college funds for the kids. He smiled, thrilled that he will soon be able to spend more time with them.

"Where are we stopping tonight?" Ben asked after the waiter removed their empty plates and refilled their glasses. Now that he had eaten, he was feeling more like himself.

"I hope to get another fifteen miles in if my legs will hold up. Then, we'll cross the North Carolina border by tomorrow."

"Didn't you have someone to visit there?"

"Yes, Will's parents in Murfreesboro."

"That's right. I think I'm going to find something exciting to do tomorrow." Ben was ready for a little adventure of his own. "Want to join me?"

Jackson knew what Ben had in mind and wasn't ready. "I don't think so."

"Why not? Is running the only thing you're going to do on this trip? Somehow, you turned down Beth, and let me say, you missed out, my friend." He raised his eyebrows, then smiled when Jackson grimaced. "You went back to the room when the

bar was just getting hot, and you hang out with old ladies. What's up, man?"

A laugh escaped before Jackson could stifle it. "Maybe one day. I just don't want to risk getting injured. It's early and I have a long way to go." It was true, but Jackson wasn't ready to confide in Ben about the real reason. His heart needed more healing before he could bring himself to seek adventures like he and his friends did together.

"Suit yourself, but when I find some hot chicks along the way, I'll bring one back for you."

"Please don't."

"Yep, I will. You need to get out and get laid once in a while." With Jackson's looks, he would have no trouble finding a beautiful woman every night if he wanted. He knew very well how women reacted to Jackson and had since high school. The man had it all and it was painful to watch him waste it.

"Why is everyone I know so concerned about my sex life?"

"Dude, because it's good for the soul. I'm not going to stop trying to find you a hot piece of ass until you get some." It was selfish, but Jackson would make an excellent wingman if he would just loosen up. And a little sex went a long way to helping a guy do just that.

Ignoring the comment, Jackson motioned for the check. He was ready to get back on the road and to a little solitary peace and quiet. After paying the bill, he gladly said goodbye to Ben and set off on the next path.

The rain held off to a slow mist for the first five miles. It was just enough precipitation to be a nuisance, and by the time he stopped to work his upper body and stretch, his shirt was drenched again. Thankfully, the sun was out, giving him a chance to dry off.

He tossed his shirt in the backpack and stretched his legs and hip flexors in the shade of an old Oak tree at the edge of a farm. The view was beautiful there. Wide rolling fields, horses and

cows, and barns that had stood the test of time. The deep red paint on the barn behind the old white farmhouse had long ago faded to a muted mauve and the white door, stained from years of dirt and wear, was missing a few boards.

Then, he noticed the rusty tractor and the farmer working under the engine hood. The farmer, who was shirtless beneath his dark jean overalls, had long, gray hair tied back in a ponytail. The ends of his ragged beard moved with the breeze and blew into his face. He swatted it away with frustration, making Jackson chuckle.

Leaning over, he stretched out the kinks in his right hamstring and laughed when the old farmer shouted then tossed his wrench across the yard. Jackson's eyes started to follow the wrench, the man had a great arm, until he noticed the thin tree limb straining to prop up the ancient tractor hood looming over the farmer. A recipe for disaster.

The black dog, resting under the massive fruit tree and tire swing behind the house jumped up and barked. The historic farmhouse seemed to be better maintained than the barn, but there were no other signs of family that Jackson could see. Other than the tire swing hanging above the—where did the dog go?

Oh, well. Starting back toward the road, Jackson glanced at the tractor and his heart dropped into his stomach. The dog was frantic, running back and forth and barking at the farmer, who was now trapped under the fallen hood.

Without hesitation, Jackson took off through the field, running faster than he knew he could. With both hands, he grabbed the rusty hood, heaved it up, and propped it on his shoulder.

“Sir, are you hurt? Sir!”

When the farmer didn't move, Jackson placed a hand on his back. Relieved to find he was still breathing, Jackson attempted to check for injuries, but one wrong move could be disastrous. They both needed to get off the hot engine and out from under

the heavy hood. He searched for something within reach to support the hood long enough to remove the farmer and found a crowbar perched against a large toolbox. It would have to do.

He stretched a leg out and managed to drag the crowbar closer with his foot. He propped the hood up, and when he was sure it wouldn't fall, he carried the farmer to a safe spot on the grass. Other than a mark on his arm and back, he seemed unharmed.

"Now, wake up, damn it."

Jackson patted the man's flushed cheek and wished for some cold water. Then, remembering the bottle in his backpack, he dug inside, unaware of the crowbar slipping. The sound of the heavy metal hood slamming closed rivalled a shot from a cannon and echoed across the farm.

It was enough to make Jackson jump, his heart sputter, and his head suddenly pound with war. Grasping at his skull to silence the torment, he pushed to his feet and fumbled for balance. Fear had taken over his body and squeezed his throat. It was all he could see, feel, taste.

Desperate to survive, he took off in a blind panic until everything went black. Silent.

When Jackson opened his eyes, he was in a soft bed under a faded quilt of red, white, and blue plaid. The room was dark, except for a sliver of sunlight shining through the curtains behind the antique white headboard. Disoriented, he propped himself up on an elbow.

Where was he? Then, he saw a black dog sitting at the foot of the bed, keeping a close eye on him, and remembered. The farm, the trapped farmer, the hood slamming closed. He must have blacked out, but how did he get into bed? The farmhouse, to his recollection, was at least a hundred yards from where the tractor was parked.

The dog barked when Jackson tossed off the quilt and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Closing his eyes, he waited for the spinning top between his ears to come to a halt. It wasn't helping that the dog continued to howl just a few feet away.

"Rex! Hush it, you old mutt," Jackson heard someone say and thankfully, the dog obeyed. "Glad to see you're right-side up."

Turning his head to the tall shape in the doorway, Jackson recognized the farmer. "So, are you."

"Ha!" He crossed the room and handed Jackson a glass of lemonade before opening the curtains. "How are ya feelin'? You were out like a lightning bug at daybreak."

Squinting, Jackson raised the glass to his lips and drank. "I've been better. How's your head?"

"Hard as granite. I was clocked by a stallion right across the forehead once." He sat in the rocking chair in the corner and pointed at a wide scar over his left eyebrow. "Devil knocked me clear off my feet, but nothing could crack this noggin'. Changed his name to Lucifer after that." His loud burst of laughter filled the room, his round belly bouncing under his overalls.

"How long was I out?" Jackson thought of Ben and wondered where his phone and bag were.

"Long enough for me to feed the goats and chickens, cook lunch, and fix that damn tractor. Purrs like a kitten on Sunday for now."

Jackson's reaction must have questioned him.

"Bout three hours," he clarified. "Did som'em happen while I was under to knock you out?"

"Memories I thought were put away."

"Ahh." He'd noticed the dog tags when Jackson was unconscious and understood his meaning. "Happen often?"

"Not that much lately."

"What's your name?"

"Jackson."

“Nice to meet ya, Jackson. Mine’s Griffin. Friends call me Griff.” He grinned. “Since you seem to have saved me from being eaten by the worst tractor in the history of machinery, I reckon you can call me Griff, too.”

Jackson nodded. “Friends call me Jackson.”

Griff laughed again. “You’re funny. Can I git ya some soup? Made it myself.”

“No, thanks. I really should get going.”

Jackson stood, only to take a seat again when nausea rose quickly into his throat, and the top whipped into action again.

“I think you jarred your head when you dropped. Pretty big knot you got there.” Griff pointed to Jackson’s temple.

Raising a hand, Jackson felt the lump and winced at the throbbing that followed.

“Got a scrape on your elbow, too. I’ve got something that will fix that right up. Be right back.”

“It’s...” Jackson began, but Griff was on his feet and out the door before Jackson could finish the thought. He was a nimble old man, despite the Santa belly, and apparently, in great shape. How else could Jackson have gotten into the house?

Rex, who had been waiting patiently by the foot of the bed, jumped up and jogged closer to lean against Jackson’s legs. He looked up with his dark eyes and panted.

“Is that an apology?” Rubbing the dog’s ears, he rested an elbow on his knee and held up his head with his hand. It felt heavy, but he fought the urge to lie back down.

“Here. Got ya some bandages and my grandma’s special healin’ cream. Use it every day for cuts and scratches. You’ll be good as new in no time.”

“What’s in it?”

“You don’t want to know, but it works better than any of that modern-day crap you git at the Wal-Mart.” With two fingers, he reached into the mason jar and scooped out a glob

of slimy yellow goo. He held it up and smiled. “Good as new, remember?”

