



Preston's
honor

A sign of love novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to John whose honor always came from the heart.



Gemini

Castor and Pollux were the twin sons of Zeus and Leda. Though Castor was mortal and Pollux was not, the brothers were very close and did everything together. Unfortunately, during a battle, Castor was killed and Pollux, heartbroken, prayed to Zeus to take his life as well. Zeus, touched by the brotherly love, put their images in the sky as the constellation Gemini. They stand out as two bright lights, together for eternity among the stars.

PROLOGUE

Annalia

I gripped the steering wheel tightly as I drove through Linmoor, a small farming town nestled in California's Central Valley, and the place I still called home, even though I hadn't lived here for almost six months.

Main Street was busy on a warm, springtime Friday night—couples walking hand in hand, laughing, some pushing strollers, and others calling to children who'd run too far ahead. Claymoor Jewelry on the right, Reid's Variety Store on the left. It all looked so similar . . . and so . . . different. Linmoor—the town where I'd been born and raised, the town where a piece of my heart still resided. My chest squeezed, and I drew in a quick breath at the sudden wave of fear and anxiety that overcame me. But I did my best to contain it. I had made it this far. I could go a little farther.

A few minutes later, I parked my car in front of the small diner at the end of the street and turned off the ignition, taking several long breaths meant to calm my nerves before stepping out into the mild evening air. It smelled like dust and asphalt and the grease wafting from the building in front of me.

I walked purposefully to the door and pulled it open, my eyes doing a quick sweep of the restaurant and landing on Preston sitting at a table near the back. My blood seemed to thrum faster through my veins at the sight of his broad shoulders and golden-brown hair, and my hands suddenly felt cold and clammy. But I lifted my chin and walked straight toward him. I could do this. *I had* to do this.

I knew the minute he spotted me, not only by the raising of his head, but by the jolt of electricity that speared through my body. Apparently, neither time, nor distance, nor a whole boatload of baggage managed to do away with that. *Damn. Damn. Damn.* I couldn't control the slight tremor that moved through me, causing a small misstep. I glanced at the floor, pretending something in my path had caused me to falter, though the tile was clean and dry and free of any debris.

The din of voices seemed to quiet as I moved through the space, heads turning, as nervous apprehension descended on the room. Or maybe I was only feeling my own jumpy emotions and assigning them to the customers at large. I'd never been comfortable in crowds and that was doubly true now. I heard my name said softly in a disbelieving tone and did my best to shut the whispers out. A few more steps and I was standing in front of him.

He sat back slowly, reclining one arm over the back of the booth, his eyes moving slowly down my body and back up to meet my eyes. His posture was negligent, his expression neatly blank, but I noticed the intensity simmering behind his blue, blue eyes. I'd never been very good at reading what went on behind Preston's cool gaze, and I was too overwrought to attempt to do it now.

"Hi, Preston."

"Lia."

We stared at each other for what felt like far too long, two people in an emotional standoff. If he was shocked to see me, he didn't show it. "I went to the house. Your mother said I'd find you here."

If it was possible, he seemed to still even further. His gaze lingered on me for several more beats before he let out a small exhale. "I don't imagine she was overly thrilled to see you."

His frosty disdain chilled me, and I wrapped my arms around my middle as if I might warm myself that way. No, his mother had *never* liked me. I shifted on my feet, feeling the first tremor of the grief I'd thought I had a handle on at the reference to the past, of Camille Sawyer's feelings for me, of everything we had gained, and all we had lost. Everything that had happened to bring us to this awful moment. I couldn't feel sad right now. I could handle the twist of yearning that made my tummy clench at the mere sight of Preston—I'd lived with that feeling most of my life. But not grief. Please, not that.

"No. You know she wasn't." *What about you, Preston? Are you going to ask where I've been? Does it matter to you or do you hate me so much you don't care at all?*

My eyes ran over Preston's face, his strong jaw and chiseled cheekbones, the sensuous lips, and those serious blue eyes. There'd been two faces like that once . . . and I'd loved them both, though in different ways. But Preston had always been the one. It had always been him. *Don't let your mind go there, Lia. Don't. Get to the point.*

“I . . . I want to see him.”

His eyes flashed and his nostrils flared slightly but he didn't say anything. He removed his arm from where it had rested on the booth and moved the salt and pepper around idly. “No.”

I took a shaky step closer to the booth, placing my hands on the table and leaning toward him. “I have a right to see my—”

“The hell you do,” he gritted out, meeting my gaze, the emotion I'd seen behind his eyes revealing itself as cold anger. “You gave up any rights the day you drove out of town without so much as a *see you later*.”

I removed my hands from the table and pulled myself straight again, biting my lip and glancing around. At least twenty pairs of eyes were focused solely on us. I looked back at Preston, my stomach clenching with grief and shame. I knew what they thought of me, had always thought of me. And I supposed I'd proven them all right. “Please, Preston. I . . . I wanted to talk to you first. To see what the best time would be, one that wouldn't disrupt his schedule . . .”

“Big of you to consult me at all.”

I took a deep breath. “You're his father.” The way he was looking at me. Oh God, I'd known to expect it. Even knew I deserved it. So why was it causing my heart to crumble with such anguish?

I heard a whispered voice somewhere behind me, picked up a partial statement, “. . . just left her own baby. What kind of mother does that?”

My own bitterness and resentment, even the nerves, drained from my body, leaving me feeling tired and hopeless. I needed that bitterness, needed that resentment. Despite my own shame, I tried to reclaim it but couldn't manage to. I felt my shoulders droop under the weight of the emotional defeat. “Please, Preston. I know we have a lot to talk about. But I just want to see him. Please. He's my son, too,” I added quietly.

His eyes moved down to the salt shaker again, and his jaw tightened. I waited him out, not moving, not saying a word. When he glanced up, it was to look around the diner as I'd done a few moments before. Doing so seemed to drain him slightly, too. His eyes met mine. “You can come out on Sunday morning. Nine o'clock.”

My heart leapt with relief and happiness, and a bit of surprise. I hadn't expected him to say yes. I'd expected to have to beg a lot more than I had. "Thank you." Thinking it best that I leave before he changed his mind, I nodded once and then pivoted, walking quickly back toward the front door.

Preston didn't try to stop me.

A breeze had stirred up and it hit me in the face when I stepped outside. I sucked in big gulps of it as I made my way the short distance to my car. As I was pulling out of the spot, I glanced in the window and saw Preston standing at the front register paying his bill. He glanced back once and our eyes met through the two panes of glass, and even across the distance, I could still feel that familiar jolt. And just like that, I was home again. I only wondered how much pain I'd endure this time.

Preston

I sat in my truck, still parked on the side of the diner, my head leaning back on the seat, my shaking hands gripping the wheel. Ah, fuck. *Fuck*. My heart still beat harshly in my chest with the adrenaline surge that was only now beginning to lessen.

Lia. She was back and had waltzed right into Benny's Diner as if she'd never left. Walked right up to me and demanded to see our son as if she'd stepped away for the weekend, not been gone without a trace for almost six months. Goddamn it. I hadn't been prepared. A humorless chuckle made its way up my throat and ended in a miserable groan. When had I *ever* been prepared for Lia? She was still the girl who knocked me on my ass without even trying. And that knowledge left a bitter taste in my mouth, because she'd left and I'd spent six agonizing months trying to figure out where she was, if she was even alive.

I'd finally, *finally* begun to accept that she didn't want to be found and as quickly as that, she was

back. I swore under my breath. I couldn't handle this now—I was a grown man with a business to run and a little boy to take care of. Our little boy.

I . . . I'm pregnant. I know you're probably not very happy about that.

The words skated through my mind, the memory of the way her voice had shook when she'd said them hitting me hard, low down in my gut. I hadn't known how to respond—*how* to answer her—because the truth was it had both thrilled me and broken my heart.

I smoothed my sweaty palms over my jean-clad thighs and let out a long exhale. Was she here to stay? Should I even consider trusting her again? Could I? How could I trust that she wasn't going to be here one day and gone the next? My throat tightened. I couldn't go through that again. *I couldn't*. I'd let her see Hudson, and then I'd make some demands of my own—namely boundaries—so he wouldn't get attached to her in case she ran off again.

Pain and resentment filled my chest at the memory of discovering she'd left. No note. No explanation. Just . . . gone. I wasn't blameless. I'd hurt her, as well. But I hadn't left. I'd stayed, and if she had, too, we could have . . . “Ah fuck,” I muttered, starting up my truck, refusing to go down that road yet again. Refusing to torture myself.

As I headed home, though, my mind kept returning to her, to how she'd looked, to the way I could smell her, even from where she'd stood across the table from me. I'd picked up that light sweetness that was Lia and despite my shock, despite my anger and disbelief that she was there, I'd begun to harden. Thank God the table hid *that*. My resentment had increased with the proof that I still wanted her so damn badly even after everything. God, I was a fool.

She had looked mostly the same—despite her slightly longer hair and being thinner than when she'd left. But her face was still as breathtakingly beautiful. As if that would change. Lia had the type of beauty that would last until she was ninety. It was as if God had decided to make her lovely and gotten a bit carried away. I'd always felt slightly stunned every time I looked at her, as if I'd never fully get used to her effect on me. Nothing had changed—unfortunately for me.

Her long, dark hair cascaded down her back in a waterfall of silken curls, curls I knew the feel of in my grip as I pushed into her tight body.

Stop it, Preston; change direction.

Almond-shaped eyes, slightly slanted and framed by delicate, arched brows and lush lashes. Eyes in a color I'd never seen on anyone before—pale green from a few steps away, but up close, rings of dark blue, light blue, green, and gold. I knew every fleck, every striation in those eyes. I'd marveled at them in the sunlight and the dimness of a starlit night. And they were even more stunning highlighted by the warmth of her bronzed skin.

Full lips with a little beauty mark right at the corner. I remembered fantasizing about licking it when I'd been nothing but a boy. I'd thought about those lips and that small sexy beauty mark as I'd stroked myself in the darkness of my bedroom. I couldn't help the tiny shiver that moved through me now, though it brought anger on its heels. I wouldn't allow myself to fantasize about Annalia ever again.

With difficulty, I tore my mind away from the details of her face. I'd only let myself dwell on it for a moment, because it had been so long since I'd seen it. Part of me still had trouble believing she was back—as if I'd fallen asleep for a moment and dreamt her. I allowed myself to go over the details of her face because I needed to deal with reality. I needed to deal with her. And I needed to come to terms with the fact that Lia had always been my weak spot, and apparently, even after her betrayal, that hadn't changed.

CHAPTER ONE

Annalia – Eleven Years Old

Oh God, it was orange. Bright, brilliant orange. *No, no, no.* Oh no. I stared at my pumpkin-colored hair in the mirror, the look of stunned horror on my face adding to the effect and making me look twice as ridiculous. *Mama was going to kill me.* Or worse, she would also give me *that look* reminding me what a terrible burden I was. My shoulders drooped and I blinked back tears. I'd only wanted to color my hair blonde like Alicia Bardua's. I pictured the straight, pale cornsilk of her hair and then looked back at the orange Brillo Pad that was now mine, a miserable groan coming up my throat.

A quick glance at the clock set my heart racing. Mama was going to be home soon, and I couldn't let her see my hair, couldn't bear to see the ugly look that she greeted me with when she walked in the door. I should be used to it, I guessed, but somehow I wasn't. It always hurt so much. And I couldn't take it today. I couldn't take watching my mama kneel in front of the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe (La Virgen de Guadalupe—the patron saint of Mexico) and pray that the lady saint ask God to banish the devil from my mama's life. *Me. Not today.*

The box where I stored my clothes sat next to my air mattress, and I rummaged through the cardboard container—which had once held Big Island Pineapple, Premium Quality—and pulled out a bandana. I tied it over my hair and tucked all the loose strands inside to the best of my ability before stepping outside into the bright sunshine.

Once I was out of sight of my small house, I meandered slowly, stopping to pick up a ladybug on a tall blade of grass and watching as she crawled along my knuckle for a minute before she flew away. I wove a flower stem into a ring, and kicked a rock in front of me, following its winding path for a bit.

I ended up at the tree-lined fence of the Sawyer property as I usually did and stood looking over it, a feeling of wistful happiness spreading through me. I soaked in the vision of the sprawling farmhouse, the

acres and acres of farmland—neat, green rows of strawberries, lettuce, melons, asparagus, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, and peppers—the vast mountains in the distance creating a picturesque backdrop. To live in a place like this! What it must be like! Everything was big and beautiful here, from the trees to the house to the land. I gazed upward, squinting against the sun. Even the sky seemed bigger here. And when evening came, if I was still lying beneath the oak tree next to where I stood, the moon and all the stars would seem larger somehow, too.

I pictured the inside of my own one-room shack—the air mattresses with several patches to cover the holes lying against opposite walls, the small table with two chairs, the dingy paint, the stained, threadbare carpet, and the old, mismatched appliances that lined the far wall to form a makeshift kitchen. Our bathroom was nothing more than a toilet, a small, rickety, plastic shower, and a utility sink hidden behind a sheet we'd strung up from the ceiling.

Our house had actually been a storage shed on the farm that had butted up against the Sawyers'. But the family had sold that land in sections to form smaller farms, and the new family that moved into the farmhouse rented the outbuildings on the property to farmworkers.

I rested my chin on my arms that were crossed on the fence and gazed at the stunning vastness before me. I thought about Preston and Cole Sawyer, the twin brothers who lived here, and couldn't help smiling. If anyone should live in a place like Sawyer Farm, it was them.

To me they were bigger than life, too. Cole who was always laughing, always making some big joke, and Preston . . . Preston with his serious eyes and the way he'd tilt his head and look right at me when I was talking, the way his rare smile filled up my whole heart. A strange sort of shiver ran down my spine at the vision of Preston Sawyer's smile, and I stood straight, shifting on my feet before going to sit on the ground under the lacy leaves of the massive oak.

This is where I came to dream. And to escape.

And now, I'd just have to stay here forever. There was no way I could face anyone ever again with hair like this. I wondered how long it'd take to grow out and if I could sustain myself that long by sneaking into the rows of vegetables and eating in the dark of night like an orange-haired Peter Rabbit. I knew the layout of the rows as well as anyone—knew just the path to take if I wanted a big, juicy tomato

or a sweet, crisp carrot.

My mama had worked here years ago, doing picking work with the other migrant workers who farmed the land. She didn't do farm work anymore though. It was the strawberries that had ruined her back—those low-to-the-ground berries that had her bent over all day long under the sweltering sun. *La fruta del diablo*, she called them. The devil's fruit. I couldn't even look at a strawberry without feeling a sympathy twinge in my shoulder muscles and lower back.

That had been my introduction to Sawyer Farm, tagging along behind the shape of my hunched-over mama as she'd pushed a wobbly, one-wheeled cart down the rows, packing strawberries into plastic containers so they fit just right. Eventually, I'd wandered farther away from her and that's how I'd met Preston and Cole. We'd played together and I'd come to love going to work with my mama, come to love the land and the peaceful feeling of just being near it.

It was why I still came back even though my mama now worked in a nasty little motel off the highway. I pushed the thought of that place away, feeling a little shiver of disgust. My mama had been hired to clean the rooms, and I helped her sometimes when her back was really bad, but no matter what you did, you could never get that place truly clean.

I tilted my face up, letting go of the image of the filthiness of the motel and filling my mind instead with the clean, pure blue of the open sky. The sun slanted through the leaves of the tree, forming shapes of light on the bare skin of my arm as I held it in front of me, turning it back and forth slowly to watch them dance.

The day grew hotter, then slightly cooler as clouds drifted lazily by—a sad dog, then a parrot, then the three-toed foot of a giant.

I watched as a chain of ants moved a seed down the line, wondering what it felt like to have that many family members all working together, and questioning whether ants felt love.

A small sound surprised me from my half-dazed state. Peeking around the tree trunk, I expected to see a chipmunk or a bird, and *not* the boys walking across their yard unhurriedly toward me. My heart lurched, my first reaction to grin at the sight of their identical faces.

I turned around, beginning to stand, and suddenly remembered my destroyed hair. Oh *no*. I groaned,

realizing there was no chance to get away now. I'd just have to hope they didn't notice. Standing, I pulled the bandana low over my forehead and came out from behind the tree, tilting my head and smiling as they approached.

Cole was grinning in that way of his that always made me think he had some big secret, and Preston looked serious as usual. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We live here, remember?" Cole's grin was slow and easy as he leaned his arms against the split rail. "We were up on the tractor and saw something red behind the tree. We thought it might be you sitting out here." *Oh*. Well, that was a stroke of bad luck. I didn't think anyone would spot me hidden behind the large tree trunk.

We still played together once in a while if I walked by and they were outside in their yard, but I knew their mom didn't approve of me, and there'd been less opportunity since my mama had stopped working on their farm. It wasn't as if I could just go up to their door and knock. *Tell that little Mexican girl with the dirty feet to run along home now*, I'd heard Mrs. Sawyer say, and it had made me ashamed and sad and so very, very small.

Lately I'd felt too old to play hide 'n' seek and the other games we used to play and I figured they must, too, since they were three years older than I was. So I'd been spending more time just sitting alone at the edge of their property, close enough to enjoy it, but far enough that I thought I'd be alone.