Turning his head, Jackson looked out the window as Griff went to work on his scraped arm. The concoction smelled of turpentine and urine, and burned Jackson’s nose, but it did soothe the ache. When his elbow was properly wrapped in a clean, crisp bandage, Griff stood.

“You should eat something. Can you walk?”

“Yeah.” To prove it, Jackson leaned forward, then slowly straightened to stand upright. He was sore but at least his stomach stayed where it belonged.

Following Griff, his knees were unsteady, and he had to rebalance himself often with furniture or a doorframe along the way. And again, Rex wasn’t helping. While Jackson attempted to travel sober, the dog stayed at his feet, getting in the way of what might have otherwise been a controlled step.

“He’s worried about you.” Griff announced. “He has a sense about him and knows when people or animals are sufferin’. He knew when one of my pigs had a thorn in his foot and tells me when my mommas are going into labor. That happens a lot around here.” He winked over his shoulder and plucked two bowls from the cabinet beside the sink.

In the center of a bay window beside the kitchen, Jackson took a seat at the large table and admired the natural wood grain. It was the color of a wheat field, and with all the marks and dents, it had been put to good use for many decades.

“That there was my great-grandfather’s.” Griff nodded at the table as he stirred the soup in a massive silver pot on the stove. “He milled the wood, carved the legs, and built it all with his own two hands. No mechanical tools back in the day. Only a hammer, chisel, saw, and elbow grease.”

“It’s amazing. I’ve always wanted to make things like this. Turning a rough tree log into something useful and beautiful—

the work must be so rewarding.” Absently, Jackson ran his hand over the soft wood.

“Maybe you will one day. You just gotta start.”

Griff joined him at the table and placed a steaming bowl in front of him. The aroma reminded him of Eleanor’s, warming his soul and making his stomach growl.

With a chuckle, Griff grabbed his spoon and waved it at Jackson. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Eat up. A hearty meal should help that upset and obviously empty stomach of yours.” Griff watched Jackson scoop a spoonful of soup into his mouth and close his eyes. “I have the same reaction every time I eat it. All the ingredients were grown or raised right here on this farm.”

Jackson tasted potatoes, carrots, beef, onions, and a variety of spices. “It’s delicious,” he sighed and took another bite. “Do you live here alone?”

“My sister’s son will help out every now and again when he isn’t away at a fancy school in New York, but other than that, it’s just me and Rex.”

“How do you manage it all? The animals, the fields, the equipment. Seems like too much for just one person.”

“Been doing it ever since my Margaret left this world. This is her recipe, by the way.” Looking down at the bowl, he grinned longingly.

“How long were you together?”

“Fifty years,” he beamed. “We were high school sweethearts. Her parents didn’t like me none, but she didn’t care. And neither did I if you know what I mean.” He winked and took a quick spoonful of soup. “She had the prettiest red hair you ever saw. Shiny and thick. It flowed in the wind like water over smooth rocks, but she never fussed over it. Her eyes, were the color of green moss, and her skin, white and pure as fresh milk.”

“She must have been very beautiful.”

“Ahh, prettiest girl I ever laid eyes on. Bought the tractor out there when we moved in because the paint reminded me of her.

Bright red with light green stripes down the side and white wheels.”

“The old rusty tractor that tried to eat you?”

“That’s the one.”

“Since her parents wouldn’t let her marry me, we eloped right after graduation.”

When Griff’s smile faded, Jackson set down his spoon. “What happened?”

“1969 happened,” he answered with discontent. “My birthday was the second number called in the lottery. I was nineteen and Maggie was expecting our first child. A girl.” He forced a smile, stirred the soup in his bowl, but didn’t eat. “I left for Vietnam six months later with the Army and didn’t get to see my daughter until she was almost two years old.”

“What’s her name?”

“Dorothy. Dorothy Jane after my momma.”

“Does she live nearby?”

“No, she lives in Alabama so she can be with her grandbabies. Seven of them, all under age 10. Can you believe that?”

“It’s hard to imagine.”

“They don’t get up here very often, and I can’t leave the farm, so it’s been a while since I’ve seen them. My sons live in South Carolina. One’s a nurse and the other a lawyer. So proud I am, but neither of them have children. Was such a sadness for my Maggie. She wanted hordes of grandbabies.” Picking up his spoon, he took a big bite. “What about you? Have any children?”

Surprised, Jackson puffed out a breath. “No. Don’t even have a girlfriend.” Feeling better, he sat back in his chair and met Griff’s amused gaze.

“Ha. Well, I’m sure that won’t last. So, what were you doing in these parts earlier? People don’t travel ‘round here much, and I didn’t see a car. Checked out by the road after I got you into the house.”

“No car. I was running and stopped at the tree by your driveway to stretch and admire your property.”

“Runnin’? The farm’s miles from anywhere.”

Jackson laughed. “I was visiting a friend in Stony Creek, and I’m heading to Murfreesboro.”

“Are you sick in the head? Who runs that far?”

“I do. I actually began in Richmond, Virginia, and I’m planning to stop in Orlando.”

“No kiddin’? Well, I’ll be damned. But why in the hell are you puttin’ yourself through all that?”

“I enjoy it, and I’ve got a lot going on in this sick head of mine.” Jackson pointed at his sore head with his spoon and grinned.

“Like what?” Griff leaned on the table and eyed Jackson. “You’re not gonna go all crazy on me, are you? I get enough of that from my animals on a full moon.” He let out another Santa laugh and gathered their empty bowls before dropping them in the sink.

“No, nothing like that. Just taking some time to figure things out.” Jackson looked around. “Do you know where my bag is? I need to make a phone call.”

“Sure do. Left it in the bedroom on the dresser. Rex,” he called and soon the dog was out from under the table and sitting expectantly at Griff’s feet. “Go get Jackson’s bag.” He pointed across the room and Rex took off.

“No way,” Jackson said when Rex returned seconds later dragging his backpack. He dropped it at Jackson’s feet and caught the chunk of meat Griff tossed him in his mouth.

“He’s a smart one.”

Jackson patted Rex on the head when he trotted over to him and removed the phone before standing. He took it slow to test his head and make sure he wasn’t going to crash again. Thankfully, the soup wasn’t threatening to make a reappearance and his legs seemed to be willing to walk without support.

Satisfied, he dialed Ben's number and stepped outside with his four-legged escort.

Looking out over the fields from a new vantage point and perspective, he instantly fell in love with the place. The sun had emerged from between the clouds and was shining on the sea of green and yellow fields beyond. The relaxing view filled Jackson with peace until it was interrupted by Ben's obnoxious voicemail message booming through the phone's speaker.

Since his patience hadn't returned as his appetite had, Jackson hung up without leaving a message and returned to the kitchen where Griff was washing dishes.

"You know you can stay here tonight if you need to. Rest a little and keep an old man company."

Jackson was enjoying himself so much, he considered it. "I appreciate the offer."

"Then, if you're feeling better later, maybe you can give me a hand. Got a few things to do and could use a little muscle. You seem to have plenty for the job." He set the wet bowls on a towel beside the sink and drained the suds.

"What do you need done?"

"Just some repairs and some heavy lifting."

"I can do that."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I feel good enough. I've never let a little headache stop me."

"My kind of guy." After tossing the towel onto the counter, Griff called for Rex, and showed Jackson to the barn door and feeding troughs needing repair.

Jackson carried the materials and tools and helped hold the heavy door and long metal pan while Griff worked. When the repairs were completed, Jackson loaded two dozen wooden planks and a roll of wire onto a trailer. He rode in the back of the old truck down a dirt road until Griff stopped next to a large hole in the fence surrounding the cow field.

“This here was done by my bull. He’s a frustrating character, especially when he sees his favorite female. Nothing’s going to stop him from reaching her...not even this fence.” Griff’s big belly laugh echoed across the field and several cows stopped munching on grass long enough to glance in his direction. “Don’t worry, he’s in his own field back thata way.” He tossed a thumb over his shoulder and waited for Jackson to climb down from the truck bed.

“How many of these do you need?”

“Grab three and the wire and we’ll see if that holds it.”

Jackson did as he was told and when the hole was repaired, they moved to the next area. There were six different sections needing repair, and it took two hours to fix them all, but Jackson didn’t mind. He was enjoying the work, weather, and company. By the time they returned to the barn, it was half past four.

“Can I ask you something?” Jackson asked Griff as they loaded hay onto the trailer.

“Sure. Ask away.”

“If you could have anything to make your life better here, what would it be?”

“Shoot, besides ten of you?” He laughed but Jackson could tell he meant it. Help for the chores that never seemed to end was priceless. “Well, I guess if money wasn’t an issue, I’d buy a new tractor that could do it all—till, haul, dig, the works. Why do you ask?”

Jackson tossed the last bale onto the bed and climbed up. “Just curious. I can see that you need help.”

Griff nodded, but before he could pull himself into the cab, a sporty silver hatchback came barreling down the driveway without regard for the dirt or potholes.

“What the hell, man?” Ben yelled out the car window when he noticed Jackson walking toward him. He threw open the door.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been freakin’ out trying to reach you for hours.”

“How did you know where I was?” Jackson continued charging forward, causing Ben to stop and rethink his next move.

“Harrison made me do it,” Ben blurted out and threw up his hands.

“Do what?”

“I put a tracker app on your phone.” When the vein in Jackson’s neck bulged, he quickly explained. “He was worried that you’d get hurt and not be able to call for help. It also comes in handy when you don’t tell your buddy where you are or answer your damn phone.”

Jackson patted at his pockets. “I don’t have my phone with me.”

“No shit.”

“Who’s this fella?” Griff asked as he approached. He’d noticed the tense interaction between them and came to investigate or defuse, if necessary. Angry men, he remembered from his service, were like territorial goats. More head buttin’ than problem solving.

Seeing a way out, Ben dodged Jackson and his boiling temper to greet the farmer. “I’m Ben, Jackson’s traveling buddy. He didn’t answer his phone, so I came looking for him.”

“Well, isn’t that nice? Great to meet ya, Ben. I’m Griffin. Jackson here saved me when my tractor turned evil and now, he’s helpin’ with some chores. We could sure use some extra hands if you’re able to join us.”

“Yes, that’s a fantastic idea,” Jackson slapped Ben on the back before joining Griff. “He’d love to help.”

“Great. Let’s get to it then. The cows don’t care for their supper being late.”

Griff and Jackson turned to head back to the truck, leaving Ben frozen in awe at his bad luck.

“He’d love to help,” Ben mocked with a pronounced frown. After letting out his frustration in a long sigh, he yanked off his shirt and tossed it inside the car.

“Ya comin’ or not?” Griff called.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” Ben yelled back and trotted toward the waiting truck. Jackson was going to pay for this.

By the time they finished delivering hay to the cows and horses, Jackson and Ben were covered from head to toe in sweat and dust. It was exhausting work, something Ben was not accustomed to.

While they rode in the back from field to field, unloading and tossing hay, Ben silently scowled.

“What’s the matter, buddy?” Jackson asked.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d wipe that smug grin off your face.”

“Can’t. Not while you’re brooding.”

“Fuck you. It’s a hundred degrees out here, and I’m covered in hay and horse shit. My skin feels like it’s on fire.” He scratched at his abs and then his back.

“You should have kept your shirt on.”

“Easy to say now.” He swatted at a mosquito on his leg and wished he could punch something. Jackson’s face would do, he decided.

Griff parked next to the old tractor and joined Jackson, Ben, and Rex at the back. “Ready for dinner and a cold beer? Our reward for a hard day’s work.”

“Hell, yeah!” Ben perked up, but his enthusiasm was met with the back of Jackson’s hand slapping across his raw stomach.

“That’s kind of you, but we really need to get going. There’s still a couple of hours of daylight left that I could use.”

“Do we at least have time for a shower?” Ben asked through his sulking.

“Fine by me, if you want.” Griff looked to Jackson, who nodded. “There’s an outdoor shower around back and help yourself to anything in the kitchen.”

Jackson looked down at Rex who had leaned against his legs and noticed his dirty clothes and shoes. “If you don’t mind, I think I might wash off too and change clothes.”

“No problem. Why don’t you use the bathroom inside and fill up a jug of water to take with you?”

Jackson jogged to the car to grab his and Ben’s suitcases. The idiot, Jackson sighed, forgot to take clean clothes with him to the shower. What was he going to do? Walk naked back to the car afterwards?

Yes, Jackson decided. That’s exactly what he would have done and rolled his eyes.

He dropped Ben’s suitcase off to him, then headed into the house with Griff. After he’d showered and changed, Jackson joined Griff on the front porch.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me,” Jackson told him. “I’m glad that tractor tried to eat you. Otherwise, I never would have met you.”

“Right back at ya. And thank you for helping with the chores. Got months of work done in an afternoon.”

When Ben emerged, Griff held out his hand. “Now, git before I find more chores for you to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jackson rode with Ben in the car to the edge of the driveway so he could give Ben some strict and detailed instructions.

“You want me to buy what?” Ben asked, beginning to question Jackson’s sanity.

“A tractor. The best one they have, and it must be red with white wheels.”

“Okay,” Ben said cautiously. “Are you feeling okay? I think that bump on your head is affecting your decision-making.”

Ignoring the comment, Jackson stayed on task. “If they don’t have one, go somewhere else until you find it. And I want it delivered here, whatever it costs. Got it?”

“I got it. Fuck. It’s not that hard.”

Eyeing Ben with suspicion, Jackson climbed out of the car to start his warm-up routine. He’d love to see the look on Griff’s face when the trailer pulled up carrying the shiny new tractor with no pesky quirks or stutters and a hood that would stay put.

Yes, Griff deserved that new tractor, and Ben better not screw it up.

Chapter Seventeen



It took three days to reach Murfreesboro, and that early Sunday afternoon Jackson stood in front of Will's parents' house, frozen to the concrete. When he originally decided to stop by, he wanted to surprise them. But when he began to tremble, too nervous to climb the porch steps, he was no longer confident in that decision.

What if they didn't want to see him? What if his presence was too painful? The lasting trauma Will endured while saving him and their fellow Marines was what ultimately caused him to take his own life. Not to mention, Jackson was the one that talked Will into joining the service.

And then there was Avery.

His chest tightened without warning. Resting his hands on his thighs, he gulped for air and searched for his courage. But all he found was suffocating uncertainty and more fear. Trying to focus on why he'd come, he waited until his lungs started working again. If they threw him out, it would hurt like hell, but he'd understand and one day be able to accept it.

Breathing in a deep breath, he crept up the driveway to the red brick ranch. It was smaller than their home in Richmond, but Jackson could see why they picked it. The quiet suburban street had cascading mature trees and manicured front yards. Jonathan loved yard work, Jackson remembered. It was how he liked to unwind, and his yard was always picture perfect. This one was no exception and fit in with the rest of the street.

Once Jackson reached the edge of the porch, the plants and trees seemed to spin in slow motion around him. Looking up, he begged Will to give him the courage to take the next step literally and figuratively. Instead, Will sent him a young woman with long, wavy red hair and a drooling toddler on her hip.

“Why are you lurking outside our house?” she asked in a tone that said she’d had better days and Jackson wasn’t helping matters.

“This is unbelievable. I think I have the wrong house again.”

“Good. Now, go away,” she demanded and slammed the door.

Confused, Jackson compared the address against the text Harrison sent. Since he was at the right house, he climbed the stairs. The toddler was still wailing inside, and although he hated to bother the young mother again, he needed more information.

He knocked on the door and waited while the child’s screams grew louder on the other side. Then, he heard angry footsteps before the door flew open again, blowing her long hair off her shoulders.

“This is not a good time to try to sell me anything,” she hissed and scooped up the chubby toddler, who had taken hold of her leg.

She went to close the door, but Jackson stopped it with his hand and regretted the fear that flashed over her face as a result.

“Ma’am, please, I’m sorry to bother you,” he said, releasing his hand from the door. “I’m trying to find Jonathan and Caroline Mason. I was told they lived here.”

With the mention of the Mason's, her face relaxed but her eyes remained cautious.

"This is their house. Who are you?"

"Jackson Vane. I was a friend of their son's."

"Jackson? Oh my God. I didn't recognize you. You look...different."

The last and only time she saw him in person was when he spoke at Will's funeral. He was thin, in a wheelchair, and had shorter hair. That man looked nothing like the man standing in front of her now.

She stepped forward and gave him a hug, catching him off guard. When she pulled back, there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

Before she could answer, the child reached out for Jackson and leaned forward. Instinct kicking in, he caught the child before he tumbled out of his mother's arms. Now secure, the toddler laid his head against Jackson's chest and stuck his thumb in his mouth.