"What's with the bandana?" Cole asked, swinging himself easily over the fence.

I shrugged as Preston joined us. I pulled the thin piece of material wrapped around my head down over the ear on the side Cole was standing on, making sure not to allow him to see the back of my head where my orange hair was visible. "Just trying out a new look," I answered, attempting to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

"Hmm," Cole said, seeming to consider it, "well, it's kinda dumb. You look better without it." He reached up and pulled the bandana off my head. I let out a little yelp, lifting my hands to my head in an effort to grab it back, but was too late. I heard both boys suck in a breath.

My eyes moved slowly from the flimsy piece of material in Cole's hand to his face to see a look of wide-eyed shock. Humiliation climbed up my neck and settled hotly in my cheeks.

He simply gaped for a minute before he pointed at my hair. “That’s . . . what happened to you?” I narrowed my eyes and looked over at Preston who was still gawking at me, his eyes fixed on my hair.

I felt tears burning the backs of my eyes, and before I started crying in front of them, I grabbed the bandana out of Cole’s hand and stomped away through the crunchy, brown grass.

“Annalia,” Preston said. He grabbed my arm and I turned toward him, ready to tell him to leave me alone. “Wait.”

I tried to conjure up some anger, but the concerned look on Preston’s face caused a huge lump to move from my chest to my throat and I choked slightly, a small hiccup giving me away. The tears I’d attempted to hold at bay sprung to my eyes and I turned quickly, walking away again. “Hey, hey, wait,” Preston said again, catching up to me. “How’d that happen?”

I stopped. “I did it, okay?” I threw my arms up in the air and let them fall. “I tried,” I glanced at Cole who was walking toward us, “I tried to go blonde and it didn’t work, all right?”

Cole snorted softly and Preston shot him a nasty look before turning his eyes back to me. “Why would you want to be blonde, Lia?” He looked so completely baffled, and it made me feel stupid and even more alone. They would never understand what it felt like to wish they were someone else. They had everything—a huge, beautiful house, two parents who loved them and didn’t pray every day that they’d never been born. They loved going home as much as I loved leaving mine. The truth was, I spent more time outside my house than in it because I could hardly bear to be there at all.

I sighed and shrugged. I didn’t have the words to explain it to Preston and even if I did, I wouldn’t have used them. “I don’t know.”

He sighed, too, and then stared at me for a few long moments. “You like it?”

“No.”

He nodded once, chewing at his bottom lip, his braces glinting in the sun, and then took my hand in his, pulling me along behind him. “What—?”

“Just come on. We’ve gotta fix that.”

“Hey, where are you guys going?” Cole called.

“We’re gonna fix Lia’s hair,” Preston said back. I stumbled over a rock on the ground and Preston’s

hand tightened, gripping me so I didn't fall.

“Why? We could put some clown makeup on you and go scare some people.”

I shot Cole a glare over my shoulder and then turned back quickly.

“Aw, Annalia, I was just kidding around,” he shouted. “Preston, we're supposed to help Dad.”

“Cover for me,” Preston called. He picked up his pace, causing me to have to jog beside him, his expression determined. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Cole had hopped back over the fence and was jogging in the opposite direction, off to do whatever they were supposed to be doing for their dad.

“What are you gonna do?” I asked Preston.

“Wait here,” he said, letting go of my hand and leaving me near the side of his house by a pretty row of lilac bushes that filled the air with sweetness. He ran toward the back door, going inside and closing the screen quietly behind him. I tied the bandana on, tucking my hair inside once again. A few minutes later he was back out and he nodded his head again for me to follow him.

“Where are we going?”

“Into town. My mom's hairdresser, Deirdre, works right on Main Street.”

“I don't have any money.”

“I do.” He patted his pocket.

“I'm not going to let you pay to fix my hair, Preston Sawyer.” The very idea filled me with shame.

He picked up his bike and nodded his head at the handlebars. “It's not really for you. It's a selfless gift to the residents of Linmoor.” His lip quirked up slightly and his eyes squinted.

Despite myself, I laughed a small laugh.

His eyes moved to my upturned lips and his grin widened. I was so unaccustomed to seeing Preston grin that way that for a moment it stunned me and made me forget what we'd been talking about. “Hop on,” he repeated softly, swinging his leg over the bike.

I looked suspiciously at the bike wondering where he wanted me to sit. He patted the space between the handlebars and though I hesitated, I trusted Preston. I finally climbed up, squeezing my butt into place. I'd never ridden a bike by myself, much less balanced on one as someone else pedaled. Preston teetered a little as we started off, and I let out an alarmed laugh, but then he picked up some speed and began

pedaling quickly.

We turned out of his driveway onto the dirt road that led to the main road, the dry, hot wind blowing in my face. I felt like I was flying. I leaned my head back and laughed up at the wide blue sky. My bandana flew off and I let out a yell as I looked behind Preston's bike, watching it blow down the road and off to the side. I sighed, turning back around and tipping my head up again, this time feeling my orange hair streaming behind me.

Preston left his bike leaning against a tree outside the hair salon on Main Street and I followed him into the shop. A small bell jangled over the door and the smell of chemicals and various hair products wafted in the air. A woman in a pink smock was sweeping hair into a dustpan and looked up when she heard us enter. I stood slightly behind Preston.

“Well, hi there.”

“Ma'am.”

She smiled at Preston as she straightened up. “You can call me Deirdre, honey. And tell me which one you are. I never can tell you handsome Sawyer boys apart.”

“Preston.”

“Well, hi there, Preston. What can I help you with?” she asked with another wide smile.

“This is Annalia.” He pushed me in front of him and her eyes grew wide when she saw my hair.

She walked toward me and picked up a frizzy strand. “Well, child, what have you done to yourself?”

“I tried to go blonde.”

“Huh. Honey, you didn't even get in the ballpark of blonde.”

I looked down, biting my lip in embarrassment.

“What's the real color of your hair?”

“Black.”

“With highlights that glint sort of coppery under the sun,” Preston said and then cleared his throat. His cheeks reddened as if he was embarrassed, too. Of what I wasn't sure.

Deirdre glanced over at him and her eyes seemed to soften, her lips turning up into a warm smile. She pulled my hand. “Well, come on then, let's get you fixed up. Just so happens I have an opening.”

She plopped me in the chair and then went to the back where I heard her humming. Preston sat down in a chair by the front window and picked up a Time magazine.

A minute later Deirdre was back, mixing something in a white dish as she stood behind me, taking me in in the mirror in front of us. “Now why in the world would you want to be blonde, child? With skin like yours and those eyes.” She made a chuffing sound.

“I don’t know. I just thought it would . . . be better.” *Make me better. I thought it would make me look like Alicia. She went to a different school, but I’d seen her in town, surrounded by friends, beautiful and laughing and carefree. I thought it would make me feel pretty, help me to blend in with all those girls at my school who giggled together in the yard at recess, the ones who lived in big houses like the Sawyers. The ones who brought lunch boxes to school filled with cups of Jell-O and bags of ruffled chips and sandwiches cut into little triangles. Maybe if I at least looked more like them, I’d blend in and they wouldn’t notice my old clothes and the free lunch I was given because my mama couldn’t afford to feed me three meals a day.*

I’d gone with my mama to work one Saturday to help clean and someone had left a perfectly good hair-color kit in a beautiful shade of Champagne Blonde right at the top of the trash. I’d pulled it out, and snuck it into my backpack. I’d even loved the name. *Champagne Blonde*. Rich and classy. You couldn’t be anything but beautiful with hair that color, even if you lived in a small shack and only owned one pair of shoes. Or so I’d thought . . .

Deirdre continued to run her fingers through my hair as she gazed at me in the mirror. It made me feel exposed like she saw something about me I couldn’t see in myself. I wondered if she saw the same badness my mama saw and I looked away, focusing my gaze on the assortment of instruments—a curling iron, straight iron, various combs—on the small counter under the mirror.

As Deirdre clipped my hair into sections and started painting on the color in the dish she’d brought out from the back, she said, “You know, honey, God gives us the things he wants us to have. And well, we gotta work within those parameters. You know what parameters are?”

I shook my head very slightly.

“It’s like a limit or a boundary. Like with your black hair, you can add more red highlights or even a

few warm caramel tones, but blonde is not for you, honey. It's outside the parameters God set. See?"

I did see and I didn't like it. No, I didn't like the parameters He'd given me at all. But the thing was, I didn't think God paid a whole lot of attention anyway. Not to my mama who prayed daily and definitely not to me. So maybe when he wasn't looking, I could slip right through those parameters before He even noticed.

When the color was done, Deirdre blew my hair dry and used her curling iron to add even more curls to my already curly hair. I tilted my head, looking at it in the mirror. It seemed darker somehow than my natural hair had been, or maybe flatter. It was pretty close and at least my mama wouldn't notice, especially if I wore it in a ponytail for a while.

I smiled at Deirdre, so happy and relieved that I couldn't help but to throw my arms around her. "Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you so much."

She laughed and hugged me back and it felt so good to be held that I didn't want to let go, but I forced myself to anyway.

Preston, who'd sat quietly reading the same Time magazine the entire time, reached in his pocket and pulled out a crisp hundred-dollar bill and held it toward Deirdre. "Is this enough?" he asked.

Deirdre got that same gooey look on her face again and pushed his hand away. "This one's on me, honey bunches."

Preston hesitated, but finally put the money back in his pocket. "Are you sure, ma'am? Deirdre?"

"Oh yes."

He nodded. "If you could, uh, keep this between us."

A look of understanding came into Deirdre's eyes before she nodded and winked. "Client confidentiality," she said. "Now you go buy this pretty girl an ice cream or something, okay?"

Preston's cheeks turned red and he looked at me. I smiled at him and he blinked, looking surprised. I frowned, reaching my hand up and running it over my hair. Maybe it wasn't quite as natural looking as I thought.

We started to leave the shop and there was a strange awkwardness between us. I was so grateful to him, and even though he hadn't had to part with his money in order to help me, I still felt mildly ashamed

that he'd been willing to. I cleared my throat. "Thank you, Preston. It was really nice of you to help me like this."

Preston nodded. I went up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. He smelled sort of salty or maybe dusty but definitely all boy, and I liked it, though I couldn't say why. I lingered for a moment and when I leaned back, his eyes were filled with so much seriousness that I stared at him for a moment, wondering what he was thinking. "You . . . ready?" I asked, nodding my head to the bike.

The words seemed to snap him out of the trance he'd been in and he nodded, gripping the handlebars so I could climb up. I laughed as he started to ride, pedaling toward the ice cream shop a couple of blocks away.

Later, we sat on the edge of the fountain in the town square, laughing and licking ice cream cones.

"Hey, Lia," Preston said, pausing for a second. "I hope you don't try to change yourself again." He didn't meet my eyes and I stared at his profile, taking in the ways he'd changed just recently, the way his cheeks were slimmer, and I could see tiny hairs growing on his upper lip. And more than that, he seemed to look at me in a different way, too. I didn't know if it was just him that was changing or if the shift I felt between us was something else. I sensed it there, just off in the distance, like the shadow of something in the darkness that you can't quite define and aren't sure is safe.

Preston cleared his throat. "I don't think you need to. You're . . . well, you're pretty just the way you are."

I smiled a small smile, taking a long lick of the ice cream cone and swallowing the cold, creamy sweetness, and taking his words inside me, too. *You're pretty just the way you are.* The sentiment flowed through me along with a small shiver, and I hoped he thought it was only the ice cream that had affected me that way. *Preston thought I was pretty?* No one had ever told me I was pretty before. I tilted my head and answered softly, "Okay."

CHAPTER TWO

Preston – Seventeen Years Old

The water was cool and refreshing, and it felt great sliding down my skin as I emerged from the creek and sat down on a rock at the edge. I chuckled softly as Cole came out of the water and shook himself like a dog, shiny droplets spraying off him. He grinned and flopped down next to me. It was a beautiful eighty-degree day in November—a little warm for the season, even in California, but we weren't complaining. It wasn't so great for farm work, but it was perfect for a dip in the creek.

Lia was still in the water, bent over, focused on something in her hand. She stood and grinned at us, lifting whatever it was she was holding. My heart jerked to a stop in my chest and then resumed beating in rapid staccato. Christ, she was gorgeous under ordinary circumstances, but standing in the water like that, soaking wet, her T-shirt and shorts stuck to her body showcasing every new curve, her deeply tanned skin practically glowing in the sunlight, she was stunning. I stared, unable to drag my eyes away, my chest pinching. She was so beautiful sometimes it hurt me to look at her.

“Look, it's shaped like a heart,” she called. My brain felt fuzzy, and I had to focus on her words. With difficulty, I moved my eyes from her face to the thing she was holding in her hand. It appeared to be a piece of sea glass. I felt my lips tip up. Wasn't it just like Lia to find a piece of glass in the shape of a heart? She was always finding shapes in clouds, assigning feelings to inanimate objects, noticing things no one else saw. As for me, I only noticed her. That had been the case for a while now, but suddenly, my feelings for her were not only an ache in my chest, but a very real ache in the region between my legs. I looked away. She was only fourteen and in some ways, I still thought of her as a kid. My feelings for her made me feel confused and slightly ashamed.

Cole was staring at her, too, his expression lazy, his eyes unabashedly roaming her body. “Hey Lia,” he called, “I thought I saw another piece of sea glass over by that big rock there.” He pointed behind her

and she looked back, walking over to where he pointed and bending to look more closely at the water.

I glanced back at Cole and his mouth was curved into a satisfied smile as his eyes focused on her exposed backside, the rounded undersides of her ass cheeks barely showing at the edges of her shorts. I shoved at him and he laughed, shooting me an unrepentant grin and winking. “You’re welcome,” he mouthed.

“Stop it,” I muttered so only he could hear.

“No, a little farther to the right,” he said, his eyes glued to her ass again. She bent even closer to the water. “Or maybe it was to the left,” he drawled. I elbowed him hard, angry that he was teasing her that way. He let out a sound that was somewhere between an “ooph” and a laugh.

Lia’s body stilled right before she reached behind her to pull her shorts down. She stood up quickly and faced Cole, her eyes narrowed. She had realized what he was doing. She picked up a small rock and hurled it at him. It hit him square in the shoulder, and he grunted in pain. I laughed.

“Ouch,” Cole said, examining the small red mark on his tan shoulder. “You’ve marred me.”

“You deserved it,” Lia said, emerging from the water.

Cole laughed and leaned back on one elbow. “I did,” he admitted on a grin. “I hope you can forgive me.”

Lia stuck her tongue out at Cole as she walked back toward us, but then laughed when he pretended to stab himself in the heart. She sat down on a rock next to me, holding the small piece of glass up, her smile filled with pleasure. She squinted over at me, and my heart flipped again.

Her eyes . . . I’d never get used to the beauty of her light eyes emphasized by her bronzed skin. I thought about her mother—a short, slender, Mexican woman with darker skin than Lia’s and straight, black hair. I guessed Lia’s green eyes came from her father, but when I’d asked about him once years before she’d only shrugged and said she didn’t know him. And then she’d changed the subject.

Lia never talked about her home life, though it was obvious she was poor, and even if I didn’t go to the same high school as her and didn’t see the old clothes she wore and the secondhand backpack she carried with someone else’s initials on it, I’d know because her mother had worked on our farm. Although our dad paid all his farm workers fairly, it was still barely above minimum wage. I didn’t imagine the

shabby motel her mom worked in now paid much more, maybe even less.

I'd heard my dad vouching for her mom's reliability when the people who owned the farm next to ours called about her renting an outbuilding on their property, so I knew Lia lived in what had once been nothing more than a storage shed.

The knowledge of Lia's poverty caused a strange sort of anger to boil in my gut, though I wasn't sure exactly who I was angry with. It was a helpless rage, one I couldn't direct anywhere specific, so it lashed out and then, directionless, found its way straight back to me.

I looked at her now in her wet T-shirt and shorts, knowing she wore them because she didn't have a swimsuit. It was the reason we never invited her with us to the town pool where we were members.

Even Cole, with his constant jokes and devil-may-care attitude was sensitive to the fact that Lia didn't have the things we did.

We'd seen her less and less since we'd grown from children to teenagers. She still walked over to our farm now and again and if we were outside and saw her, we spent a lazy afternoon cooling off in the shallow creek that ran behind our property. Or if we didn't have much time for a break, *or* if it was too chilly, we'd rest under a tree and just talk.

Mostly I watched her grow older from afar. Both living for and dreading those times we'd have a few stolen hours, or even minutes, to spend together. I loved spending time with her, but it was always too short and never quite enough.

I noticed as her legs grew longer and her hips and breasts began to round slightly in the beginnings of womanhood. My mouth went dry whenever I looked at her for too long and I ached to touch her. But I also felt that same protective instinct I'd always felt for her since the moment we'd met. It was weird, because in some ways, Lia was a mystery to me—so secretive about her home life, so dismissive about the dreams in her eyes—but in other ways, I felt like I knew so much about her. She was pensive and kind, giving yet remote, and she exuded a gentleness I'd never felt so strongly in another person.