Sadness consumed her and she collapsed onto the stoop, crying loudly into her hands. What was he supposed to do? He was holding the woman's child and she was distraught. Feeling helpless, all he could think to do was give her time. To wait her out, he crossed his legs and lowered to sit on the porch across from her, resting the child on his leg.

While he waited, Jackson studied the tiny human in his arms. Strangely, holding the child wasn't as foreign or terrifying as he expected it would be, and feeling his little heart beating against his chest was oddly touching. He rocked and rubbed the child's back while he drifted to sleep.

Then, she raised her head but said nothing—only stared at them both, lost in her own thoughts.

"What's his name?" Jackson asked to break the silence and get her talking again.

“William, after his father,” she answered without breaking eye contact with Jackson.

Stunned, Jackson looked down at the sleeping baby in his arms and ran a hand over his soft red hair. “He’s beautiful. You must be Sydney, then.”

She sighed. “I am.”

“Did Will know?”

She shook her head and took the child’s hand in hers. “I was going to tell him the night we found him. Avery, her parents, and I were invited over for dinner, so I thought it would be the perfect time. I was too late.”

Sobs burst out of her throat, and Jackson had to fight against his own. Her story was torture. Will had succumbed to the terrors of his disease before he could learn of a new, precious reason to live. William would never know his father, and the child’s heartbroken mother was still mourning.

“I’m sorry,” she said and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “It still hurts. I miss him so much.”

“I know. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about him and wish he was here.”

She looked down at William. “Seeing him so content in your arms would have made Will so happy. I hope you know how much he loved you.”

Jackson nodded, choked by the pain and remorse.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said, slapping her thighs before standing. “You must be so uncomfortable. Do you want to come in?”

“That would be great.” He smiled and stood, careful not to wake William. “I didn’t think he’d ever find you, but you were the one. I saw it in his eyes.”

She returned his smile, but her chin quivered. “I loved that man and every last crazy, unruly bone in his body.” She held out a hand. “I’m Sydney Norman. Nice to finally meet you, Jackson. Although, I feel like I already know you. Will talked about you

and your adventures together all the time,” she added, opening the door.

Once in the living room, she transferred the sleeping baby to a playpen where he rolled onto his stomach and fell back asleep. She grabbed tissues and two water bottles from the kitchen, then joined Jackson on the couch, folding her legs under her.

“Will’s parents should be home from work soon. They’re going to be so excited to see you.”

“I hope so.”

She tilted her head, studied him. “Why would you say that? Of course, they will be.”

He ran a nervous hand over his hair. “Well, they didn’t tell me they were leaving, and I haven’t heard from them since the funeral. I couldn’t help but think that, maybe, a part of them blamed me for his death.”

“Never,” she touched his arm. “They adore you. If anyone is to blame for their sudden move, it’s me.”

“Why? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“After we buried Will, I was forced to ask my parents if I could move back in. Because of the relentless morning sickness and grief, I had to quit school and my job. I lost my apartment and had no way of supporting myself. But they were ashamed and practically disowned me.” Her gaze dropped to her hands in her lap. “You could say they’re a little old-fashioned.”

She was smiling, but it was easy to see that their reaction hurt her deeply.

“I didn’t think that was still a thing.”

“Well, leave it to my parents to be different. It should be a long story, but it isn’t. They didn’t want to help. So, I went to Will’s parents, and they didn’t hesitate.” Her face brightened at the memory. “They took me in, gave me a roof over my head, and have supported me and William ever since.”

“That sounds like them, but why did they have to move?”

“You know they don’t make a lot of money, and Will’s funeral wiped out what little savings they had. Now, they have two more mouths to feed. I could work now, but I wouldn’t make enough to pay for childcare. It isn’t worth it to be away from him, and I can’t ask them to watch him. When Jon received an offer for a promotion at the plant down here, he had to take it. Plus,” she swallowed hard, “it was hard to heal in that house.”

“I get that.”

“I don’t know what I would have done if they had turned me away.”

“I guarantee it never crossed their mind.”

When William began to fuss, she picked him up. “He’s likes to eat after a nap, like his daddy, and I should get dinner started. Will you join me in the kitchen?”

After filling William’s tray with crackers, chicken, and diced grapes, Sydney prepared a casserole with rice, leftover rotisserie chicken, and vegetables.

“I hope you’re okay with this. It’s the only thing I know how to make...successfully.”

“I’m sure it will be great.”

Their conversation continued, light and easy, until a car pulled into the driveway.

Her eyes widened with her smile. “They’re here. Let’s surprise them.” She rushed Jackson into the nearby room and returned to the kitchen in time to greet Jon and Caroline as they entered.

“Welcome home. How was work?”

“Tiring.” Jon kissed Sydney on the cheek and William on the top of his head. “You’re in a good mood this evening.”

Caroline did the same, then opened the oven. “Are you cooking?” She looked over her shoulder and narrowed her eyes at Sydney’s suspicious smile.

“Yep. I thought we could have a family dinner together to celebrate.” To hide her smile, she opened the refrigerator and peeked inside.

“Celebrate what?” Jonathan got out before Jackson emerged from the dining room.

He stood in the doorway waiting for their reaction, but they only stared at him. “I’m sorry to stop by unannounced,” he said to break the agonizing silence.

The longer they stared, the more he doubted himself. This was wrong. He shouldn’t be there. He was only hurting them. Then, Caroline’s hands went to her mouth, and as she’d done at Will’s funeral, she threw herself into his arms and sobbed on his shoulder.

He wasn’t happy about making her cry, but she gave him the acceptance he was hoping for. Slumping into their embrace when Jonathan’s arm draped across his back, he let all the emotion he’d been harboring pour out with his tears.

“I can’t believe how healthy you look,” Caroline said when she released him, her hands cupping his face.

“I’m getting better every day and being here is part of my therapy. I needed to see you.”

“We’re so glad you did. Come. Have a seat. I want to hear all about what you’ve been doing.” Caroline led him and Jon to the kitchen table and held both their hands. “Last time we saw you, you were in a wheelchair, and now look at you. You’re walking.”

“Actually, I’m running again. Seemed impossible two years ago, but it’s helped me start to heal.”

“I’m so happy for you, but we never had a doubt. You’ve always been a special breed when it came to anything athletic. And Avery filled us in occasionally on your progress.”

“She did?”

“Don’t worry, dear. Her feelings for you weren’t a secret around here. I’m sorry it didn’t work out the way she expected, but I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Why is that?”

“The way she felt wasn’t healthy or natural, Jackson. Your relationship was doomed from the start.” Caroline placed her other hand on Jackson’s and leaned forward. “I know you’re beating yourself up over it. Stop. She’s better off.”

“I had no idea how she felt until we started seeing each other, and it didn’t end well.” *Either time*, Jackson thought. The official break up and when she threw herself at him after the funeral.

“That puts you in the same category with every other male. You’re usually oblivious to our signals.” She cast Jon a sly grin.

“She had to ask me out,” Jon explained and pointed a thumb at himself. “Oblivious is my middle name.”

Relieved, Jackson smiled. “Thank you. I was worried you’d be upset with me.”

“Lord, no. I adore Avery, she’s family, but that girl had it coming to her. It’s about time she moves on and gets herself a life.”

“She’s dating someone now,” Sydney chimed in.

“Good,” Caroline began. “Now, enough about Avery. What else is happening in your world. I want to know everything.”

Grateful for the shift in conversation, Jackson sighed. “I assume you know about Grayson, too, then.”

“Yes.” Jonathan answered. “We would have liked to have been there to support you during the funeral, but we couldn’t get off work so soon after starting our new jobs.”

“Getting to spend time with you would have been great, but I didn’t expect you to come. It’s not like you and Dad were friends.”

“Dad? I’ve never heard you call him that before. Did you two have a chance to mend your relationship before he passed?”

“A little. He apologized, and I’ve forgiven him. There’s no sense in dwelling on the past.”

William screamed and slammed his little hands on the highchair tray causing the group to turn in his direction. Sydney jumped up and wiggled him out of the chair.

“Sorry about that, but I guess now’s a good time to announce that dinner’s ready.”

“Thank you, dear. Let’s grab a plate and continue our conversation in the dining room,” Caroline suggested. Along the way, she grabbed a decanter of red wine and four glasses from the cabinet.

Once seated at the table and the wine poured, Jonathan held up his glass for a toast. “To our second son and his remarkable recovery. May love, strength and happiness continue to fill your cup.”

“Hear, hear. We love you, sweetheart.” Caroline added.

“I’m so grateful to be here. I’ve missed you both so much.”

Jackson took a sip of wine and dug into his meal. It wasn’t what he usually ate, but he didn’t care. After visiting with Eleanor and now Will’s family, he was too happy to think about the ingredients. Plus, it tasted fantastic.

“So, how long are you staying in town,” Sydney asked when there was a lull in the conversation.

“Just tonight and tomorrow morning. I’m trying to keep a strict schedule, so I don’t get off balance.”

“Schedule for what? Do you have to get back to Richmond for work or something?” Sydney asked, dragging William into her lap. He’d crawled over to her chair, pulled himself up, and whined.

“No. I needed to get out of Richmond. I had been cooped up there during my recovery, and I needed to do something for myself and for Will. I owe him my life.” Pausing, Jackson fought with the grief and frustration taking over his body. “I have no plan for my future, so I’ve started a long journey to help me find myself again. I’m a week in.”

“What type of journey?”

Jackson took a deep breath, knowing they were going to struggle to understand. "I'm running to Orlando."

"What in the world?" Jonathan set down his glass. "Why would you do that?"

Jackson laughed. "It's the only thing I know how to do, and I have nothing to show for the twenty-eight years of my life. No skills, no prospects, and no idea what to do with the next twenty-eight. I thought that by making this run, I might find my future path along the way."

"Well, I hope you do, son." Jonathan said with a smile. "You're crazy, but you deserve it."

"Thank you. But I'm not doing this only for myself. I'm doing it to honor Will and all the veterans who struggled when they came home or are no longer with us. I'm also doing this for them because they can't."

"Oh, Jackson, that's beautiful. Will would be so proud of you."

"So, why Orlando?" Jonathan asked and wiped at the corner of his eye with a napkin.

"Well, I knew I wanted to stay on the east coast for the trip, but I needed the distance to be substantial for it to be worthwhile. Orlando came to mind because Will, Billy, Josh, and I went to the Disney parks a couple times. I have great memories with them there."

"I remember when you went for spring break your senior year. I was so worried," Caroline confessed and took an unsteady sip of wine.

"You always worried. I thought you'd have been used to all the crazy things we got into by then."

Caroline laughed. "That's why I worried. Every time I turned around, you four were giving me another reason to be."

"It was usually Will or Billy's fault."

"I believe that, but you're not completely innocent, mister."

Jackson shrugged. Better to leave that one be.

“Do you have any other stops planned along the way?” Sydney asked.

“I only planned three. I visited Eleanor in Stony Creek and convinced her and her family to move back to Richmond. This visit is the second, and the third is Myrtle Beach. After that, I plan to let the road guide me the rest of the way.”

“Well, I hope you find everything you’re searching for on this trip, sweetheart,” Caroline added before standing to kiss Jackson on the top of his head. She gathered the empty plates and headed to the kitchen, trailed by William crawling behind her.

It was after midnight when the reminiscing stopped and the yawns took over, sending everyone to bed. Jackson was exhausted, but as usual, memories roared, and sleep eluded him.

Lying awake on the living room couch, William’s whimpers soon echoed down the hall. When no one checked on him, Jackson went to his room and found him standing in the crib with fresh tears on his cheeks. He reached out and Jackson melted.

He lifted the chubby toddler out of the crib and paced around the room until he fell back to sleep. But when Jackson tried to put him back in the crib, he awoke and held on tight to Jackson’s shirt with both fists. Not wanting to upset him, he returned the toddler to his chest.

He continued pacing until William went lax again, then lowered him to the mattress, only to have him wake up again. The pattern seemed to have no end in sight, so Jackson strolled to the living room to break up the monotony. He paced circles around the couch until his muscles started screaming. Careful not to wake the boy, Jackson lowered himself to the couch and shook out his arms. How could such a small human be so heavy?

At some point in the night, he must have fallen asleep as the early sun was now shining on his face through the window. He opened his eyes to find William still resting soundly, his roly-

poly arms and legs draped across Jackson's body. Unsure of what to do, he checked the time on his watch.

"Good morning," Sydney greeted over her coffee cup when Jackson's saw her. "I had a slight heart attack when I went into William's room this morning."

"Yeah. Sorry about that." Jackson explained how he and William ended up on the couch, bringing a smile to Sydney's face.

"He's already got you wrapped around his little finger. Gets that from his father."

"I can see Will in him. He may have your hair, but he has Will's eyes and mouth. What?" he asked when the color drained from her face, and she turned away.

"He was with me last night."

"Who was? Will?"

She nodded and faced him again, her eyes filled with fresh tears. "He was in my room and even laid next to me."

"I'm sure he's always with you and William."

Sydney shook her head. "No. That's what hurts. I thought I would have these sensations all the time. I thought I would see him and feel him beside me, but he's been absent. Painfully absent." She looked down at William then lifted her eyes back to Jackson. "Until you showed up."

"Sydney," Jackson began but didn't have the words.

"I think he's with *you*, Jackson. Not me. William felt it as soon as he saw you, and I can feel him now. Don't you?"

Disappointed, Jackson shook his head.

"It's amazing, and probably why I slept so soundly and didn't hear William. He held me through the night and for a short time, I was whole again."

"I envy you." He'd forgotten what it felt like to not have so many holes in his heart. "He hasn't made his presence known to me."

Although, Jackson was beginning to wonder if Will was responsible for this journey he was on. The day the idea came to him, he thought he was running a random route, and that he was in control of his own destiny. But maybe it had been Will, directing his path and sending him clues. Yes, he wanted to help Jackson heal, but he was also sending him to Sydney. *The tricky bastard*, Jackson thought and smiled.

“Jackson,” Sydney said absently, too lost in her own thoughts to notice Jackson’s amusement.

Feeling better, he folded an arm and tucked a hand behind his head. “Sydney.”

“I need to ask you something.”

“Sure. Ask me anything.”

Rubbing her hands together, she paced, glancing often at her world sleeping contently on Jackson’s chest. “If Will was here, physically.” She flashed an unsteady grin. “I know he would have asked you this himself.”

“What is it, Sydney?”

She returned to her seat, breathed deep. “William doesn’t trust easily. It’s my fault, I know. I’m too protective, but he’s my everything and all I have left of Will.”

“Understandable. But being protective of your child isn’t a bad thing.”

Ignoring the comment, she shot up and started pacing again. “Seeing you with William and how he responds to you, it makes me so happy. I know he senses what a good man you are and how much you loved his father.”

He sat up so he could see her better and adjusted William to his lap. “Sydney, whatever it is, just ask. I can see it’s bothering you.”

“Fine. Will you be William’s Godfather?” she blurted out before she lost her nerve.

Stunned speechless, he looked down at William sleeping in his arms. His long pale eyelashes fluttered over his soft cheeks,

and he couldn't imagine not being a part of the child's life. He loved the little guy already. "I'd be honored."

She exhaled, dropped onto the couch beside him, and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Thank you. Now, he has a guardian angel and a Godfather. He's one lucky little boy."

"I think I'm the lucky one."

"Good morning," Jonathan said as he entered the room and found the three huddled on the couch. He sat in the nearby chair and studied them.

Releasing Jackson, Sydney scooted over on the couch. "Good morning, Jon."

"What's going on?" he asked, curiosity alive in his voice.

"William woke up in the middle of the night as usual, but I didn't hear him. When I checked on him this morning, I found these two sleeping on the couch." Sydney explained, remembering how adorable they looked together in the early morning sunlight.

"That was nice of you," he said to Jackson.

When Caroline entered the room, she immediately noticed Sydney's red eyes and rushed to her side. There had been many mornings where they cried over their grief together, but she hadn't expected to see her upset that day.

"I'm fine. These are happy tears," Sydney explained. "We're all together as Will would have wanted, and Jackson has agreed to be William's Godfather."

"That's great news. Will is probably doing back flips in heaven," Caroline said with a laugh. She hugged Sydney and then Jackson, but the commotion startled William awake.

Disoriented and groggy, he reached for his mother, who accepted him and held him close.

"We'd love to stay and spend more time with you, sweetheart," Caroline said to Jackson. "But we're going to be late for work if we don't get out of here."

“I understand. It was so great seeing you, and I hope we can get together again soon.” Jackson stood and gave them both a hug.

“I’m counting on it. Good luck on your trip and please stay in touch.” Caroline gave Jackson another hug before kissing Sydney and William on the top of their heads. Jonathan did the same and followed his wife out the door.

“I need to get William changed and something to eat. Can you stick around a little while longer?” She hoped they’d have more time together before he left.

Jackson checked the time. “I have a couple hours. Meet you in the kitchen in a few minutes? I need to make some phone calls.”