I thought back to the first time we met. Cole and I had accidentally surprised her as she was wandering down a strawberry row that'd just been picked, holding a ripe berry to her lips. She'd jolted when we'd stepped out in front of her, her eyes wide and her mouth stopping mid-chew.

“That strawberry belongs to us,” Cole had teased, holding out his hand. “You have to give it back.”

She hadn't understood that he was kidding and her face had grown pale, her beautiful light green eyes blinking up at him. I watched the exchange, wordless, mesmerized by her pretty oval face, the soft vulnerability in her gaze, and something inside me, which I had no idea how to identify, went completely, utterly still. I felt a constriction in my chest and I suddenly wanted to push Cole aside, to step in front, to protect her from him, from the world, from anything hard and hurtful that might potentially harm her. The feeling confused me and made me pause, unsure of what to do or where the sudden urge had come from.

Then she'd leaned forward, opened her mouth and let the chewed-up strawberry plop wetly onto Cole's outstretched hand. For a moment, he and I had stared at it in shocked silence and then Cole had shouted with laughter, doubling over and almost falling on the ground. Maybe we'd both loved her from that first moment—though Cole was never one to be stingy with his affections. Cole loved everyone. Cole loved the whole wide world.

And the whole world loved him, too. Though his teasing could go a bit too far, it was always obvious he never meant any true harm.

We'd begun spending time with her whenever we could after that, seeking her out among the rows of strawberry plants. Even though our mom disapproved of our friendship and told us to stop running around with her, we didn't. Our mom disapproved of almost everything, but Lia's sweetness and easy smile were far too appealing.

“I'm going to miss this place someday,” she said, looking around, shooting Cole a smile. It was their thing, their inside joke. Jealousy bubbled up inside me, and I tried my best to squash it.

“Yeah?” Cole asked, winking at her. “Why? Where are you going to be?”

She shrugged, turning her body toward us. I willed my eyes not to move down to her T-shirt where I knew I'd see the outline of her bra, maybe even her small, hardened nipples. I shifted where I was sitting, trying to relieve that damn ache.

“Anywhere else,” she murmured, looking out to the small creek where we'd been coming since we were little kids. “Maybe I'll move to Italy and grow grapes.”

Or you could marry me and grow strawberries, I wanted to say, but that sounded stupid, even in my

own head. And not much of an offer. My father had made that same offer to my mother once upon a time, and she'd taken him up on it and look how that had turned out—two people who could barely stand to be in the same room as the other. Not that Lia was anything like my mom, but still.

Lia and Cole had always talked about where they were going to go when they left the Central Valley. It wasn't big enough for them. They always wanted . . . more. And in a way I understood them both. Of course Lia would want to get out of here and experience something other than the life of poverty she'd led so far. And as for Cole, he was my brother, my twin—I'd listened to him talk about the places he wanted to go, the things he wanted to see, since we could talk. But I also wondered if *any* place was big enough for Cole—he was always running after more, always wanting new experiences that would trump the old ones. And he was always devising ways to get what he wanted. I had no doubt he'd hold the world in his hands if that's what he decided to go after.

Cole laid back on the rock and put his hands behind his head, closing his eyes. In a few minutes he was breathing deeply, and I knew he was asleep. He'd been out the night before with Shayna Daws, and he'd snuck into the room we shared close to three, smelling like beer and Shayna's perfume. It was no wonder he was exhausted.

Quietly, I moved over to the rock Lia was sitting on and gestured toward the piece of sea glass. It was pale aqua, the edges smoothed by the water. And it did look like a heart. "Kind of reminds me of your eyes."

She turned that pale gaze my way, looking at me with a sweet smile on her lips. "My eyes?" she asked softly.

"The color," I murmured. "It's so unusual. Beautiful."

A small frown flitted over her face before she seemed to force a smile and looked back to the heart she was holding. *Had I said something wrong?* Taking the glass between the thumb and index fingers of both hands, she snapped it in half. I jolted slightly, not understanding the action, and then she turned and handed me one half. She took my hand and I felt a small spark at the contact of our skin. Her eyes lingered for a moment on our hands before she said, "Someday I'm going to leave here, but a part of my heart is going to remain. With you."

My breath caught. I took the small piece of broken glass and put it in the pocket of my swim trunks. When I looked back at her, her gaze was running down my naked chest. Her eyes blinked up to mine and her cheeks filled with color before she looked away, back down to where she held her own half of the glass heart. Was she looking at me with the same awareness that I watched her? At the mere possibility, my whole body suddenly felt far too hot. My eyes moved to her mouth—those full luscious lips with the small beauty mark at the corner—and I grew painfully hard. I wanted to kiss her so badly. It was a yearning not only in my body but in my heart.

“Why do you have to leave?” I asked. “You could stay.”

She shook her head, a look of pain crossing her expression. “Don’t *you* want to experience the world?” she asked, leaning back on one elbow and gazing at the trees.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” *No.* Something about not wanting *more* caused me embarrassment, as if Lia might look down on me if she knew that everything I ever wanted out of life was here. As far as I was concerned, there *was* nothing more, or at least nothing better. Everything that filled my soul was all around me—the land, the farm, my best friend and brother, and Annalia Del Valle.

You’re just like him.

I heard my mother’s voice in my head, the disappointment with which she said the words. Yes, I supposed I was just like my father. I loved farming, loved the smell of dirt and the way the tiny shoots pushed their way out of the ground. I took satisfaction in work that required the strength of my body and my own two hands. I felt a deep pride in our family business, knowing that the food we grew was shipped all over the United States, that a part of our labor of love was placed on dinner tables and in fancy restaurants, in grocery stores, and picnic baskets. For that, I *was* simple, I guessed. Simple, introverted, and far too serious, just exactly the way he was. And I didn’t know how to be any different even when I made a point to try.

According to my mother, my father had stifled her, given her a life that leached the joy right out of her soul and left her a restless, dissatisfied person. At least that’s what I’d heard her say to Grandma Lois a few years ago before she’d died. Would I do the same to Lia? If I asked her to stay with me someday, would she lose her joy and become restless, too? I frowned slightly, disturbed by my own line of

thinking.

“How are you liking high school so far?” I asked, wanting to change the subject. We were in school together now, but we’d never been before. She’d gone to different elementary and middle schools.

Her eyes lingered on me a beat too long, but then she shrugged, looking away. “It’s fine.”

“How come you never come over to sit with us at lunch? You never even say hi.”

She smiled, tilting her head, her dark curls falling over her shoulder and causing my breath to catch.

“You’re all older and . . . I’m not part of that crowd.”

“You could be.”

She shook her head, looking away again, that same troubled frown reappearing. “No, I couldn’t be, even if I tried. Remember what happened when I tried to go blonde? It’s about parameters.”

I gave her a confused frown, the word pricking at my memory, though I couldn’t quite place it.

“Parameters?”

She laughed softly. “Some things shouldn’t be forced, let’s put it that way.”

Her words saddened me. Did she think she wouldn’t be accepted if she hung out with us at school?

I’d just assumed she’d rather sit with the people she sat with in the lunchroom—kind of a motley crew, but they were her friends. But if she was staying away from Cole and me in public because she thought we’d rather it be that way, I had to set her straight. The only reason we ever excluded her from anything—like the public pool—was if we thought it would make her feel awkward or put her in an uncomfortable position. “Lia—”

Cole let out a loud yawning moan and sat up, distracting me from what I’d been about to say. “How long was I out?”

“Not long.”

He sat up fully, running a hand through his hair. “We should go, Pres. We’re supposed to help Dad on the farm today.”

I nodded reluctantly. I could have stayed on that sunny rock for the rest of the afternoon, talking softly to Lia and listening to the lap of the creek as it ran past us. But there was never a lack of work to do on a farm and this had been meant only as a short break from the heat.

“I’ll walk you home,” I said to Lia as we all stood and began gathering our things. I didn’t know *exactly* where she lived but I knew the general direction.

“Don’t be silly. I’ve made the walk a thousand times.”

I pictured her walking through the farmlands and back roads, her long, browned legs moving swiftly, her dark curls flowing down her back, and felt the grip of protectiveness I’d always felt for Lia and usually wasn’t certain how to manage. She was so damned independent. So insistent on doing everything by herself. “I think—”

“Stop thinking so much,” she teased. “I’m fine. Anyhow, I have to go into town to pick up a few things for my mama so I’ll be on public roads the whole time.”

“Then I’ll go back to the farm and get our truck.” Dad had bought Cole and me a new truck on our seventeenth birthday. Even though we had to work out a schedule of who used it when, it was so much better than having to borrow our parents’ cars. And it worked out because Cole went out far more often than I did anyway. If he wanted to use it, it was generally available.

But Annalia waved me off. “No. I like to walk.” I wanted to push it, but what was I supposed to do? *Force* her to accept a ride when she had made it clear she didn’t want one?

“All right,” I said, sighing. I supposed she *had* made the walk a thousand times and was even more familiar than I was with everything along the way.

We said goodbye and began the short walk back to our farm. I got lost in my own thoughts and didn’t notice that Cole was quieter than usual until he stopped, turning toward me, one hand on the towel slung over his shoulder. “I think I’m going to ask Lia out.”

For a minute the words didn’t make sense and then a fierce blast of jealousy punched at my guts. “What?”

“Oh come on, you haven’t noticed how gorgeous she is?”

“Of course I have. But Lia’s always been gorgeous.”

He squinted up at the sun. “Yeah, but she was a kid. Now . . .”

“She’s only fourteen.”

“Old enough.”

“Old enough for what?” My voice sounded like a cold hiss, even in my own head. I scratched my bare stomach, feigning nonchalance.

Cole’s smile was slow and knowing. “Old enough to kiss.”

“Lia’s never been kissed before.”

“How do you know?”

“I just . . . fucking do,” I sputtered. Or I figured. Who would she be kissing? I suddenly felt mildly panicked as if I hadn’t been paying enough attention and someone had wormed his way past me and gotten to my Lia. *My Lia?* Maybe I’d taken it for granted that she’d just always be there, and all I needed to do was wait for her to grow up a little bit.

“Are you interested in Lia, Pres?” he asked casually.

“Yeah. But she’s too young now. I just . . .” *I was waiting for her. I’ve always been waiting for her.* I ran my hand through my hair. I wasn’t just . . . *interested*, didn’t just think she was pretty. It was more than that. I didn’t know how to voice my feelings for Lia, even to my brother. The emotions inside me felt too big to put into words.

“We’re going to college next year,” Cole said. “Time is of the essence.” He gave me an easy grin, the one the girls apparently lost their minds over.

Someday, I’m going to leave here . . .

Only, Cole was right. *We* were the ones who were going away. But I hadn’t decided on the location—how near or far—and it’d always just been a given that I’d be back. I’d be back for Lia. Oh God, I’d stupidly assumed I had time . . . that waiting was the right thing to do. Maybe I’d been wrong. No, I’d definitely been wrong.

“But, what about Shayna?” I asked, the mild panic I’d felt a few moments ago, blooming inside me.

Cole shrugged. “There’s nothing serious between us. We’re only having some fun.”

“Is that what Lia would be to you? Fun?”

“You know she means more to me than that.” Yeah. Yeah, I did and that’s what made this unexpected turn of events so incredibly awful. “I’d wait for the timing to be right,” he added. *Right timing?* No timing was right for him to move in on Lia. I stared at him for a moment, a red cloud filling my brain.

“But, I—”

“Hey, if you’re interested, too, let’s race for her,” Cole suggested.

“Race for her?”

“Yeah, a foot race like we used to have when we were in track. Winner earns first dibs on Lia.”

“She’s not a prize to be won, Cole. Why don’t we both ask her out and let *her* choose.”

“How can she choose? She cares about us both, and we’re identical twins for Christ’s sake. Let’s make it easy for her.”

I stared at him, noting the pleased look in his eye, the happy-go-lucky expression on his face, the easy way he carried himself. We were identical twins, but we were about as different as two people could be. And that might be the problem. If Lia had to choose between us, wouldn’t she choose Cole? I paused, a sick feeling of certainty squeezing my guts. Of course she would. Oh fuck, of course she would. They had so much in common. Cole was funny and outgoing and made everyone laugh. People just naturally flocked to Cole. They always had. God, I should be happy he’d left it to a foot race. I could *win* in a foot race. If Cole had his sights on Lia, this might be my only chance.

“Okay.”

He nodded. “Same track as usual?”

I nodded back. When we’d been younger, our dad had taken us out in his pickup truck and measured the distance on two different back roads with a thick growth of forest in the middle, that met in the same spot, each ending at the mailbox at the end of our road. They were the same distance. Cole and I would each take one, not knowing the other’s pace until we came around the bend and spotted the mailbox. It had taught us not to use the other runners’ paces to determine our own, to simply picture the finish line and get there as quickly as we possibly could. We’d been really good and had beaten all kinds of records in middle school. But we’d moved on to other sports when we started high school and hadn’t run this route or any other for a couple of years.

“Brother oath,” Cole said, spitting in his palm and holding it out to me. I looked down at his outstretched hand. We hadn’t done *this* for years either. I supposed it spoke to the importance of the match we were about to enter into. *Could I do this, though? Bet on the only chance I might have to make Lia*

mine? I hesitated, but when Cole thrust his hand closer, I spat in mine and gripped his, the wetness of our mixed saliva creating what we'd deemed an unbreakable bond.

When we were seven, Cole and I had gotten into an argument about something and when our dad broke it up, we'd both turned away, each of us holding onto our personal grudge. Our dad had made us turn back to each other and that's when he'd told us about the brother oath. We'd shook, promising to drop the grievance. "All right then," our dad had said, "you've promised to let it go, and so you will. A man is only as good as his word." He'd repeated it often over the years.

A man is only as good as his word.

"Brother oath," I repeated.

He nodded once. "If I win, you step away from her. If you win, I'll step back. Honor between brothers."

I pressed my lips together but nodded. Brother oath. Honor between brothers. And we'd never broken either.

A man is only as good as his word.

We dropped our towels and took a minute to stretch, eyeing each other like two gladiators about to go into the ring. We were each wearing water shoes, which weren't ideal for running, but at least we were on even footing, literally.

We lined up, facing opposite directions, the dirt road I was going to run stretched out in front of me. *This was stupid. This wasn't right. I turned to my brother to call it—*

"On your mark, get set, go!"

Despite my last-minute reservations, the words jolted me into action, and we both took off, shooting apart, running toward our goal. My legs pumped and my lungs ached, but I ran my heart out.

Lia.

Lia.

Lia.

I pushed myself as far as I could possibly go without breaking, not caring that I was shaking with effort as I rounded the bend. I ran for Lia. I ran as if I were running straight into battle for her. I'd never

run so hard in all my life. And yet as I came around the corner, I let out a sharp cry of pain and defeat, the bitter blow of disappointment knocking what little wind I had left completely out of me.

Cole was just arriving at the mailboxes. He'd beaten me by twenty-five yards. How the hell had he done it? I was obviously far more out of shape than I'd thought. *Fuck!*

I came to a walk, breathing harshly, my lungs still aching from my effort, a sharp pang in my side where a nasty stitch had started. Cole was breathing just as hard, but he leaned back against the post, shooting me a smug smile.

"Don't gloat, asshole," I said, bending forward and resting my hands on my knees in an attempt to slow my breathing. I'd lost her before I'd even had her, and he had the gall to rub it in.

He laughed, slapping me on my bare back. "I guess she was just meant to be mine," Cole said. *I wanted to own those words. I guess she was just meant to be mine.*

I tried to pretend it didn't hurt as badly as it did that I'd just lost Lia. In a fucking foot race.

CHAPTER THREE

Lia – Fifteen Years Old

My mama stepped into our house, the door slamming behind her. I glanced up, and then paused, frowning at the look on her face. She always looked tired, always looked slightly angry, but tonight she looked as if she was in pain. “Hi, Mama. You okay?”

She dropped her purse on the table, sitting down in one of the chairs and swearing softly in Spanish.

“Is it your back?”

“Sí.” There was resentment in her tone as if I should know very well it was her back.

I sighed, standing from where I’d been sitting on my air mattress doing my homework. I went to the cabinet in the kitchen where we kept medications and grabbed the bottle of pain reliever and a glass of water. I brought them to the table and set them in front of her, moving around behind her wordlessly so I could massage her shoulders.

She poured four tablets into her palm and threw them back with a long drink of water and then let her head fall forward so I could work out some of the kinks.

I kneaded her muscles in silence, staring at the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe that she often kneeled in front of in prayer. I knew that one of my mama’s prayers was that I’d never been born, so I’d come to look at that shrine with anger and pain. “The devil held me down and raped me all through the night,” she’d once told me. “In the morning he went away, but he left me with his eyes. Devil eyes to watch and curse me all the rest of my days.”

When I was just a little girl, I’d thought it was a terrible story, a scary story, and I’d felt deep sympathy and fear for my mama. It had been years before I’d understood that by “he left me with his eyes,” she meant he’d left her with *me* and that the strange green eyes I’d inherited had belonged to him, a monster and a rapist.

It was no wonder she looked at me with such blatant hatred. It was why I wished so much to be someone *different* when I looked in the mirror. Someone other than the unwanted girl with the devil eyes who had caused my mama so much pain just by being born.

Once my mama had had a young husband and a dream. They'd crossed the border illegally and her husband had died at the hands of a coyote who stole their money and shot him in the middle of the desert just because he felt like it. Then he raped my mama and got her pregnant with me. Even though I knew a coyote was just a name for a human smuggler who helped migrants cross the border, I still couldn't help picture the evil beast that had attacked my mama as a wild, four-legged predator with my same pale eyes.

After that, my then nineteen-year-old mama had somehow made it to California, starving, pregnant, and barely alive, where she had settled into a migrant farmworkers' camp and begun working at one of the farms when I was still inside her belly.

She was only thirty-five now, but looked about fifty. She'd been here for sixteen years and no dreams had resulted—only a broken body and a broken spirit. I supposed I couldn't even blame her for hating me the way she did. I couldn't blame her but it still hurt—it hurt down to my soul.

“Las manos del diablo,” she murmured.

Hands of the devil. My hands.

I sighed. Sometimes it seemed she said things like that to keep her dislike for me alive and well—especially in moments when I was being kind to her. It was as if she accepted my generosity but wouldn't allow herself to feel anything for me. “Silencio, Mama,” I said, not disguising the weariness in my voice. *Hush, Mama.* I continued massaging her until her muscles were looser under my hands.

“Why don't you go to bed? I'll come with you tomorrow and help clean so you don't have to bend.” I didn't mind cleaning in general, didn't mind hard work. What I *minded* was how utterly disgusting the rooms at the motel were—how they were generally rented by the hour to prostitutes and drunks who left behind used condoms and bedbugs.

She made a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat and got up and went over to her mattress and sat down on it. I wished I had the means to buy her something better to sleep on. Surely an air mattress was making her back even worse. It might be better just to sleep on the floor.

I took my sweater and made a flimsy excuse about taking a walk, abandoning my homework where it lay on the floor. The truth was, I didn't want to be in our house when the sun hadn't even set yet and my mama was sleeping. It felt stuffy and far too small.

It was spring in California's Central Valley, and the air smelled fresh, the blue sky and green farmland stretched far and wide. I roamed, collecting wildflowers in a bouquet as I went: poppies, lupines, evening primrose, the sweet alyssum that smelled as if it was made of honey. I'd take it back to our house and at least there'd be a tiny corner in that ugly space that provided some beauty.

When I made it to the Sawyers' fence, I leaned against it, holding the wildflowers in one hand and propping my face on the other hand that rested on the old wood.

I gazed across the farmland, melancholy gripping me at the fierce longing in my heart. Longing for all the things those damned parameters kept me from: a beautiful place to live, a loving family, good food that didn't only come in cans and microwaveable boxes and sometimes—shamefully—from the free food store in town. And Preston Sawyer. Mostly, Preston Sawyer. My heart pinched at the thought of him, and I closed my eyes, picturing the strong lines of his face, his serious eyes, the way his body had grown tall and broad in the last couple of years. And I ached for him.

I'd always loved him, I supposed. But in the last year, my love had turned . . . different. In the last year I'd begun noticing him in ways I hadn't before. And I'd begun wondering what it would feel like if he kissed me, if he touched me, if he wanted me, too.

I knew he cared for me in his own way. I knew both the Sawyer boys did. But I also knew that they were vaguely ashamed of me. I knew they didn't invite me places where other people would be, knew they preferred to do things with me in places where no one else was likely to see us together. And I was so desperate for friends—so desperate for *them*—that I'd take anything they were willing to give. Even if it hurt me to know that even with Preston and Cole, there were parameters. Boundaries.

But I also knew I was partly responsible for the distance between us—I didn't want them to know more about my situation and pity me because of it. I didn't want them to see where I lived, to know the squalor of my life compared to theirs. I didn't want others to see them with me and think less of them for it.

I was certain they already realized I was poor, and I could live with that. But I refused to allow them to know the details. The true ugliness was in the details, the tiny papercuts that sliced at your soul, and no one who hadn't been dirt poor could ever really understand that.

When I opened my eyes and looked up, I saw both brothers in the distance and sucked in a breath, standing straight. I watched as they stopped and appeared to be talking and then one of them turned and walked back toward the house. The other one moved toward me and I squinted my eyes to see who it was, after a moment realizing it was . . . Cole. I could tell by his loose walk, by the easy grin on his face. I was happy to see him, but disappointed that Preston had turned away.

I smiled back as he approached. "Fancy meeting you here," I teased.

Cole laughed, hopping easily over the fence with the natural grace of an athlete. He leaned a narrow hip against the fence and crossed his arms. I watched the way his biceps bulged. "You didn't have to walk all the way here to see me. I would have come to you." He winked, shooting me a boyish half-smile, the one he was very aware was completely adorable.

I couldn't help laughing, not just at his joke, but at the picture of him standing in my small, awful house, gazing around in horror at the proof of our poverty. It was the very thing I worked so hard to avoid. And God, it was such a terrible picture, even in my imagination, that I *had* to laugh or I'd start crying and never stop. "I like the tradition of meeting here like this," I said, tilting my head. "Where did Preston go?"

Cole shrugged, moving slightly closer. "Back to the house. He had something else to do."

"Oh." Disappointment washed over me. I hadn't walked up here intending to see them, but now that Cole was out here, it caused a brief spear of hurt to know that Preston had known I was here and had chosen to go back inside. Maybe he was headed somewhere else. Maybe he had a date. I knew the girls in school all swooned over the Sawyer boys. I kept myself distant enough from the social crowd they hung with that I didn't have to hear the details about the things they did when I wasn't around. But I still couldn't help knowing some of it.

"And I told him I wanted to talk to you alone."

"You . . ." I frowned, confused. "Okay. What for?"

Cole moved closer, taking my hand in his. Surprised, I looked down at our linked hands. "I . . . I like

you, Lia. I guess you probably know that.”

I stilled, blinking up at him, shocked by his words, shocked by the hesitation in his tone. I raised a brow. “Are you joking with me? I don’t know whether or not to take you seriously, Cole.”

He chuckled softly, running the hand that wasn’t holding mine through his thick, golden-brown hair. “That’s what I get for kidding around all the time.” His face turned serious and my breath caught. For a moment, he looked exactly like Preston and my heart jumped, responding instantly.

Cole stepped toward me, took my face in his hands, and brought his lips to mine. I froze, so surprised that I didn’t know how to react. His lips moved on mine, warm and soft, and I felt a tiny fluttering between my ribs. Cole moved in, pressing his hard body against me and I opened my mouth on a tiny gasp. He moved his tongue between my lips and groaned, and my eyes opened, watching as his expression turned slightly pained. I felt him harden against my hip and it shocked me, so I pulled back, our lips disconnecting with a wet pop.

I blinked at him, off balance after such an unexpected turn of events. “That was . . . nice.”

Cole laughed. “I’ll try not to let my ego get too bruised after that lukewarm review.” But his eyes sparkled with good humor. “Let me take you out, Lia. A movie on Sunday?”

A movie. In the dark. Of course. Still, it wasn’t like anyone else was asking me out on dates—in the dark *or* in the light. And though I liked to keep a certain distance between myself and the Sawyer boys, I also couldn’t deny the excitement I felt in my belly at the idea of going on a date, and of seeing a movie for the first time.

I bit at my lip, noticing the tenderness where he had pressed his mouth against mine. I had never thought of Cole in *that* way. Had never imagined he had feelings for me. I had only ever thought of Preston. But . . . if Preston had known his brother wanted to talk to me alone and had turned away of his own will, wasn’t it pretty lucky for me that the boy who *was* interested looked exactly like the one I pined for?

I frowned slightly, confused by my own thoughts, my own inner turmoil. I’d just experienced my very first kiss, moved outside those damn parameters, even if only for the breath of a moment. Wasn’t I supposed to be delirious with joy?

Still, before I answered, I wanted to make sure I hadn't misunderstood the situation as far as Preston was concerned. I needed to know Preston didn't . . . *wouldn't* want me. *Love* me.

"Did . . . did Preston know you were going to ask me out?"

"Yeah." He studied me for a moment, his brows coming together slightly. "He was fine with it if that's what you're worried about."

He was fine with it.

I felt a dropping sensation inside as if something had fallen out from under me—something precious that I wanted to grab for but instinctively knew would slip through my fingers. I managed a nod. *Preston didn't want me.* "We've just always hung out together, the three of us. I wanted . . . to make sure."

He smiled. "Three's a crowd."

Was it? I'd never thought so.

"So what do you say?"

Maybe in my focus on Preston, I hadn't allowed room for the feelings that might develop for Cole. Maybe . . . maybe I could love him the same way someday, if I opened my heart to the idea. Cole was fun and easy to be with, and we had some things in common that Preston and I didn't. I only paused for a second before smiling back. "All right."

Cole's grin was big and bright. "Great."

I went to the movies with Cole that Sunday night and again three Sundays later and we kissed in the dark. I liked kissing him, liked the way he tasted and the way he made small moaning noises in the back of his throat. But I especially liked being held in his arms, loved the warm feeling of being embraced, of feeling cherished and protected for the first time in my life—even if only for a short time. He seemed to want to kiss continually, but I just wished he'd hold me.

I also loved the movies, loved the buttered popcorn Cole bought me and the way the story on the

screen filled the whole room and took up my whole mind. The sounds bounced off the walls and made me feel like I was in another world. I tried not to appear too affected—I didn't think it was very normal that a fifteen-year-old girl had never been to the movies, and I didn't want Cole to know.

Afterward, I told him I was meeting my mama where she worked so we could go home together and had him drop me in front of the motel. He kissed me goodbye and I went up the outside stairs, ducking around the corner. When his truck had driven away, I went back down and walked home by myself, down the dirt roads and through the grassy fields, going over the scenes from the film we'd just watched and thinking about the way I'd felt *part* of the crowd, sitting in the theater holding Cole's hand.

The school year was almost at an end and both Preston and Cole would be heading to college in the fall, and I knew my time with him would be coming to an end, too. It confused me that I wasn't more upset by that knowledge, but I just wasn't.

The boy I still longed for was Preston, and it weighed on my heart that kissing Cole had only intensified that yearning. I'd *hoped* it would lessen it. Even with my eyes closed in a darkened theater, I couldn't pretend Cole was really his brother. And I couldn't pretend it didn't hurt that Preston had seemed to completely withdraw, even in friendship.

One rainy Thursday at lunch, I was rushing to class, taking an alternate route so I wouldn't get soaked, when I rounded a corner and almost collided with a group of people standing under an overhang.

Halting abruptly, I saw that it was Preston and Cole and three or four of their popular friends. Cole had been talking animatedly to the group who was laughing at whatever he'd been saying and his words halted at my sudden appearance.

My eyes darted around, landing on Preston. I tried not to let it show on my face how much I'd missed seeing him, though I'd seen his brother. Preston's eyes widened slightly and his lips parted as if in surprise. I tried to stay away from them at school. I didn't want to cause them any embarrassment, and I didn't want them to be put in the uncomfortable position of including me with their friends when they might not want to. I forced myself to look away from Preston.

“Hey there,” Cole said warmly. “Join us. Everyone, this is Annalia.” I hesitated, though. I felt unsure and rigid with nerves. I managed a weak smile, hoping I didn't smell like cleaning supplies. I'd gone to

work with my mama that morning and cleaned six disgusting motel rooms before school. If I did still carry the scent of toilet bowl cleaner, hopefully it was subtle enough that no one would notice.

Gathering my courage, I nodded at the people standing around Preston and Cole looking at me curiously.

The group had fallen silent and tension pricked at my skin, a sense of not belonging falling over me like a soggy sheet. I almost turned in the other direction and walked away, but forced myself not to.

“Lia,” Preston said, his voice slightly scratchy. He cleared his throat, holding out his hand to me, and it snapped me from my frozen state. It was only then that I noticed I was the only one not covered by the overhang, the only one getting wet under the drizzling rain.

I let out a quick exhale and took Preston’s hand gratefully, not too nervous to notice the zap of electricity that always went through me at his touch, his nearness. It was both calming and off-putting.

I stepped under the overhang and Preston’s hand dropped from mine, leaving me feeling cold and alone again.

Alicia Bardua had been standing next to Preston and she stepped back, her eyes moving from my head to my feet. From her expression, it was clear she was not impressed. I remembered that long-ago hair fiasco and my fervent desire to look like Alicia—to *be* her—and felt especially ashamed and embarrassed by her obvious disdain. It was as if she could see inside me and knew the secret longings of my heart. Instinctively, I knew she would use them to hurt me. I felt my cheeks heating and looked away.

“Aren’t you a freshman?” Alicia asked.

I looked back to where she stood and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I’m a freshman.”

She shot me an insincere smile. “We were just talking about the prom. I don’t suppose you’re going since you’re not a senior?”

I glanced at Preston whose face seemed paler than it’d been. “Oh. No. I’m not going.”

She smiled, a cunning tilt of her lips. She latched on to Preston’s arm and said, “Well then you probably won’t be interested in this conversation. You should run along to class.” My heart squeezed painfully and I felt slightly sick. Preston was taking Alicia to the prom.

“Jesus, Alicia. Don’t be fucking rude,” Preston gritted out almost at the same time Cole said, “Shut

up, Alicia.”

“What?” she asked silkily, shooting daggers at both of them. “I was just trying to save her from the boredom of having to listen to plans she has nothing to do with.”

My whole face felt hot, that sense of not belonging intensifying. I swallowed. God, I’d known talking to Preston and Cole in public was a bad idea. I’d *known*.

“Annalia—” Cole started to say when Alicia jumped backward, letting out a small shriek.

“Oh my God! Are those *bugs* on her?”

I sucked in a breath, reactively jumping backward from everyone, too. I glanced down at my white sweater and spotted three bedbugs, large and filled with blood. *Oh God, oh God, oh God. No. No, no, no.* Panicked, I stripped my sweater off and threw it to the ground, brushing at the light blue tank top I was wearing underneath.

“Oh that’s so disgusting!” Alicia was yelling as she wiped at her own clothing. “Is anything on me? Did she get anything on me?”

Tears of anguish and humiliation sprang to my eyes. “I’m so sorry,” I croaked. Oh God, they must have gotten on me when I was cleaning this morning.

I was always so careful about bringing bedbugs into our home, always stripped my clothes off in the back of the house when I came home from cleaning and my mama generally did the same if her back wasn’t hurting her so much she couldn’t manage it. But I must not have checked myself thoroughly enough before school that morning. “I’m so sorry,” I repeated.

Everyone had moved back, everyone except Preston who came toward me and took my hand. “Come on, I’m taking you to the nurse.”

I pulled free, a shuddery breath escaping. “No. No. You stay here. Please. I don’t want—” I ripped my gaze from his face. He looked tortured, as if this situation was actually hurting him. It increased my shame, causing bile to move up my throat. *He’d already withdrawn. Now he’d never want anything to do with me ever again.* Oh God, I was going to vomit.

“Wait, Lia,” I heard Cole say as I turned and ran toward Mrs. Stephens’s office. Though I wanted to leave school completely, I had finals that day, and I knew I couldn’t. Despite the fact that I often came to

school exhausted from working mornings at the motel, if I was going to graduate in three years, I had to continue to get decent grades, and pass my freshman year-end exams.

When I turned into the small nurse's office, tears were tracking down my cheeks.

"Annalia, what's the matter, dear?" Mrs. Stephens was an older woman with short, gray hair and a kind manner. I'd only been to her once before for a small injury when I'd needed a Band-Aid, but I'd liked her immediately.

I stopped in the doorway, staring at her in misery. "I think . . . I think I may have bedbugs on me."

Her brows furrowed. "Bedbugs?"

I nodded. "I work with my mama in the mornings at a motel, changing bedding and there were three of them on my sweater—"

"Okay, dear, take a seat and I'll check you over. My goodness, it's okay."

It wasn't okay. I'd humiliated not only myself but Preston and Cole. I'd live in shame forever.

I heard a small sound behind me and turned to see Preston standing in the doorway breathing hard.

"Are you all right?"

I looked away. "I'm fine. You can go."

At this point I was beginning to feel numb. I just wanted to be checked over, go take my final, and go home so I could cry. But Preston came in and sat down on the chair on the opposite wall, leaning forward on his knees and clasping his hands together.

"Stand up, dear, and I'll check the outside of your clothing. The most important thing, though, is to check your mattress when you get home."

"I don't have a mattress," I said dully. I didn't look at Preston but I caught him twitch slightly out of my peripheral vision. I couldn't bother to care that he now knew that embarrassing fact. Could it get any worse? "At least, not one that's made of material. It's plastic."

Mrs. Stephens paused in her perusal of the back of my tank top. "Oh. Well then, you're probably okay. But it's still a good idea to wash all your bedding and clothes in hot water and then dry them twice."

I didn't bother to tell her that we didn't have a washer or a dryer, that we used the Laundromat in town, but could only get there every other week or so—and sometimes less often if my mama's back was

really bad.

There was a commotion by the door and then Cole was standing there. “Hey,” he said, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, looking back to him and then to Preston. “Please, go.” *Someone might see you here with me.*

Preston and Cole both opened their mouths simultaneously but Mrs. Stephens cut in, “I’m going to insist that you go actually, because I need Annalia to remove her clothing so we can get her completely checked out. Now go on back to class, boys.”