After breakfast, Jackson and Sydney sat on the couch while William played with his toys. Occasionally, he’d crawl or wobble over to them to be held or to show off a toy. Jackson had never spent time with children, never had the urge, and it amazed him how natural his time was with Ethan and now William.

For a fleeting moment, he envisioned having a family of his own one day, a possibility he’d never considered in the past. But he’d had to rethink a lot of things recently and having children of his own no longer seemed so strange.

“What?” Jackson asked when he noticed Sydney watching him. He was distracted by new and confusing thoughts and William, who had crawled into his lap.

“I’m so happy he has you. You’re another piece of the puzzle to help him know his dad one day. Oh!” she said, slapping her leg before popping out of her seat. “I have something for you.”

She quickly left the room and when she returned, William was back on the floor playing with blocks.

“I made a few of these for Will’s family before William was born. I want you to have the last one.” Sydney held out her hand to reveal a thin leather bracelet with three small silver beads held firmly between two knots.

When Jackson accepted the band, he rotated the square beads and realized they were toy building blocks. Each block was engraved with a letter: W.A.M. for William Andrew Mason.

“It’s a memory bracelet. The letters could be for Will or William or both. Jonathan and Caroline wear theirs often but mine broke, thanks to little man over there.”

“I’ll wear it every day and think of all three of you.” She took the bracelet from him and tied it around his wrist. “Thanks,” he said and twisted his arm to adjust it into place. “Now, my turn.”

“What?”

“My turn to ask you a question.”

“All right.”

“You mentioned yesterday that you didn’t finish college. What were you studying?”

“Accounting. I know,” she laughed when Jackson scrunched his face. “It’s not sexy, but I love numbers. Always have. It’s so frustrating that I had only a few semesters left and didn’t finish.”

“If you had the opportunity, would you go back?”

“That would be great, but we can’t afford it, and I can’t take out any student loans. I’d never be able to repay them. Why do you ask?”

She placed her hand over the corner of the table so William wouldn’t hit his head as he pulled himself up. He then waddled down the couch and crawled up onto the open seat between them before climbing down again.

“I want to help you get on your feet and if you want to, move back to Richmond.” Jackson didn’t know Sydney well enough to read her expressions, but it was easy to see she was shocked by his offer. “I know this is coming out of the blue, but I want to be a part of William’s life and make sure both of you are taken care of. Everything is being set up. All you need to do is say yes.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She tried several more times before finding her voice. “What’s being set up?”

“I’ve arranged to start a trust fund for William and an account for you to use for tuition and to buy a car and a house in Richmond. I also talked with Harrison, Billy’s dad, and he’s willing to offer you a job. He said, the position is yours after you graduate, and the finance department was one he mentioned that had an option of working from home. You wouldn’t have to worry about child care for William.”

All color drained from her cheeks before she dropped her face into her trembling hands.

“Sydney?”

“Give me a minute? Please?” She picked up William who had crawled up to her and held him against her chest while she paced the room.

“Jackson, what you’re offering me, it’s—I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll consider it and will let me know when you’ve made a decision. If you don’t want to move back to Richmond, you don’t have to.” His offer wasn’t an all or nothing deal.

“No, I want to. Richmond is my home. My friends are there. You’ll be there. It’s just...I don’t want to hurt Caroline and Jonathan. They uprooted their lives for me. But on the other hand, they deserve to have their lives back, and so do I.” Feeling more at ease, she set William down and returned to the couch. She curled one leg underneath her to face Jackson. “You’re every bit as amazing as Will said you were. Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Jackson, you’re offering me a chance to make something of myself. To take care of my son and have a life. I’ll never be able to repay you for that.”

“Just be happy and give William the life he deserves. That’s all I want. It’s what Will would’ve wanted.” She moved closer, and he held her while she cried.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sitting up and reaching for the tissues. “All I’ve done since you arrived is cry my eyes out.”

“It’s okay.” Suddenly uncomfortable, he looked down at William. “Do you really think Will is with me?”

“With every ounce of my being.”

He nodded. “Then I better make him proud.”

“Too late.”

He took her hand and sighed. In a matter of twenty-four hours, she and William had become family, and he’d do anything to protect them.

“I should get going,” he announced when William began to whimper for his mother. She crossed the room to pick him up.

“Are you sure you have to go?”

“Yeah. If I don’t make it to my destination on time, Ben will come looking for me. And I promise you don’t want that.” He laughed and accepted William when he reached for him.

“Quite the character, is he?”

“You have no idea.” Jackson kissed William on the cheek. “I’ll call to confirm everything with my attorney and Harrison tonight.”

“Thank you, Jackson, for what you’re doing for us and for wanting to be in William’s life. He loves you already.” When William laid his head on Jackson’s shoulder, she grabbed her phone. “Mind if I take a picture?”

He nodded, and she snapped a few photos. The mutual love was bright in their eyes and it both warmed and broke her heart. She was grateful William had Jackson as the father figure he needed, but the part she struggled with was the reason. William had Jackson because his own father wasn’t there.

“I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“Me either, but we’ll all be together in Richmond soon.”

He hugged Sydney one last time, then handed over William. Pulling himself away was harder than he expected. They’d known each other for one day, yet they were family. He waved from the end of the driveway and committed to memory the image of them on the porch.

Who knew a little boy and his mother could fill so many gaps in his heart? Everything he dreamed this journey would do for him was coming true. The pain was beginning to dull and with every stop, hope was building.

Hope that he would be able to handle the challenges ahead. Hope that he would heal and find happiness. Hope that the journey would work as intended and he could one day build a life with purpose and meaning.

Hope was all he needed to get through it. After all, he wasn't alone or weak anymore. Eleanor, William, and Sydney were rooting for him. Will was watching over him and guiding the way. Harrison, Sophia, and Ms. Beasley were awaiting his safe return. He was strong, he had family that he loved, and for the first time in two years, he was cautiously optimistic about his future.

Pausing to start his usual stretching routine, he set his watch as a text arrived from Sydney. She'd sent the photos of him holding William with a message: *He misses you already.* With a smile and his family on his mind, he stored the phone and set off again with newfound energy.

Everything was going according to plan and achieving his goal didn't seem quite so far away...until the third scheduled stop crossed his mind. The closer he got to Myrtle Beach, the more he second guessed it and worried over how he'd feel being there without his friends. Setbacks were the last thing he needed.

But it was time to face that fear head on and stop worrying over things he couldn't control. Yes. He could do this.

He was going to be fine.

Keep reading for an excerpt from
Book II in The Journey Series

A JOURNEY TO LOVE

by Alexandra Grace

Ben sat on the curb outside a rowdy bar in Greenville, North Carolina, sulking and trying ineffectively to plug his bloody nose with a stiff paper towel.

“What did you think was going to happen?” Jackson asked, fighting the urge to say what he was feeling.

“I didn’t think.”

“No shit.”

“But she was so hot, right?”

Jackson shrugged and sat beside him.

“You could have stopped him a little sooner, by the way. This is on you.” Ben pointed at his swollen cheek.

“Try again.”

“He was twice my size.”

“You should have thought of that before touching his hot girlfriend.”

Ben continued to glare at him. “She started it.”

“Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds?”

Ben huffed, then winced at the sharp pain that shot through his split lip.

“Come on.” Jackson pulled Ben to his feet.

“Where?”

“Back to the hotel before you attract more attention.”

“What? Why? It’s early.”

“You’re welcome to stay, but you’re on your own for the rest of the night.” Jackson’s stride didn’t hesitate as he headed toward the hotel. “I’ve had enough.”

“Fine.” Ben sighed, jogging after Jackson. “I’m coming.”

The short walk back to their hotel was a quiet one. To Jackson’s delight, Ben’s swelling face was making it difficult for him to talk, and Jackson had lost all interest in chatting well before they left the bar. He was exhausted, but another sleepless night was waiting for him. He could feel it.

It was still dark when Jackson stepped outside the following morning. All the tossing and turning had drained him of what little energy he had left, but he couldn’t spend another day doing nothing. He needed to run to soothe his escalating anxiety, courtesy of Ben Stevens.

Cutting this warmup short, Jackson rolled his eyes and took off down the street. Although he desperately wanted to think of literally anything else, he couldn’t get Ben and the previous night out of his head. Why couldn’t Ben control himself? It would be nice to have one night where all hell didn’t break loose.