They both stared at me for a moment, but I looked away and finally, Preston stood up, rubbing his hands down his hips. “I’ll wait outside for you.”

“Please don’t,” I said without looking at him. He stood there for a few beats longer, and I felt his stare on me, but then he turned and left the room.

“Do you want me—?” Cole asked.

“No.”

I didn’t hear him leave and knew he was lingering, so I looked up to meet his gaze. He looked so troubled and I just wanted him to go. “It’s okay, Cole. Soon this will all be a distant memory. I’m not going to be here forever.” I mustered a half-hearted smile.

His grin was immediate, his head tilted in interest. “Yeah? Where are you gonna be?”

“On the North Shore of Hawaii giving surf lessons to tourists. I just need to learn to surf first.”

He laughed softly. “Sounds perfect.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It does.” I looked back down and a second later I heard his footsteps echoing down the empty hall.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lia – Fifteen Years Old

I didn't go back to school for the rest of that year. I took my finals and never returned. What was the point? I'd done what I needed to do to pass my freshman year. I couldn't bear sitting in classes and feeling the humiliation of the kids who were surely laughing behind my back and calling me ugly names, or even worse, feeling disgust and pity. I'd go back next year once Alicia Bardua had gone to college. And I prayed no one would remember that awful, awful day.

I had elaborate fantasies about slipping amnesia-inducing drugs into the town water supply, but couldn't work out a real-life plan in which I could actually make that happen.

As much as I hated my house, it was a sort of sanctuary because no one ever came by—how could they when they didn't know where we lived—and we didn't have a telephone.

Loath as I was to go back to the motel where my mama worked, I did it anyway because she needed my help, and we both needed to eat and keep a roof over our heads.

On the night of the senior prom, though, I felt antsy and cooped up and needed something to do to take my mind off what I knew was happening right across Linmoor.

Doing laundry in town where I could sit in a brightly lit Laundromat by myself reading might not sound very exciting to anyone else, but I took pleasure in it and decided it was a good night to wash clothes.

I loved the whirling sounds filling the space, the fresh smell of detergent and fabric softener, and even the piped-in eighties music the owner played—the same repeating playlist he'd been using for years. Sometimes I'd hear one of those songs somewhere else and I'd be momentarily confused when a different song than the one on the Laundromat playlist came on next.

I hefted our laundry bag onto my back and left the house, asking my mama if she wanted to go with

me but knowing she'd say no.

When I stepped outside, sundown was painting the sky in wide, vivid brush strokes of mauve and purple and small splashes of white gold. I halted for a moment just to breathe in the loveliness of it, thinking about all the girls in town getting ready for tonight's dance and wondering if they, too, were looking out their windows and remarking on what a magical sky it was, how it must certainly mean it was going to be a magical night.

I wondered what Alicia Bardua would be wearing and I pictured her dancing with Preston, swirling around the floor. What a beautiful couple they'd make: her in a prom dress—turquoise, I thought, no, deep blue—and him in a tux.

I picked up my feet, beginning the walk, trying to tell myself I didn't care at all *what* they'd look like together, but the vision in my imagination caused a sharp ache of hurt and I closed my eyes on a groan.

I wondered who Cole was taking. Shouldn't I have felt that strange ache thinking of Cole with someone else? I didn't. Couldn't.

Before now, I'd never allowed myself to picture Preston with other girls. Although I knew he must date. Preston and Cole were among the most popular boys in school and I assumed he must have girls throwing themselves at him. But now I knew specifically who it was, I couldn't help the picture that formed in my mind.

A feeling of desperation filled me and I picked up my pace, walking through the tall grass of our yard, and turning onto the dirt road in front of our house.

The walk to the Laundromat on the edge of town wasn't too far, but under the weight of the laundry, it took me almost thirty minutes when I could usually do it in fifteen.

The familiar fragrant mugginess of the space brought a smile to my lips and I hefted my laundry bag onto the counter, separating the clothes into two loads. I'd have liked to separate it into three, but I only had enough money for two cycles and one box of Tide from the vending machine.

I stuffed the washers full and slid the quarters into the slots, adding detergent and starting the machines.

As my clothes began washing, I took a seat in one of the light blue, plastic bucket chairs by the

window and opened my book, switching my clothes over to dry when the washers stopped.

A little later, I was snapped out of my novel by the buzzing from the dryers indicating my loads were dry.

There was a folding table near the back and I unloaded my clothes into a laundry cart and rolled it there to begin folding, humming softly to “Time After Time” as I worked.

Awareness suddenly made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I paused, bringing my head up in mild alarm.

When I heard the soft sound of footsteps on the linoleum floor behind me, I dropped the shirt in my hands, whirling around and letting out a startled squeak at the sight of a man standing near the door.

Preston.

A loud whoosh of breath escaped my mouth. “Oh my God. You scared me,” I said, putting my hand over my heart.

He gazed at me steadily, taking a few steps forward. “Sorry.”

I furrowed my brows, shaking my head slightly. “You’re supposed to be at the prom.”

“No, I’m not.”

“What? Why?”

“I broke the date with Alicia after the way she treated you.”

I gaped stupidly at him, dread sliding down my spine. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I don’t want to hang out with someone who’s that much of a bitch.”

I closed my eyes briefly. I couldn’t deny the relief I felt at the knowledge Preston wouldn’t be with Alicia tonight, and I appreciated the sacrifice he’d made on my behalf. But I felt panic knowing what he’d done had ensured I’d have an enemy for life. Thank God she was leaving soon. I hoped she’d never be back. “Preston—”

“The basketball team decided to go as a group and Cole’s with them, but I decided I’m just not interested.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged.

The knowledge that Cole hadn’t asked me to his prom didn’t bother me. He understood enough to know there would be no way for me to go. I couldn’t afford a tube of lipstick much less a dress and shoes

and whatever else . . . It was a kindness that he hadn't put me in the awkward position of having to come up with an excuse why I couldn't go when we'd both know the real reason.

I stared at Preston for a moment. "So . . . what are you doing *here*?"

"I came to see if you were okay."

I furrowed my brow, pressing my lower back against the high table. "How'd you know where I was?"

He looked to the side with interest, glancing at the dispenser mounted on the wall that sold miniature boxes of laundry soap as if he'd never been inside a Laundromat before. God, he probably hadn't been. When he looked back at me, he said, "I stopped by your house. Your mom told me you were here."

What? A feeling of horror moved up my spine. I swallowed. "You . . . stopped by my house? How did you . . . know where I live?" Oh God, I didn't even want to know how my mama had greeted him. I actually couldn't picture it. What would she have done when opening the door and finding Preston Sawyer standing there? Had she been nice to him? Had he seen inside? *Oh God.*

"I've known where you live since we were kids."

"Oh." I swallowed. "Does . . . Cole know, too?"

There was a small tic in his jaw and he suddenly seemed to be watching me more closely than usual. "Not that I know of."

I nodded, thankful for that. "My mom, she . . . she doesn't speak English. I mean, hardly at all."

"She knows the word Laundromat." He let out a breath, a look of annoyance passing over his features. He shook his head slightly as if we'd gotten off track somehow. "You haven't been at school."

I paused, trying to get my bearings. "No. I didn't see any reason." I frowned, gripping the table behind me. "You came all the way here just for that? Just to see why I hadn't been in school?" Despite my embarrassment in him being anywhere near my house, a sudden warmth moved in my chest. It felt good to know he'd worried over me.

Preston studied me and my stomach flipped at the intense scrutiny of his gaze. He stepped forward slowly, decreasing the amount of space between us until he was right in front of me. "Yeah. Yeah, I did." His voice sounded slightly scratchy as if some strange emotion had stuck in his throat. "You don't have to

be embarrassed about what happened, Lia. Alicia acted like a total bitch and everyone knows it. No one's saying anything mean about you. I won't let them. And neither will Cole."

I released a harsh breath, looking down at my feet for a moment before meeting his eyes again. "Preston . . . neither of you have to do that. You didn't have to cancel your prom date."

A brief expression of hurt passed over his face before it settled into what looked like irritation again. "Yeah, I'm aware of what I *have* to do and what I don't."

I pressed my lips together. "What I'm saying is, you don't have to be my champion like some older brother. I never, ever wanted that. I avoid you and Cole in public specifically so you don't feel obligated to include me or defend me or whatever might come up by me hanging around you and your friends."

"Obligated?" His jaw ticked and he looked angry. "Is that what you think?"

"I . . . I don't think you feel that way, but . . ." *I don't want you to have to. I don't ever want to be a burden. I never want you to look at me the way my mama always has. I couldn't stand it.* "It's just that we live such different lives."

I shook my head slightly, staring over his right shoulder, voicing the least of which he must already know. If he hadn't known the extent of it before, he certainly did after visiting my house tonight. "Anyway, you should enjoy your last bit of time here. You and Cole are going away to college in just a few short months—"

His shoulders seemed to sag in some incremental way that had less to do with movement and more to do with a sudden shift in mood. Was he nervous about going away to college? He must be—Preston loved this land as much as I did, maybe even more since his roots were generations deep. I had the love, and he had the addition of pride.

"Are you going to miss Cole?" he asked. His voice was gentle though his body was still rigid. The question confused me for a moment when my mind had been going in a different direction. *Was I going to miss Cole?* I hadn't seen Cole since that day at school either—had purposely stayed away from any other soul except my mama. I bit at my lip trying to answer the question inside my head before saying anything to him. For a second I considered asking Preston what *he* thought about Cole and I going on a couple of dates. For a second I hoped that he'd tell me he hated it. But then I remembered the way Preston had

willingly turned back when Cole told him he was going to ask me out, and I realized I already had my answer: he was fine with it. *He didn't want me.*

“I’m going to miss both of you.” *Mostly you, Preston. And I wish that wasn't true because I don't think you're going to miss me back, at least not in the same way.*

He seemed to relax slightly, letting out a long sigh and massaging the back of his neck. While his gaze was directed away, I allowed my eyes to move down his body, taking in the way his long-sleeved T-shirt clung to the lean muscles of his chest, the way his shoulders were so broad and his hips narrow. The strength of his long, jean-clad legs, and how tall he was.

He dropped his hand and met my eyes again, studying me for a moment as if trying to determine what was going on in my mind. He still looked a little troubled, and I wished he didn't. It'd been nice of him to come all the way here to check on me, though I hated that he knew where I lived and had possibly even glanced inside. But he was here, right in front of me, and he wouldn't be for long. My soul ached with the need to touch him before I no longer had the chance.

He was going to go off and live his life and meet new people, maybe even fall in love, and I was going to be here, finding what joy I could in the earth and the sky and warm Laundromats—small joys within the parameters I'd been given—but mostly, *mostly* just existing and trying to get by day by day by day.

An intense wave of need to make the most of what might be our last moment rose inside, drowning my usual reticence and the words fell from my lips, “We could . . . dance.” I blinked, holding my breath for a few seconds before releasing it in a barely controlled exhale. “So you can at least dance just once on the night of your senior prom. Especially since I'm kind of the reason you're missing it.” The final words faded into nothing, my heart pounding in my ears.

He stared at me, his eyes darting to my mouth, and then quickly back to my eyes. He looked slightly startled and backed up a step, opening his mouth as if to say something and then closing it again. “I . . . no. I can't. I'm sorry.”

I stared at him for a second, feeling a cold sinking in my stomach at being turned down, at the way he was moving away from me as if he didn't want to be near me. Didn't want to touch me.

Oh. Oh God.

Realization dawned. Of course. I'd almost forgotten about the bedbugs. I felt suddenly nauseated. Of course he wouldn't want to get close to me. What had I been thinking? He had defended me before Alicia, but he was still revolted by me. There had been a moment of kindness in his eyes—how he'd used to look at me—but now it was gone. *He was gone.* “Okay,” I whispered. I turned abruptly and began stuffing the rest of my laundry into the bag.

“Lia.”

I ignored him, continuing to put the piles haphazardly away. My hands were shaking though, and I dropped a stack of pants, a tiny sobbing sound coming up my throat. I started bending to pick them up, but I felt Preston's hands on my arms and then he had stepped right up to me and I felt the warmth of him at my back. “Lia,” he repeated.

The one word, spoken with so much intensity, lashed at my heart, causing the loneliness I'd felt inside most of my life—and certainly more so in the last couple of weeks—to come barreling at me as if it would knock me straight to the ground. Only his body, the solid wall of it, kept me from hitting the floor.

I leaned back against him, weak with the emotional impact, going limp as he wrapped his arms around me from behind. “I'm not . . . I'm not dirty. I made sure—”

“Stop,” he growled against my ear. “There's nothing, *nothing* dirty about you.”

My racing heart steadied, and my ragged breathing calmed. He was holding me, and it felt so good. The need for human contact overwhelmed me and though I knew I should step away and compose myself, I couldn't. Instead, I pressed backward, into his body and allowed myself to enjoy it. *Just for a minute. Just a small sliver of joy. Just one memory of being in Preston's arms.*

After a minute or so, he turned me around and pulled me back into his chest, wrapping his arms around me again in a strong embrace. *Oh*, my heart sighed.

I gripped the material of his T-shirt at his back and turned my cheek into his shoulder, letting out a shuddery breath and then inhaling the comforting smell of him—soap and that same faint saltiness I associated with him, and *only* him. *Preston.*

He was murmuring my name and running his hands up and down my back. After a minute I pulled

away slightly to look up at him, though I could have stayed that way forever. He was gazing down at me and his face was cast in the overly bright lighting of the Laundromat, the masculine lines of his bone structure made sharper by the harshness of the incandescent bulbs, the shadow of hair under the skin of his jaw made more obvious. There was something so manly about him right then and I stared, mesmerized. When had he lost the last vestiges of boyishness and become a man? Or was it me, overly aware of his masculinity pressed up against him like this?

I had a momentary flashback to the time we'd sat in the town square eating ice cream. I'd wondered then when he'd started losing the look of childhood. And *now*, I was staring at him again and he'd graduated into manhood.

Part of my love for Preston was like a slow-moving river that had gained breadth and speed over time. And another part came in short bursts of white-hot lightning, marking the very moments when the love in my heart had charged and intensified. And I knew this would be one of those flashes, one of those moments burned into my memory, and even possibly, the last one I'd ever get.

“Lia,” he said yet again and his voice was low and throaty.

My body stilled and the moment itself seemed to freeze as we both stared at each other, our chests rising and falling against the other's. His eyes moved to my mouth again and I felt my lips part. For a breathless second I wondered if he might kiss me, wondered if those quick glances at my mouth meant he was considering it. But then his eyes snapped to mine and he moved back slightly. “I—”

“I'm sorry,” I said, dropping my arms. “I've gotten your shirt wet.” I pointed toward the wet mark near his shoulder where the tears I hadn't even realized were falling had soaked through the fabric.

He glanced down distractedly, but didn't comment. Didn't seem to care. He watched me for a second.

I shifted on my feet, feeling embarrassed and emotional and drained, confused and *fifteen*, and like I desperately needed someone to answer all my questions about life and love and the aching throb in my heart that never seemed to go away.

“I'd like to take you up on that dance if you're still offering.”

“What?”

“The dance. This is my favorite song.”

I blinked, pulling myself back to reality, to the bright Laundromat with music piping softly through the speakers.

I paused and then looked down, biting my lip and laughing softly. “Your favorite song is ‘Stuck on You’ by Lionel Richie?”

He nodded. “I’m a big fan of the eighties.” His expression remained serious but his eyes crinkled slightly at the corners.

Something fluttery moved between my ribs and I couldn’t help smiling back, though he hadn’t exactly given me a smile. I took a deep breath, my shoulders relaxing as I gazed into his earnest eyes. “I’d love to.”

We both stepped toward each other at the same moment and laughed when we collided gently, and whatever tension had been there seemed to ease.

He wrapped his arms around me and we began to dance slowly under the bright lights. He tightened his grip around my waist and spun me when the chorus came on. Surprised, I laughed and gripped him tighter, joyful delight expanding my chest. He sang softly in my ear about a midnight train and a feeling down deep in his soul, and I could feel the smile on his lips against my cheek and it filled me with dreamy happiness.

We moved together again, and my heart was beating triple time at the closeness of our bodies, the awareness of every part of him pressed directly against me, and the giddiness of discovering this new playful side of Preston, one I’d only ever glimpsed.

We swayed and something about moving as one that way felt so incredibly intimate. I’d never danced before and now I understood why it might lead to . . . more.

The tension between us built again, only this time the undercurrent was different—warm and exciting. My body felt heated in a way I’d never experienced, my breasts heavier as they pressed against the solidness of Preston’s chest. My nipples hardened and I blushed at my own body’s reactions, wondering if he felt it, wondering if he knew. Would it make him uncomfortable if he did?

His hand gripped mine and his breathing seemed to increase. My brain clouded slightly and I felt off

balance and again, had the sensation that the only reason I was standing was because Preston was holding me up.

I tilted my head back and gazed up at him to find him already staring down at me. His stare was intense, but then Preston's stare was usually intense.

The moment of lighthearted singing had passed and moved to something else—something I wasn't experienced enough to name. I wanted to know if he was feeling the same things I was, if maybe things were changing between us. But I was too shy and insecure. I didn't know how to ask, couldn't risk my far-too-tender heart to rejection.

He stepped back, letting go of me and jarring me out of my own foggy thoughts. I felt the loss of his body heat as harshly as I felt the loss of the connection I'd felt so strongly.

"I should go."

"You . . . you don't have to." My smile was shaky. "The eighties never end here."

He ran a hand through his hair, not reacting to my attempted joke. "Yeah. I do."

Cold achiness settled in my bones, extinguishing the warmth I'd been feeling. Oh God, he hadn't been feeling the same things I had. I had been wishing this moment could last forever, and he was ready to end it.

"And you should get home," he said. "I'll give you a ride." He looked around, frowning slightly. "This doesn't seem like the safest place for you to come by yourself."

He spoke as if he were a father or an older brother, and I wrapped my arms around my waist, realizing that's exactly how he saw me. A little sister. Someone to look out for. Someone to dance with for a few minutes and wipe away her tears. The kid who'd been following on his heels since she was barely out of training pants.

Cole kissed me, but all Preston ever wanted was to protect me.

I didn't take his protective nature lightly. I'd always appreciated it so much, but suddenly I hated it with the burning heat of a thousand suns. It meant he didn't want me. I brought my chin up and forced a smile. "Well, thank you for checking on me. Thank you for coming out here."

He nodded once, rubbing his hands together. I reached down and gathered the pants I'd dropped and

pushed them into the bag, along with the other things I'd folded, the few unfolded items, and my paperback. Preston picked up the heavy bag from the counter, and I followed him outside to his truck.

There was no point in asking him to drop me off somewhere other than my house. He'd already seen it. We rode in silence and though I tried to think of something to say, something that might bring back the easy rapport we'd had as we danced in the Laundromat, I couldn't think of anything. All too soon, he was pulling to the side of the dirt road next to my house and I looked over at him.

I wasn't sure why, but when I thought about our friendship, I realized he'd been pulling away for a while. The last time we'd sat and talked quietly together, had been the day I gave him the other half of my sea glass heart. *"Someday I'm going to leave here, but a part of my heart is going to remain. With you."* Mine was wrapped in a small piece of cloth and kept under my mattress. He'd probably thrown his away, never to think of it again. Now he was going to leave here, and a part of my heart would go with him, even though he clearly didn't want it. *I missed my friend.*

"Thank you, Preston." *For being my friend once, for giving me my first dance, for watching over me.* It was all I had. It would have to be enough.

He paused for the breath of a moment and then his lips tipped up slightly, too, looking more like a strange grimace in the dim light of his truck. "Goodnight, Lia," he said.

I paused for a second, waiting—*hoping*—he might say more, but he didn't, so I grabbed my laundry bag and hopped down, shutting his door behind me and walking quickly inside, not looking back.

I didn't hear his truck pull away until after I'd shut the door of my house behind me. My mama was already sleeping. I dropped the laundry bag on the floor and curled up on my air mattress.

"Annalia." My mama's voice drifted to me from the other side of the room, though she was turned toward the wall.

"Yes, Mama?"

"You don't open your legs for the boys." She spoke in broken English and I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it had something to do with Preston coming by. Maybe it was the first time she realized I lived in two worlds—one in Spanish, and one in English. Perhaps she was trying to relate to me in the world that she was warning me about. *Whatever* it was, it embarrassed me, and I felt heat rise in my face.

My mama had never talked to me about boys. For a second I almost sat up, desperate to ask her all the questions I wanted answers to so badly. But the words stuck in my throat as so many of my words did. I didn't know how to start, not with my mama, and so I relaxed my muscles, sinking back down onto my bed. "No, Mama."

She paused for a second before she spoke again. "Rich boy only want one thing from nobody girl."

Nobody girl. There wasn't malice in her tone, just weariness. Her words, as usual, had been harsh, and I wondered if there had been something lost in translation. The few times she'd attempted to speak English to me, she'd chosen words that weren't exactly what she meant.

I wished she'd spoken in Spanish so I could have understood her better. Because long into the night the words—misused as they might have been—still echoed in my head:

Nobody girl.

Nobody girl.

Nobody girl.

Me.

The beginning of that summer was unbearably hot. A month after school ended, I got a job working evenings as a hostess at the IHOP in town. Working nights allowed me to continue helping my mama at the motel.

Though it wasn't much, the extra income allowed me to buy a few new summer clothes—ones I desperately needed—and help put some more decent food on the table.

I was happy to be busy, and relieved to be helping around the house. And I was also thankful to be so tired every day that I barely had the strength to miss Preston.

Both boys were working on their family farm that last summer and would leave in August for college on the East Coast. My heart pinched whenever I thought about it, even though I hadn't seen Cole since

school ended and hadn't seen Preston since that night when we'd danced under the lights of the Laundromat.

Just the thought of them being so far away caused grief to well up in my throat. They'd been a constant in my world, seemingly all my life. I couldn't remember a time when their twin smiles hadn't been waiting for me right up the road, even if I went months and months without seeing them.

Cole surprised me one evening as I was leaving work. I laughed when he stepped in front of me, grinning and almost causing me to trip over my own feet.

"Hi," I breathed, joy rising within at his familiar face. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned. "One of my friends mentioned he saw you working here."

I nodded. "Just for a month now."

"I've missed you. You're a hard person to pin down, Annalia Del Valle."

I laughed softly. "Right, because so many are trying . . . to . . . pin me down."

"I am. I'm trying to pin you down." His eyes were searching and I looked away on a laugh, feeling slightly awkward.

"I thought we'd see more of each other this year with going to the same school, but we really didn't, did we?"

I shrugged, knowing it was my fault. I'd avoided them there. And the bedbug incident, as I referred to it now in my mind, had been proof that I'd been right to do so. "You were seniors this year. I was just a freshman. Our paths just didn't cross much."

He smiled. "Hmm. Well, here we are tonight, our paths crossing. I thought you might need an escort home."

Nerves prickled. Preston had seen my house, and I hadn't liked it. I didn't want to repeat the experience with Cole. I turned back toward the door when I heard Cathy—my coworker and the girl who usually gave me a lift home—exiting behind me. "I've got an escort tonight, Cathy."

Cathy grinned and waved as she turned in the direction of her car. I turned back to Cole. "Where's your truck?"

"Preston has it tonight."

I cleared my throat, refusing to think about where Preston might be. Or namely who Preston might be with. I nodded. “You can walk me to my turnoff.”

His eyes lingered on me for a moment but then he nodded. “All right.” We walked in silence for a few minutes before he asked, “Are you really okay? After what—”

“I’m fine.” My cheeks colored and I was glad for the dim outside lighting. I didn’t want to talk about the *incident*—it still mortified me.

He looked thoughtful for a moment before he put his hands in his pockets and glanced up at the moon. He seemed especially pensive tonight and reminded me of his brother. “Are *you* okay?”

It was still strange spending time with Cole without Preston there. I was so aware of his absence—probably even more so than if I’d been completely alone. Although it was funny because I hadn’t felt that way when I’d spent time with just Preston.

“Yeah, I’m fine. We’re, uh . . . we’re leaving in a couple of days.”

I stopped and turned to him, startled. “A couple of days? I thought you were leaving mid-August?”

He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “Our dorm opened up earlier than we were originally told it would, and Preston thought it’d be good to get out there and look for jobs before school started.”

My heart sank. “Oh. Jobs. Right . . .” I licked my lips, a sense of panic filling my chest. I blinked at him. “You’re here to say goodbye.”

He nodded and it was the first time I thought I’d seen an expression of sadness etched into the lines of Cole’s handsome face. “Yeah.” He looked off into the distance for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “I could have borrowed my dad’s truck tonight but I kind of just wanted to walk. I’ve been walking through town, just . . . remembering. Feels so strange to know I’m going to wake up somewhere other than here for the next four years.”

I took a deep, calming breath. Despite my sadness, I was happy for them. “You’re finally getting out of here,” I said, offering him a weak smile, the only one I could muster at the moment.

He smiled back and took my hand as we started walking again, giving it a squeeze. “I’m going to miss this place,” he said, grinning wider.

I tilted my head and looked at him sideways. “Yeah? Where are you gonna be?”

“In a college classroom, gettin’ myself educated.”

I laughed softly, squeezing his hand back. I was happy for Cole, truly and deeply. This time the joke we’d always laughed about wasn’t a joke at all, but reality.

We turned out of town and started walking slowly down the dirt road that led to his house and the turnoff for the road to mine.

The luminous moon cast a glow on the miles of farmland stretched to either side of us, the hills in the distance a dark outline against the indigo sky. “Are you going to miss it here at all?”

He shrugged. “I’m going to miss you.”

I smiled. “I’m going to miss you, too. This town is going to seem so much smaller when you’re gone.”

“Without my larger-than-life personality?”

I laughed softly. “Yeah, actually.”

We walked in companionable silence for several minutes and before I knew it, we’d reached the dirt road that separated us in more ways than one.

“Here we are,” I said softly, feeling a sudden overwhelming sadness. This was goodbye. I had no idea if this was goodbye forever, if he would go off to college and forget all about me, or if I really meant more to him. I wasn’t naïve about the parties and girls college would offer him. *And Preston.*

Cole turned to me and took me in his arms, lowering his mouth to mine. He pulled me close and kissed me deeply, his tongue twisting with mine. I tried to lose myself in the kiss but only felt half-involved. It was the last physical contact I’d get for a long time, possibly forever, though I refused to consider that dismal possibility too closely.

When we parted, he smiled and looked at me for several moments, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. I couldn’t make out his exact expression in the dimness of the night but it looked thoughtful, and for a moment, I wondered if he was going to make note of there not being a spark between us. “I know we barely got started, Lia, but wait for me.”

I tilted my head, our bodies still pressed together. “Wait for you . . .” I repeated, surprised. My

thoughts had been going in such an opposite direction.

“Don’t give yourself to someone else.”

I let out a rush of breath and pulled away. Did he really have no idea how few friends I had? “That’s not likely, Cole.” I was only fifteen, but even so, the only boys who had ever even given me the time of day were Preston and Cole. And that might be mostly because we’d been friends since we were little kids.

I shook my head. “But . . .” I paused as I gathered my thoughts, “you have so much living to do. This is your dream. Enjoy every second of it to the fullest. For both of us, okay?”

He smiled, leaning in and kissing my forehead. “Okay.”

We lingered in our goodbye but finally it was time to go. I turned and walked away from Cole, looking over my shoulder once to wave back to him. But he’d already turned in his own direction.

CHAPTER FIVE

Preston – Eighteen Years Old

I'd watched from a distance as she'd tilted her head back and laughed, her hair flowing in thick curls down her back. I'd watched as my brother took her hand and begun walking her home, my guts twisting with jealousy.

I leaned back on the seat, taking in deep breaths of air. I'd come to say goodbye and hadn't realized Cole had the same idea.

I'd avoided her since that night in the Laundromat. It hadn't been difficult. We were so busy on the farm, and Cole and I felt like we needed to help Dad as much as possible before we were both gone, leaving him short, leaving him to handle the things we'd always done. He'd hired a couple of guys to do the work we'd been doing but still, he was going on sixty-two—it was time for him to be slowing down, not working harder than ever.

I hovered between wanting to spend every day helping out at home, and all day far, far away. My parents were fighting more than they'd ever fought before, and I was sick of the endless yelling, the endless sound of my mom's sobs echoing through the house, and the way I'd look out of my window at night where I could just barely see the glow of a cigarette coming from the barn where my dad would smoke and pace, not knowing how to handle her constant high emotions.

And then she'd come downstairs and glare at me before bursting into more tears, gripping my shirt and crying as I held her. "Say something," she'd sob. But what was I supposed to say?

So she'd pull back and turn away muttering how I was just like him.

Once I'd gone out to the barn where my dad was after one of their fights and he'd looked at me and sighed before muttering, "Don't ever marry a woman just because she makes you feel weak in the knees, son. It isn't enough." And it'd made me feel sad and confused and frustrated with both of them.

Lia made me feel weak in the knees. And maybe I knew what my dad meant because there was an achy pain associated with that knowledge.

I watched *Lia* continue to laugh as *Cole* said something else and then they turned out of sight. And as much as I wished it was me with her tonight, I couldn't deny that I loved watching her smile—even if it was because of *Cole*.

I pictured her tiny rundown house, the squalor I'd glimpsed over her mother's shoulder, and my throat clogged with heartache. *Lia* deserved every second of happiness she could get.

I pulled out of the parking lot and headed home.

Later that night when *Cole* came in, I was sitting in the kitchen going over some paperwork regarding the farm that I wanted to get in order before we left. Dad had never been one for keeping things organized and I could only imagine how the farm's files would be neglected when we left.

"If I wanted to file stuff, I'd have worked in an office," Dad would drawl. "I'm a farmer, not an accountant."

I looked up when the back door opened and *Cole* came sauntering in, opening the refrigerator and pulling out the orange juice and taking a long drink straight from the carton.

He flopped down at the table, yawning and running his hand through his hair and peering at the form I was filling out. "Dad's gonna have to get by without us, you know. You should let him start getting used to it."

"I don't mind."

After a minute I looked up and he was watching me curiously. "What?"

"Nothing. Aren't you going to ask where I was tonight?"

"I know where you were. I saw you walking with *Lia*."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled as he leaned back in the chair, balancing it on two legs. For a minute I wanted to give him a small push and watch him topple over backward onto the floor.

I had mixed emotions about going away to college—and especially so far away. Part of me wanted to stay right here on the farm I loved, but part of me longed to get away from the tense mood in our house. And, I could admit, from that achy pain of loving *Annalia*.

When we'd been applying to colleges, I'd thought that if I had to go away, having my brother there would make it easier. But now . . . now I was second-guessing that idea. Now I was thinking it might have been better to avoid him for the next four years.

"She's going to wait for me."

I narrowed my eyes. "Wait for you . . ."

"While I'm away."

"What does that even mean?"

He shrugged. "It means I want her. She's too young for anything more than kissing now. But she won't be when we get back. And I don't want her to give herself to some asshole who's going to end up using her." His brow furrowed. "Lia, she's so . . . shy and withdrawn sometimes. I'd hate for her to get involved with the wrong guy, some asshole who wouldn't have her best interests at heart."

My stomach churned with pent-up jealousy and want, and it annoyed and angered me. I didn't want her to give herself to anyone either. I didn't want to know that she'd given herself to *Cole*, even if he'd only kissed her. *Tasted* her. I knew he had but hearing the words aloud made it even worse somehow. The knowledge that she wanted him, had responded to him physically, already sat inside me like a heavy weight of misery. "She's *fifteen*. She shouldn't be waiting for anyone."

He brought his chair forward, the front legs making a soft clack when they hit the floor. He shrugged. "I asked her and she said yes."

I stared at him for a moment before pushing the paperwork away and standing up. "I'm going to bed."

"We've all been friends for a long time, Pres. Aren't you going to go say goodbye to her?"

I had turned and started walking to the stairs but halted at his question. I thought of that night in the Laundromat when I'd danced with Annalia. I thought about how I'd held her close and yearned to kiss her with every beat of my heart. And for a moment I'd thought I'd felt her body react to mine and wondered if the vulnerability in her eyes wasn't just the sweet defenselessness I'd always seen shining from those green depths, but maybe it was *more*. Maybe it was directed at me and maybe she might want to kiss me, too.

But I'd agreed to step back for Cole if I lost that damn race and he'd already moved in—slowly, and

pretty late in the game as far as us leaving, but moved in nonetheless. *Brother honor. A man is only as good as his word.*

For a second I'd almost said to hell with it. To hell with brother honor. To hell with my word being any good. To hell with anything that didn't involve my lips on Lia's and the proclamation that she was *mine*, that she'd always been mine, regardless of contests or a spit-wet handshake, or even my palm on a Bible and the eyes of a thousand people bearing witness to a sworn oath.

What happened when your words agreed to something but your heart couldn't be swayed? But then I'd remembered I was going away. She was so damn young and so was I for that matter. What was the point anyway? She'd responded to Cole just as I'd figured she would. *If I was the one who could call her mine, would she have waited for me?* The thought brought a sharp ache. Within my love for Lia had always existed an edge of pain and maybe it was best to get out from under the grip of something that brought as much hurt as it did joy. Time would do that. Distance would do that.

Aren't you going to say goodbye to her?

I closed my eyes on the memory of how her soft, slender body had felt pressed against me and how sweet she'd smelled. And *that* was the memory I wanted to take with me. Without turning, I answered, "I already did."

CHAPTER SIX

Four Years Later

Annalia

“Hey, Annalia, are you coming with us?” I turned around to see Lacie heading for the door with her jacket slung over her arm. “We’re going to Brady’s. One drink?”

I paused, ready to say no, but then reconsidered. They’d asked me so many times and I *always* said no. Pretty soon they wouldn’t even ask me anymore. I could stop for one drink on my way home. Why not? “Sure.” I smiled. “I’m just finishing up here. I’ll be done in five.”

Lacie’s smile held a fair bit of surprise. “Awesome. We’ll see you there.” She waved as she pushed open the double glass door.