He’d thought about sending Ben packing more times than he could count, but despite how annoying it was dealing with his antics, they’d become friends. He’d come to rely on Ben and knew he’d be there if he needed him. Plus, he was harmless. The ridiculous situations he often created were not a result of anything malicious or deceptive. A womanizer, he was not. He would never do anything to hurt or upset the women. On the contrary, he was

quite protective and kind. It was his boyish charm, if that's what they found so appealing, that gnawed at Jackson's nerves.

He could stay at the hotel and avoid having to defuse Ben's hazardous interactions with boyfriends—something he never considered some of these women may have before approaching them. But Ben couldn't be trusted, and sometimes Jackson needed a distraction from the growing ache in his legs.

With each passing day, the ache lingered longer, especially in his knees, and he began to worry about his ability to finish the journey. Of course, worrying about things out of his control was a useless time suck, but it wasn't as dreadful as the fear he now felt. He'd never been afraid of anything, let alone something that hadn't even happened yet. *Add it to the list of things he'd had to get used to since discharge*, he thought with disdain.

His latest fear was the terrifying reality that he may have to return to Richmond early with nothing accomplished or decided. After coming this far, that outcome would be impossible to accept. Failure had never been an option, but it was staring him in the face every time he skipped a run for more time to recover.

Then, the pain, fear, and mounting anxiety compounding together opened the door for the memories, migraines, and sleepless nights to creep in unannounced. It was an all-too-familiar recipe for disaster. And the absurd fight in Greenville hadn't helped his flailing attempts to control it all.

Despite being the only voice of reason and not taking a single swing or blow, the interaction triggered a migraine. Thankfully, he was safe in his hotel room when the freight train slammed against his skull and incapacitated him for hours. It was the only thing that went Jackson's way that night.

By the time his thoughts returned to the present, he was out of the city, traveling down a two-lane road lined with thick woods on both sides. The sun had begun to peer over the trees to the east, burning off the light morning fog. Blurry silhouettes of buildings appeared in the distance, so he stopped to stretch and

work his upper body while there was still some privacy to be found.

After locating a tree for pull-ups several yards into the woods, he drained one of the water bottles in his backpack and checked his watch. He'd gone eight miles, and it was barely past seven. Since he had it, he decided to take some extra time to stretch and hydrate before setting out again. After that, maybe his knees would cooperate and not send him off on another dangerous trip down memory lane.

He looked up at the branch he'd chosen for his workout, then jumped. When his hands were secure, and he was confident the branch would hold his weight, he pulled himself up. Forty reps in, he was already sweating.

"What are you doing?" a little voice asked from below.

Startled, Jackson dropped to the ground in front of a young girl about seven or eight years old with blonde, messy braided pigtails, jean shorts, a white t-shirt two sizes too big, and faded cowboy boots. She was carrying a light blue bucket.

"Hi, there. I was exercising. What are you doing in these woods by yourself?"

"Looking for berries and nuts."

Jackson leaned forward to see inside the empty bucket she carried. "Didn't find any today?"

"Not yet. Why are you exercising in the woods?" She squinted up at him, the sun shining on her freckled face.

"When I run, I take breaks in the shade to work my muscles. This tree looked sturdy enough for pull-ups."

"What's a pull-up?"

"What I was just doing. I hold on to a branch like this." Jackson demonstrated with his hands in the air. "Then, I pull my body up until my chin is above the branch."

"That sounds easy."

He smiled. "It is, until my arms get tired."

“What’s that?” She pointed at the silver necklace hanging around Jackson’s neck.

He cupped the tags in his hand and smiled. “These help me remember my friends. They’re called dog tags.”

“You’re not a dog.”

“No.” Jackson laughed. “You get these when you serve in the military.”

“Oh. My grandpa probably has some. He was in the Army.”

“I would say he does.”

“That’s his favorite tree.”

Jackson looked up at the tall tree he’d used, then back at the girl. “He has a favorite tree?”

When she walked around it, he followed and waited while she turned the bucket upside down and stood on it.

“He put that there when he found Grandma.” She pointed to a heart carved into the bark with two letters inside.

“Found her?”

“When they fell in love, silly.”

“Of course.” Jackson slapped a palm to his forehead, causing her to giggle. “What do the letters stand for?”

“Their names, Olan and Ellie.” She hopped off the bucket. “Are you married?”

“No.”

“Do you want to get married?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I guess you have to find someone you love first.”

“It’s usually a prerequisite.”

“A what?”

“A prerequisite. You should love someone before you marry them. There’s an order to these things.”

Sadness clouded her eyes before she looked away. “Yeah.”

“What is it?” Jackson lowered to see her face.

“My mom and dad aren’t married.”

“People can still be in love and choose not to get married.”

“They yell a lot.”

“Relationships can be hard. They’re a lot of work, and that might be how they communicate. It doesn’t mean they don’t love each other or you.”

“Yeah,” she said again, pushing at the dirt with her boot. “Do you yell at people you love?”

Jackson considered. “No. But I don’t yell at anyone. It’s not me. Everyone is different.”

She raised her dark blue eyes, now wet with tears. “I wish you were my daddy.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Cautiously, he held out his hand and was surprised when she took it. “You don’t mean—”

“Callie! Get away from him,” a woman screamed as she stomped toward them.

“Momma.”

Jackson stood to greet the frenzied mother and felt Callie tighten her grip on his hand.

“What are you doing? You know you’re not supposed to wander inside these woods, and this is why.”

The woman threw her hand in Jackson’s direction, causing her to stumble to the side. Her short black hair was tossed into her face by the sharp movement as she felt for a nearby tree to steady herself.

“I come in here all the time, and he’s nice.”

“Well, I’ve told you not to, not that you ever listen, and didn’t your teachers tell you not to talk to strangers?”

“I don’t know. You don’t take me.”

Jackson snapped his head to Callie. “You don’t go to school?”

“Don’t talk to her. Come here, child!”

“No!” Callie yelled back. “I’m staying.”

“Callie,” Jackson coaxed and lowered to a knee. “I *am* a stranger to you. You can’t come with me. You have a family that loves you.”

She shook her head. “She doesn’t. She won’t let me see Grandpa or go to school. Please don’t leave me.”

“Callie Marie, shut your mouth and get over here!” When Callie refused and hid behind Jackson, the woman lunged toward them. “Just wait until I get my hands on you.”

“You lay one hand on her, and I swear...”

“You swear what, tough guy? Are you going to hit a woman? And what were you doing creeping around these woods, anyway?” She looked down at Callie, peeking around Jackson’s leg, then back at him. “Or have you found what you were looking for?”

The woman was a few feet from him now, her eyes glossy and unfocused on his face. As she stood there, challenging him, she swayed and fought gravity like a heavy wind was blowing against her. She reeked of cheap cigarettes and whiskey, and Jackson wrestled with how to defuse this situation.

“You need to take a step back,” he warned. “You’re scaring your daughter.”

“She ain’t my daughter. She’s my good-for-nothin’ ex’s.” The woman said as she took a few unsteady steps backward. “On second thought, I’m done. If you want her so bad, you can have her. We’ll see how Chris likes finding his perfect little Callie gone when he comes crawling into my bed again.”

“Wait!” Jackson called after her when she trotted off, but by then, Callie was sobbing. “Oh, sweetie. I’m so sorry.”

He picked her up, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him. It was then that he noticed how dangerously thin she was. So, now what? He couldn’t take her home. He’d never be able to live with himself.

“I want my Grandpa,” she murmured, giving Jackson the answer.

“Does he live near here?”

With her face buried in his neck, she nodded.

“Can we walk there?”

He bent to pick up the bucket and his backpack when she nodded again.

“Which way?”

It took a little coaxing, but he was able to pull enough information out of her to start in the right direction. Several times along the way, he tried to get her to walk, but she would only tighten her grasp in response. But when they came to a little brick house outside the little suburb he saw earlier, she jumped down and took off toward it.

“Callie!”

He ran after her, then stopped at the end of the driveway when a man with thick gray hair exited the house and met her in the yard. He bent down for a hug, and it was easy to see the reunion was long overdue.

“What are you doing here, Callie Bug?”

He managed to unlock her arms from his neck to check her over, and the look on his face broke Jackson’s heart. She meant everything to him and seeing her upset brought fury and sadness to the man’s eyes. Jackson could relate.

Then, he noticed Jackson watching them nearby and took Callie in his arms again. “Who are you?”

Before Jackson could answer, Callie whispered into the man’s ear. Shock brushed across his face before he took hold of Callie’s waist and held her at arms-length. His eyes pierced into hers with unspoken questions, which she answered with a nod.