I quickly finished up the side work I’d been doing, removed my small waitressing apron and clocked out, calling a goodnight to the kitchen workers.

Fifteen minutes later I was pulling my small beater car up in front of Brady’s, a local dive bar, and hopping out. I’d stay for an hour tops and then head home. It’d been a long shift, and I was tired and smelled like syrup and bacon. It had been a pleasant, comforting smell once, but after four years, I was over it.

It was unseasonably hot, even for June, and though the sun had already set, the air was stuffy and still.

The state had officially declared a drought just two months earlier, but the local farmers had been worried about their crops far longer than that. We were a farming town and what happened at the farms affected every business in the area. So *everyone* was worried, living and breathing the weather forecast and glancing constantly at the sky for the most scant sign of rain even the experts may have missed.

I couldn't help wondering about Sawyer Farm and how they were dealing with the drought. I'd spoken to Cole occasionally over the years, and I'd even seen him a couple of times when he'd come home for one break or another. He'd pulled me to him both times, smiling and kissing me, but we'd ended up talking more than making out. I wondered vaguely if Cole was seeing other girls in college but didn't ask him. I sort of figured he was—and really, he should—but it didn't weigh on my mind, so what was the point in potentially creating an uncomfortable situation or causing him to believe I was suggesting he shouldn't be dating?

I'd attempted skating around the topic of Preston, but in the end, even though it still hurt that he'd never said goodbye, I'd been too desperate to hear any news of him, so I'd asked Cole how he was. Cole had told me he was enjoying college and finally letting loose a little bit, that the girls couldn't get enough of him. A stab of jealousy had sliced into a tender spot inside me, and I'd barely stopped myself from wincing with the pain. I'd cried later, and then felt angry at myself for my tears. Preston was doing exactly as he should be doing—he was living his life. As far as I knew, he stayed on the East Coast during the summers, working, and taking classes even during breaks.

I'd become accustomed to not seeing the Sawyer boys for long stretches of time—even when they'd been living in the same town—so I continued as I had for most of my life: I loved them from afar.

And I was busy enough that my own life distracted me. I graduated high school, started working full time as a waitress at IHOP, and began making enough money that I moved Mama to an apartment in town. A studio was all I could afford and so my mama and I still slept in the same room, but it was bigger, with new carpeting on the floor, a small but clean kitchen, and a bathroom with an actual door. I wondered if other people smiled every time they clicked a lock behind themselves and figured they didn't. It was a pitiful sort of joy, I supposed, but it was a joy nonetheless, and I would take what I could get in that arena. I always had.

My mama quit working at the motel and although I couldn't do anything about her back—we didn't have health insurance or enough money to go to a doctor, much less consider surgery—I felt pride in the fact that she no longer endured the physical labor that had caused her injury in the first place.

Though money was still very, very tight, I'd saved up over four years and finally had eight hundred

dollars to buy my very first car: a silver Hyundai with almost two hundred thousand miles on its engine and rust on its fender. I had the interior detailed, hung a vanilla air freshener on the rearview mirror, and smiled every time I turned the key in the ignition. It was mine and I had earned it with hour after hour of hard, honest work.

The interior of Brady's was dim and smelled like old beer and something lemony—maybe some type of polish used on the ornate wooden bar in the center of the room. I squinted until my eyes adjusted and I was able to spot my coworkers already at a table near the window. I smiled as I approached, and they called out a greeting, pulling a chair out for me so I could sink down into it.

My coworkers were young like me and went out for drinks after almost every evening shift. IHOP was open twenty-four hours and when I'd first become a waitress, I'd worked graveyard shift, which had been hard when I had to get up early for classes. But the money was good and it'd improved our situation so I made do, sleeping when I could and studying during my breaks. Recently, I'd gained enough seniority to work days, but I usually picked up a few evening shifts, too, if someone needed a fill-in.

Because there was a uniform, my clothing wasn't noticed or compared as it had been at school, and the fact that I felt on more of an even playing field in that regard, had helped me come out of my shell a little and make some friends—friends who I thought liked me for me, and didn't alienate me, judging my low social status.

Even so, I rarely joined those going out, so they teased me after I'd ordered a Coke, asking who I was and what I'd done with the hermit known as Annalia. I joked back, turning the conversation. Even though none of my coworkers came from rich families, they wouldn't understand my situation, wouldn't understand the pressure of doing well at my job, of making every penny in tip money I could. They rolled into work hung over most days, ignored customers to sit at the break table in the back if they were tired, and didn't have a dependent parent at home with no safety net whatsoever.

Sometimes I felt like I was the most ancient person on earth in the body of a nineteen-year-old.

My Coke was delivered and I took a sip.

“You can order a beer here, you know. Brady doesn't care,” Sonya, another waitress, said, tipping her own beer to her lips.

I shrugged and made a face. “I don’t like beer.” The truth was, I was the daughter of an illegal immigrant. I would never purposefully break the law and risk bringing legal attention to myself and perhaps my mother. Again, this was something I could never attempt to explain to other people who didn’t live the life I led. Nor would I ever try. I carried it alone. When at school, it had been an unconscious decision, as I had never fit in. I was friends with the misfits. At work, we were all much the same, and it felt good to have friends but it didn’t mean I would consider opening up to anyone. Even if I wanted to, I didn’t think I’d know how. I’d been so isolated—*reclusive*—for so long, it was just a part of me now, like my black hair or green eyes.

Those damn parameters in which I would always be contained.

We all chatted and joked for a few minutes before the name Sawyer caught my attention being spoken from somewhere over my shoulder. I startled very slightly, my ears tuning into the conversation between two young Mexican men sitting at the bar, speaking in Spanish. From what I could pick up over the buzz of noise around me, one of them worked at Sawyer Farm and was worried they were going to get laid off after Warren Sawyer had passed away several days before. My breath caught. Warren Sawyer—Preston and Cole’s father—had passed away? I hadn’t heard. Not that I would have, except Linmoor was a small town. Sadness lodged in my throat. Poor Preston and Cole. I didn’t know a whole lot about their family dynamic, but I knew they both respected their father immensely, and he’d always been a fair employer to my mama.

I stayed for another half hour or so and then told the group I was leaving and said my goodbyes. Outside, I grabbed a newspaper from the box near the curb and threw it on my seat before driving home. Once I’d pulled into my space at the apartment complex where we lived, I opened the paper to the obituaries and scanned the headings. My heart sunk.

Warren Sawyer, 66, passed away Wednesday, June 2. Born and raised in Linmoor, California, Warren is survived by wife, Camille, and sons, Preston and Cole. Funeral services will be held Monday, June 7 beginning at 11 a.m. at Ritchie & Peach Funeral Home. Friends and family are invited for refreshments at the Sawyer family farm after the service.

I'd been holding my breath as I read, and I let it out in a rushed exhale. I wondered how he'd died. What would this mean for the farm and the Sawyer boys? Should I go to the funeral? I sat biting my lip, wondering. Wouldn't it be proper to pay respects, both as a friend of Preston and Cole and as someone whose family member had once worked there? I wondered if my mama would want to go and immediately rejected the question. I knew better. She wouldn't.

Gathering my things, I got out of the car and walked up the stairs to our apartment, letting myself quietly inside. My mama was sleeping soundly on the used mattress I'd bought her when we'd moved in here, after I'd inspected it thoroughly for bedbugs. I still shivered in disgust and humiliation at that awful, long-ago memory—but not nearly long ago *enough*. *The bone-deep chill I'd felt, humiliating Preston and Cole . . .*

My socks were quiet on the padded carpet as I tiptoed to the bathroom and locked the door behind me, smiling slightly at the click that continued to be a small pleasure. As I washed the day from my skin, I decided that, yes, I would go to Warren Sawyer's funeral. It was the right thing to do. I told myself it had absolutely nothing to do with seeing Preston, but I knew that was a lie.

The church was packed to the rafters, but I managed to find a seat in the back, pressed between two families. I had to sit mostly leaned on one hip in order to fit, and the people on either side seemed annoyed that I'd squeezed myself in. But it was either that or stand in the back and I was too nervous to situate myself somewhere where I'd likely be one of the first faces the family saw as they entered the church.

The voices hushed as Camille Sawyer appeared in the doorway, her eyes red and her lips quivering. She must be in her fifties but she was still a stunning woman who, from a distance, looked more like thirty-five. Her pale blonde hair was in a classic twist and her figure was trim and svelte in a sleeveless,

black dress. She stood in the light of the doorway for a moment as if she was posing for the cameras. The effect was striking with the sunshine streaming in behind her and highlighting her golden beauty, and if I'd had a cell phone, I would have been tempted to raise it and snap a shot. But then two tall figures joined her, taking her arms as they moved out of the backlight and into the dim church.

My breath caught and my stomach clenched. The last time I'd seen Cole had been a year ago but even since then, he'd changed. He was even broader, or maybe he just seemed that way wearing the stiff, dark suit, but the lines of his face were definitely stronger and less boyish than they'd been. My gaze traveled slowly to Preston and though he was identical to Cole, the change in him was more startling because I hadn't seen him for so much longer. And my God, they were handsome. Something about their double beauty made them even more gasp-worthy. Throughout the church, I swore I heard a collective feminine sigh.

My heartbeat sped up and all the feelings I'd thought were in the past came slamming back in the time between one breath and the next. Oh dear Lord. How had I forgotten what it felt like to be in the same room as Preston? Had spending time with Cole on those two occasions over the years, emailing him from my school account now and again, led me to fool myself into believing that my feelings for Preston were the same easy, lukewarm emotions I had for Cole? Without having them together, without the contrast right in front of me, I'd somehow begun to believe my feelings for them were similar. More to the point, I'd *wanted* to convince myself of that falsehood because it was less painful than the truth that the twin I loved didn't love me and had found it easy to leave without once looking back.

I sagged down on the pew as they passed by, both of them staring straight ahead, grief etched into their expressions. Camille Sawyer walked slowly, a singular tear sliding down her creamy cheek as she leaned in to Preston.

I sat numbly through the service, only able to see the backs of their heads. Their mother's soft cries echoed through the church, and she turned to Preston again and he put his arm around her, pulling her close. She was between both of her boys and I wondered briefly why she appeared to rely more heavily on Preston to hold her up than on Cole.

"How sad," the woman next to me murmured. "He was far too young."

“Was it a heart attack, did they say?” her husband whispered.

“Yes. He died out in the fields. Fell right over. One of those Mexicans carried him inside.” *One of those Mexicans.*

In my peripheral vision, I saw the woman who’d uttered the words glance quickly at me and then away as if she’d just realized *one of those Mexicans* was sitting next to her. I stared ahead, pretending I hadn’t heard her.

After it was over, I watched as Preston and Cole walked back up the aisle, their crying mother between them. Preston’s jaw was rigid and Cole’s eyes were fixed straight ahead. I had the urge to reach out and touch their arms, to offer some measure of comfort, to let them know I was here, and I hurt for them.

The crush of people moved slowly toward the open doorway and by the time I stepped outside, the family was gone, back to their house as the paper had announced.

I’d decided earlier to drop by their home with a dish, if only to give my condolences, but I hesitated now, feeling nervous and unsure. There would be so many people there. They wouldn’t miss me; they had closer friends. *They’d always had closer friends.* I assumed half their high school class would be there, and they’d be overwhelmed as it was. But I also didn’t want to let my own fear stop me from doing what I felt was right—it was *right* to offer my sympathies to two people I cared about. And the paper had offered an open invitation.

I climbed in my car and checked on the pie I’d put in a cooler. The ice inside was almost completely melted, but the pie still felt cool. I’d siphoned twenty dollars from our budget to make the pie and had stayed up late after I’d gotten home from work baking it. Though I’d never made a pie before, I’d asked an older woman at work named Darla for a recipe and she’d given me one for an apple blueberry she said was sure to impress. It smelled amazing, and was pretty enough to present to the Sawyers.

The dirt road in front of the Sawyer family farmhouse was already lined with cars when I arrived and I pulled behind a red Jeep across from the barn and took a deep breath, glancing in the mirror to make sure I didn’t look too wilted. I didn’t have air conditioning in my car and I felt the sticky slide of sweat dripping down the inside of my black blouse and collecting between my breasts, but I hoped the color

would hide any wet marks.

Grabbing a tissue from my glove box, I blotted at the sweat droplets on my forehead and upper lip, freshened my lip gloss, and got out.

I walked slowly and carefully toward their house, unaccustomed to the short heels I'd borrowed from the sixteen-year-old next-door neighbor, holding the pie in both hands.

There were a few people mingling on the large front porch, sipping cold drinks and talking in somber tones. Through the open window to the left of the front door, I saw people inside what looked to be the kitchen.

My heart rate increased, that familiar feeling of not belonging causing my skin to prickle. The sweat still sliding down my back felt cold and clammy. I took a deep breath and gave a man standing near the porch railing a smile that felt timid. He nodded back to me and I walked slowly to the door, raising my hand and knocking.

My muscles tensed as I waited and when the door opened ten seconds later, I made an effort to relax so I didn't look as stiff and uncomfortable as I felt. Camille Sawyer was standing on the other side, blotting her nose with a tissue. She stared at me, waiting.

"Ma'am," I said. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Her brows drew in slightly, and she brought the tissue away from her face. Her eyes were puffy from crying, and her nose was slightly red, but her lipstick was still perfectly applied, her hair beautifully sleek, her eyes vivid aqua in contrast to her pink-rimmed lids, and she looked somehow especially lovely in her sadness. I saw Preston and Cole in her blue, almond-shaped eyes and high cheekbones.

My hands shook as I held the pie out to her, and she took it but then glanced down in confusion as if she hadn't meant to do so. "Aren't you that little thing the boys used to run around with outside?"

The heat in my face increased. I felt like I was standing in front of her as a ball of flame, a melting candle, and for a minute I could only nod. "I . . . yes, my mother used to work for Mr. Sawyer."

She sniffed and turned her face away for a moment, looking back into the house before turning back to me. "Well, I'll tell the boys you stopped by. Surely you understand why I don't invite you in." The look on her face held such disdain that I felt it like a sudden, sharp blow.

My heart dropped, and I felt sick. I'd known she didn't like Preston and Cole playing with me when we were children. Even in my childish understanding of the world, I'd received the message that she didn't believe it appropriate that her boys socialize with the farmworkers or their children. But I hadn't thought she'd outright snub me if I came to her front door as a woman, to pay my respects to her dead husband.

I'd been wrong. Incredibly wrong.

I remembered Warren Sawyer as a man who spent as much time working the land as the men and women he employed. I remembered him patting me on the head and handing me a ripe strawberry, and I remembered falling half in love with him for the way he smiled at me. I remembered him as very large and not very talkative, but with an air of kindness about him. Very much the strong, silent type but not without the light of depth in his eyes. *Like Preston.*

I wondered now if he'd disapproved of my friendship with his sons, too, and something about the question—the mere possibility—*hurt* me, though it felt like an irrational pain. I hadn't even really known him and now he was gone.

For a moment all I could do was focus on my borrowed shoes, wishing I could just disappear. But I gathered what pride I had left—precious little—and raised my chin, offering a small smile that felt wobbly, but I hoped wasn't visually so. “Please accept my condolences. Goodbye.” I turned slowly and walked with as much grace as I could over the porch and down the front steps.

The man I'd said hi to standing at the railing shot me an embarrassed look, and it made me want to shrink to know he'd heard the exchange, but I lifted my chin higher and continued my slow walk away from the Sawyer home.

When I'd only made it a few steps away from the house, Mrs. Sawyer's voice came to me through the open kitchen window, obviously speaking to someone else in the room. “Ick. Throw this in the garbage. It's probably not fit to eat.”

A lump rose in my throat and I sped up my pace, unwilling to cry while on this property. I walked back to my car and climbed inside, shutting the door and pulling hot air into my lungs. I'd left the windows down so my car wasn't an oven when I returned to it, but even so, the heat was stifling and I felt

mildly woozy. I leaned my head back on the seat and fought to regain my strength, waited as the pain of what had happened at the Sawyers' door lessened.

You're okay. You're okay. You're okay.

When I felt less shaken, I reached for my keys, movement in my peripheral vision causing me to glance out the window. Preston was walking very slowly toward my car. My heart jolted, the hand holding my keys freezing on the way to the ignition. He approached me slowly and as he did, I unconsciously opened the door of my car and stepped out, drawn to him without thought.

Our eyes held as I closed the door behind me, pressing my butt against it and waiting as he drew nearer.

“Lia.” He sounded shocked, his eyes moving over me quickly, coming to rest on my face. He roamed my features, too, blinking as he took another step closer. “My God, I thought it was you.”

“Preston,” I breathed, swallowing nervously. “I’m . . . I’m so sorry about your father.”

His eyes met mine, blank for a moment, as if I’d reminded him of something he’d momentarily forgotten. Then he nodded, his expression becoming solemn, that same serious expression he’d worn since he was just a kid.

Preston . . . Preston.

Despite what I’d just experienced with his mother, I couldn’t help smiling. I’d missed him so much, more than I’d admitted to myself. It was a sudden swelling inside of me as if a balloon had been inflated in my chest.