“What’s your name, son?” he asked as he stood, holding Callie’s hand.

“Jackson Vane, sir.”

“Nice to meet you, Jackson. I’m Olan Lewis. Can I interest you in some iced tea or water? It’s a hot one today.”

“Sure. Water would be great.”

Olan led Jackson to the kitchen and prepared two glasses of ice water and a bowl of cereal. “Eat,” he instructed Callie.

“Can I watch TV, Grandpa? Momma—” She scrunched her eyes closed and shook her head. “I mean, Rachel won’t let me watch cartoons when she’s there.”

“Sure, Buggie. But use the coffee table so you don’t spill.”

“Yes, sir.”

After she had gathered up her bowl and left, Olan turned his attention to Jackson. “The witch wanted nothing to do with that sweet child but forced her to call her momma anyway. It burns my insides to think of her suffering in that house.”

Unsure of how to respond, Jackson lifted the glass to his lips and drank.

“She said you saved her.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did. You kept her safe and from getting beat again. I will forever be grateful to you.” Olan studied him. “She had a dream about you.”

“What?”

“She dreamed a tall man with long dark hair would be the one to get her to safety once and for all. That you would be the one to end the last cycle.”

“The last cycle? Cycle of what?”

“Every time she escapes, she goes to a friend or neighbor’s house until Rachel sobers up and comes looking for her. She did that a couple times here around Christmas. But she’s convinced all that is over.”

“Why?”

“Like her Grandma, God rest her soul, Callie believes dreams have meaning and the power to predict the future.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Is it? She knew you were coming. That’s why she wasn’t scared of you, and she doesn’t trust easy.”

Once again, Jackson was speechless.

“Do you have any children?” Olan asked Jackson.

He shook his head. “But I recently gained a Godson.”

“That’s great. You will soon learn a lot about yourself and how infinite your love can be. Children can teach us many things if we take the time to listen and observe. Christian, that’s my boy, he’s always been good at testing my patience, and I had to learn to control my temper. Still working on it,” Olan grinned, then leaned on the table, his smile slowly fading. “He’s in rehab again, trying to get better to provide for Callie. But I predict that when he gets out, he’ll go straight to Rachel and soon be right back in jail. He can’t seem to stay away or see she’s toxic.”

“Does Callie have to go back? Rachel isn’t her parent.”

“Unfortunately, Christian filed to add her as official guardian before he went into rehab the first time. He was high when he did it.” Olan rolled his eyes. “I think Rachel forced or manipulated him into doing it so she’d have that hold over him. He loves his daughter, and if she has Callie, she can control him.”

“But does he know how Rachel treats her?” How could Christian leave her there if he did? Jackson couldn’t fathom it.

“He does, but what is he going to do?”

“Remove her as guardian.”

“No judge will listen to a druggie who knowingly signed the paperwork. Plus, they think the child is safe where she is. Rachel can play the part, and I have no say in the matter. Believe me, I’ve tried.” Olan sighed. “So, we play the game, over and over, tormenting the poor, sweet girl.”

“But how can they keep her out of school?”

“What?”

“Rachel admitted it to me. How has that not reached the authorities?”

“They moved back here late last summer, and I haven’t seen her much since Christmas break. I doubt anyone is aware she even exists. They move around constantly, always skirting the law.” He stood and began pacing the small kitchen. “This changes things. If I can prove she’s unfit...” Olan trailed off, contemplating his options.

“Well, the fact that Callie was wandering the woods alone at her age and Rachel was drunk should—”

“If I call the cops, will you tell them what happened?”

“Of course.”

“Bless you.” Olan rushed to the ancient, green phone on the wall and dialed 9-1-1. He provided his address and a brief overview of what he’d learned before hanging up. “They’re on their way. Callie Bug,” he yelled.

“Yes, Grandpa?”

Surprised, Jackson turned toward her when she placed a hand on his shoulder and absently played with his hair. She responded with a tender grin, and he was happily wrapped around her finger along with his hair. How anyone could ever be mean to that sweet face was beyond his comprehension. He wanted to curl her into his arm and protect her forever. Whatever he had to do to keep her from Rachel, he’d do it.

Olan sat in a chair opposite her and took her free hand. “You’ve told me before that you don’t want to live with Rachel. How do you feel about it now?”

Her eyes instantly filled, and Jackson felt her fist tighten around a lock of his hair.

“No, Grandpa. I can’t.” She shook her head quickly, sending tears zig-zagging over her pink cheeks.

“Okay, sweetheart. Then, I will do everything I can to keep that from happening. And so is Jackson.”

She looked from Olan to Jackson and relaxed.

“But we’ll need you to tell the cops and whoever they bring with them everything that’s happened. And I mean everything. It’s not going to be easy.”

Callie nodded. “I can do it.”

“I know you can, Buggie. You’re so brave.” He kissed her forehead and took a deep breath. “Did you finish your cereal?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want anything else to eat?”

“I’m full.”

“Okay. Go watch your cartoon until they get here.”

“Grandpa?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Can Jackson come, too?”

Melting, Jackson smiled. “I’d love to.”

The trio watched cartoons and chatted until the officers and social workers arrived. Callie sat in Jackson’s lap as they recounted what happened after meeting in the woods. She answered questions about her living conditions and showed them the bruises on her back, sending Jackson’s stomach and blood pressure into a nauseating tailspin. When a social worker and officer left during the conversation, Jackson hoped they were headed straight for Rachel.

“Do you really have to?” Callie asked Jackson when everyone else was gone, and Jackson announced he, too, had to go.

He knelt in front of her and took her hand. “I don’t want to, but you’re safe now. There’s no way I would leave if you weren’t.”

She threw her arms around Jackson, and he picked her up.

“I gave my phone number to your grandpa. So, if you ever get scared or need anything, anything at all, you call me. Okay?”

She agreed but with sad eyes, and it broke his heart. Reluctantly, he put her down before she convinced him to stay. It wouldn't have taken much.

"What happens next?" he asked Olan on his way to the door.

"When I get official custody...I'm staying positive," Olan added with an unsteady grin, "I'm taking her far away from here. If my son ever gets his life straight, he can come find us."

"Smart. She deserves to be a happy, carefree kid, and if there's something I can do to help give her that, just say the word."

"You're a good man, Jackson. You will always be a part of our family."

"Well, she's already wrapped me around her finger, so you're stuck with me." He laughed and headed out the door. "If you're ever in Richmond, I'd love to see you both."

"Richmond, you say. Virginia?"

"That's the one."

Olan leaned against the doorframe. "I have a sister not too far from there. Maybe that's where we'll go."

"That would be great. Keep me informed of what happens here and where you end up."

"Will do. Have a safe trip."

Jackson made it down the driveway and turned toward town before he heard Callie yelling for him. He turned around to find her waving from the front porch, as Sydney and William had, filling him with joy. When he waved back, she blew him a kiss before running back inside.

Thinking of the people he loves and the new family he'd gained since leaving Richmond, he couldn't understand why he'd been struggling lately. The journey had been good to him. Better than expected. Still, by the time he reached the Town of Winterville, his heart hurt from missing them all.

He couldn't focus on his breathing or keeping a consistent stride, so when he came to a bed and breakfast, he surrendered.

Maybe he could make up for lost time tomorrow when he had a better grip on his emotions.

After reserving two rooms, he took a shower and rested on the back porch of the massive historic home before texting Ben and calling Olan.

“I decided to stay in town tonight, so let me know if I can do anything to help with Callie,” Jackson offered.

“Well, now that you mention it, how about you stop by for dinner? It sure would lift her spirits.”

“I’d love to, and seeing her would lift mine as well.”

“Then, I’ll get to cookin’ and see you when you get here.”

“Hey, Olan,” Jackson called, catching him before he disconnected. “Don’t tell Callie I’m coming. I want to surprise her.”



When Ben finally arrived, Jackson met him in the parking lot.

“I need the car,” he informed Ben as he climbed out.

“Where are you going?”

“I have a date.”

“What? When did you—can I come?”

“Nope. I don’t want you anywhere near her. She’s too special.” Jackson lowered himself inside and dropped the gift he purchased at the nearby strip mall on the passenger seat.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. Make sure you stay out of trouble. I’ll be unavailable to bail you out tonight.”

“But what about your wingman? Come on,” Ben yelled as Jackson backed out of the parking space, narrowly avoiding his toes, and sped away.

Spinning around to see more of the tiny town, he threw his hands up. “How am I supposed to find trouble in a place like this?”