I let out a shaky laugh. And before I could blink, he’d scooped me into his arms, holding me tightly against his body. I let out a startled squeak and then hugged him back tightly. He was so solid against me, and I melted into him, needing the comfort, the affection, to help me let go of the feeling of being seen as dirty and unwanted. Preston had never seen me that way. I had wanted so much from him that he couldn’t give, but he’d always been generous with his acceptance, his praise.

He seemed to need the physical contact, too, because we held each other for several long moments. I finally pulled back, realizing I had to feel just as soggy to him as I felt to myself. I shook my head slightly, giving him an embarrassed smile. “I’m a sweaty mess.”

He chuckled softly. “Hard to help in this weather.” He gestured down to his own button-down shirt and I saw the dampness despite the T-shirt I could see outlined beneath. “Do you want to go inside and cool down? I’m sure Cole would like to know you’re here.”

I glanced nervously at his house and he followed my gaze, frowning. “Have you already been inside?”

I shook my head, my eyes sliding away from his. I wasn’t going to tell on his mom, especially today of all days. “I just dropped off a pie. I hadn’t planned to stay.”

He studied me for a moment as if he didn’t quite believe me, but he nodded to the barn and said, “I’ve been hiding out there. I’d like to hide for a little while longer if you’ll join me?”

I let out a breath. I had wanted to get as far away from his mother as quickly as possible, but I couldn’t imagine her coming out to the barn in her heels and lipstick, and I desperately wanted to spend a few more minutes with Preston. I nodded. “Yes, I’d like that.”

It didn’t escape me that I was a woman now and yet I was still sneaking around with Camille Sawyer’s boys behind her back. And it still felt worth it.

I followed Preston across the road and through the side yard of his house. A wall of lilac bushes obstructed the view of the house so I didn’t think his mother, or anyone else, could see us as we walked. I remembered the smell of the lilacs and that long-ago day I’d waited beside them as Preston had run inside to get the money to fix the disaster of my orange-dyed hair. The memory brought both a warm feeling and a sad melancholy.

Inside the barn wasn’t much cooler than outside, but it was dim and open and there was a very slight cross breeze between the open front doors and the back windows. Preston closed one of the doors, but kept one open presumably not to lose the little bit of airflow.

There were several large wooden storage boxes sitting against the wall and Preston took a seat on one. I sat on another one beside him, glancing around. We’d played in this barn once when we were little kids. It still looked the same. High-beamed ceiling, dusty wooden floor, farm equipment and machinery stored in the back, and tools hanging from hooks on the walls.

When I looked back at Preston, he was gazing at me with an unreadable expression. “How have you

been, Lia?”

I shrugged dismissively, smiling slightly. “I’ve been good. How about you? Cole told me you were enjoying college.”

His jaw ticked slightly and he glanced away, staring out the back window. “I was never the one who wanted to go away. That was always you and Cole.” He looked back at me, his lips tipped up. “I liked it fine though. I stayed busy. But I guess I found out what I always suspected—my heart is here.” He paused for a moment before continuing, “In the fields and the hills and even in this unholy heat.” His eyes squinted slightly with a crooked smile and my heart flipped over.

“You never came home . . . even during the summers.”

He shrugged a shoulder, one side of his full lips turning up so very slightly. He was silent for a second and then he let out a sigh, appearing almost pained. “I couldn’t leave twice, Lia. If I’d have come back—even for a short visit—I wouldn’t have been able to leave again. Pitiful, right?”

I shook my head. “No, Preston. You love it here. I always admired that about you. Your deep love of home. The way you’ve always been committed to this farm the same way your own father . . . was.” I flinched slightly, not wanting to hurt Preston with my use of past tense when speaking of his father, whether it was accurate or not. I could only imagine that was something that would have to be accepted slowly.

He gave me a small, sad smile before his eyes shifted upward for a moment as if in thought. “My dad wasn’t much for technology, at least not when it came to computers and such. But he wrote letters while we were gone and I wrote him back. He told a few stories, imparted farming wisdom.” He gave a small shake of his head. “They were usually short and sweet, but I’ll always have them, you know?” His voice filled with emotion and he cleared his throat. “I’ll always be grateful for those letters.”

“A gift,” I said softly.

He nodded, our gazes locked. “Yeah.”

I allowed myself to stare at him for a moment, drinking in the details of his face. His expressions and the intensity in his gaze made him completely unique even though he had an identical twin. His eyes were moving over my face in the same way I imagined mine were moving over his. And oh, I’d been starved

for him all these years. How had I not realized? It felt like I'd been starved for him for practically my whole life—always somewhere close but so very, very far away.

Even now, sitting here, it felt like Preston was removed from me in so many ways. Not just because of the obvious differences that had always been there, but in some deeper way I couldn't understand. And I wanted to but I didn't know where to begin. So much time had passed, and in some ways he was a stranger; in some ways he was so familiar. *He'd been my friend—one of my only friends. I hadn't fully realized before this moment that I'd been living with a hole in my heart. A Preston-sized hole.*

With some effort, I shifted my gaze away, toward the doors that led outside. “You're going to run the farm now?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“And Cole?” I knew he had majored in business like Preston, knew he wanted to work in some big city somewhere, but I didn't know how their father's death might have changed those plans.

Preston shook his head. “I don't know if he'll want to stay or not. We haven't even started working through any of that. It's all been such a shock.” He stared off into the distance for a moment, sadness moving over his expression.

I reached out and laid my hand on top of his where it rested on the box he was sitting on. He looked down quickly and watched as I took his hand in mine, holding it gently. His skin was slightly rough and I felt the shivers that had always moved through me when I touched Preston. In a flash of thought, I wondered what it would feel like if our bare skin touched everywhere—not just our hands but our thighs and our bellies and my breasts pressed to his naked chest. The vision jolted through me and I sucked in a breath, letting go of his hand and rubbing my palm on my skirt as if by doing so I could rub the erotic thought from my mind.

He was looking at me curiously. “Are you all right?” His voice sounded oddly scratchy and he cleared his throat, waving his hand through the dust motes that floated lazily in a shaft of sunlight in front of him. They dispersed momentarily, dancing madly in disarray, but then drifted back together exactly as they'd been, proving that some things could be interrupted but never forced to change in any permanent way, no matter how much effort you put forth.

I swallowed and looked away on a small nod. When I looked back at Preston, he was gazing at me with an amused smile that lit his face. “What?” I asked.

“You still do that.”

“Do what?”

His smile grew. “Go away into your own head for a minute or two. I used to wonder so hard what you were thinking.”

I tilted my head, surprised. “Why didn’t you ever ask?”

He ran his hand through his hair, looking slightly confused. “I guess I didn’t think you’d tell me. Thoughts can be so . . . personal.”

I considered him for a minute. Yes, that was true and perhaps I wouldn’t have shared many of my thoughts with Preston—but mostly because they were so often about him.

We sat in silence for a moment and things felt suddenly awkward between us. It was because of me. Preston affected me so much that I hardly knew how to control my own reactions to him. The mixture of the deep attraction that had always been there on my part and the shyness I felt after not having seen him for so long was wreaking havoc on my system.

“Tell me about your life now, Lia,” he said quietly after a moment.

I played with the hem of my skirt for a second, feeling insecure. He’d done so much in four years, and though my life was improved, the improvements were basic and wouldn’t sound very impressive. “I . . . well, I graduated last year, and since then I’ve been waitressing at IHOP.” I shrugged, a flush of embarrassment filling my face. I hoped my skin was already red enough from the sweltering heat that he didn’t notice. “We moved into an apartment in town.” I cringed internally, remembering when he’d come out to our house and seen the shack we’d lived in. “I don’t have much more of an update than that.” The words faded away, the last one coming out more breath than sound.

He studied me for a moment, his face unreadable, before he said, “Have you been happy?”

I tilted my head, taking a moment to consider that. “Well, I won’t say slinging pancakes is my life’s dream, but . . . yeah, I’ve been happy.” I didn’t know if that was precisely accurate, not about slinging pancakes not being my life’s dream—it wasn’t—but about being happy. I’d never asked myself that

question. At least not in such a direct way.

“What is your life’s dream? Is it still to get out of Linmoor?”

Is that what he thought my life’s dream was? I guessed Cole and I had always joked about that. Truthfully, though, my life’s dream had just been to get out of the tiny spaces I’d always occupied—not just where I lived, but the stifling nature of my life in general. I just wanted things around me to . . . open up. I didn’t know any other way to describe that than in terms of locations—long stretches of white sand beaches in Greece, or high mountains with winding ski trails in Austria. *Or endless rows of strawberries under a wide-open sky right up the road.* But somehow that dream seemed more impossible than those of far-off lands I had no earthly way to get to. I laughed softly. “I suppose.”

He was staring at me again in that intense way Preston did and though it was hot in the barn, a small shiver moved through me. It was dim and still, and we were both sweating. I could see the steady beat of his pulse under the tan skin of his neck and a bead of sweat moved slowly over it, my eyes following as it settled in the hollow at the base of his throat. And it was the sexiest thing I’d ever witnessed. My nipples tightened and a trickle of wet warmth pooled between my legs. This is how it would be on a hot night in a dim room if we were in bed together—both dewy from the exertions of lovemaking. Our combined scents filling the air. *God, Lia, stop it! Stop this line of thought.*

The last time I’d seen Preston, I’d been fifteen and I hadn’t understood all the reactions of my body. But I did now and I realized that it wasn’t only my heart that had always wanted him; it was my body, too.

Voices outside the barn jerked me from my thoughts and I stood quickly, looking toward the door. The low murmur of conversation moved past but whoever it’d been had helped me remember myself, where I was, and why I needed to leave. Even if Preston’s mother wasn’t likely to come out to the barn, someone else could and they might mention I was here. Not only that, but I couldn’t seem to keep my thoughts from straying to places that would only cause me hurt. “I’d better go.”

Preston stood, too. He opened his mouth as if to say something but then seemed to think better of it, pressing his lips together and simply nodding. “Okay. Let me walk you back to your car.”

I shook my head. “No, really, this gathering is for you and your family. Go back inside. I can walk myself. I’m so glad we got to visit for a few minutes. It’s really . . . well, it’s really good to see you,

Preston.” My voice sounded breathy and too high and by the way he was looking at me with a small frown of confusion, I knew he heard it, too.

“It was good to see you, too. Maybe the next time I get a craving for pancakes, I’ll come see you.”

I laughed, a small sound of both humor and breath. “You know where to find me. Will you, uh, give Cole my condolences as well?”

“He’s right inside . . .”

“I know. But I really have to go.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell him.”

I nodded, we paused awkwardly, and then both stepped forward at the same time, hugging quickly again before I turned and walked out of the barn. I didn’t look back to see if he was behind me or not, I couldn’t. The hug had been too brief, and if I looked back I would want to run back into his arms.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Preston

The gathering was still crowded with people. I moved through them, giving small smiles to those who patted my arm, offering condolences as I passed. I was still moving through a sort of fog, in disbelief that any of this was real, that my dad was gone, and Cole and I were without him to run the farm. And seeing Annalia on top of everything else, I was desperate to find a place where I could just be alone for a few minutes.

I'd almost stayed hidden in the barn, but Annalia's scent lingered, the sweetness of her skin mixed with the womanly musk of her sweat. It overwhelmed me and caused a boiling need inside that made the sweltering barn suddenly completely unbearable.

Our one-hundred-year-old farmhouse had never been wired for central air, but we had window units in the bedrooms. I just needed to make my way through the house and up the stairs. I heard my mother's voice rising and falling in the kitchen, sympathetic murmurs all around her—a captive audience to her misery—and I knew she was right where she wanted to be.

She'd been an actress when my father met her on a weekend trip to Los Angeles. After a whirlwind courtship, she'd married him and moved to Linmoor. Though, I often thought she'd never really given up her day job. Or maybe she'd become an actress in the first place because she was naturally suited for it. *Did she miss him? Had she ever really loved him? Or did she hate him as much as she hated being here, hated the farm life that had once probably appealed to her as romantic and instead had proven to be a way of life where nothing came easy?*

I breathed a sigh of relief when my feet hit the back stairs that were out of view of the guests and I took them quickly, closing the door to the room Cole and I had always shared behind me. I turned the window air conditioning unit to high and sank down onto my bed. The whir of the fan was loud enough

that the din from downstairs became muted background noise.

My body felt shaky and overheated, and I knew it was only partially from the temperature outside. *Annalia*. Christ. Seeing her again had been simultaneously torturous and joyful. I gripped the hair at my forehead, a sound of frustration coming up my throat. Hadn't that always been the case? Only this time . . . this time the shock of seeing her as a woman had nearly stopped my heart. I'd felt . . . breathless. Struck mute. *Consumed*.

She'd always been beautiful to me, from the very first moment I'd seen her, her feet bare and her lips wrapped around a strawberry. But now her beauty was a punch to my gut, almost shocking in its impact. The sweep of her lashes over those exquisite eyes, that tiny beauty mark, and the way her tongue darted out to wet her full lips. *Ah, God*.

I'd been away for four years, and the first fucking moment I laid eyes on her again, all my pent-up longing came slamming back as if I'd never been away at all—and worse, as if the distance had only increased my desire.

I'd known she and Cole got together over the years, but I'd resisted the urge to ask him for any details about her. He would have mentioned it if she wasn't doing well in some way or another, and since he didn't, I let that be my only solace that she was okay.

I didn't want to picture them together, didn't want to know what they'd done physically, whether or not she was still a virgin. More than that, I, needed to get over my feelings for her. I needed to pull away. Nothing lasted forever and surely my feelings for Lia were something attached to my hometown. As much as I'd never had any real desire to see a different part of the country, much less the world, what I did want was to remove myself from *her*, to pull up the roots of my yearning, the ones that had been planted when I was nothing more than a boy.

I'd needed a new perspective, some distance. Some sanity. Maybe even the experience of relationships I enjoyed, women I could date peacefully without feeling like I was tumbling head first over a cliff each time they looked at me. The way I felt with Lia.

And I'd thought I'd been successful at gaining some clarity, some peace of mind where she was concerned, but apparently, I hadn't. Being away had only put things on hold. And maybe I'd even

suspected as much and hadn't admitted it to myself until I saw her sitting across the road from my house in an old, beat-up car. I'd pulled her to me and felt almost drunk with the soft feel of her in my arms, the dewy look of her flushed skin. I hardened in my suit pants at the memory of it now, resisting the urge to take myself in my hand and relieve the terrible, aching pressure.

I'd been with plenty of women in college. I had a healthy appetite for sex, and I liked the soft feel of a woman beneath me, but somehow, I'd always felt slightly removed and strangely guilty as if what I was doing was wrong in some way. I didn't let myself look at that too closely because I suspected it had to do with Annalia, and she was out of reach. She was waiting for my brother, and even if she wasn't, we'd never been more than friends, some years not even that. Even when we'd been in the same town, some years, I'd gone months and months without laying eyes on her at all. And yet still, that damn one-sided craving lingered, and I was scared to death it always would.

I desperately wanted to turn my mind away from these thoughts, wanted to shut down my emotions. I hardly had time to be obsessing about Annalia or any woman when I had a farm to run. And now a drought was destroying our crops. *Our future. Our livelihood.* I'd gone out to the fields that morning and walked up and down the rows, looking at the drooping, parched plants and feeling a helplessness rise inside me. Had my father felt the same way the morning he died? Had he felt that wave of sorrow wash through him right before his heart gave out and he fell to his knees? I hated thinking that my father's last thought was of the dying all around him.

The door opened and I startled. I'd been so deep in my own thoughts, I hadn't heard footsteps coming toward my room. Cole stood in the doorway with his eyebrows raised. "I should kick your ass for leaving me down there to contend with Mom while you nap."

"I wasn't napping. I was hiding."

Cole let out an irritated huff that turned into a chuckle. "I don't blame you."

"How'd you get away?"

"I said we were out of ice and left to get some."

"Are we out of ice?"

"I have no idea."

I laughed softly. “They all mean well, but I hope to God they leave soon.”

“Then we’ll be left alone with Mom.”

I groaned but guilt gnawed at me. We’d lost a father, but she’d lost a husband. Of course, both Cole and I were shocked that they hadn’t divorced while we were away. I’d figured we’d come home to a broken family, had even been prepared for it. Frankly, I’d thought it would be for the best and a relief for all of us. But somehow they’d stuck it out, though from what I could tell, nothing had changed for the better.

A man is only as good as his word.

Was that what it came down to? Had my father stuck it out simply because by marrying my mother, he’d said he would and breaking a promise wasn’t part of his makeup?

After a minute, Cole pulled me from my thoughts by saying, “I thought maybe Annalia would come. I haven’t been in touch with her since we’ve been back. But I was sure she would have heard the news in town.”

I paused, not wanting to tell him she had been here. I had some irrational desire to keep our short visit in the barn a secret, something intimate and just between the two of us. But I couldn’t lie outright to Cole. “She did. She was here.”

Cole’s head turned quickly my way. “She was? When?”

“Just a little while ago. She was on her way out when I saw her.”

“No shit. Why didn’t she come find me?”

“I don’t know. She seemed like she had somewhere to be. She said she’d just dropped off some food.”

Cole was quiet for a minute. “Huh.”

I didn’t want to talk about Annalia with him, didn’t want to hear about his plans so I changed the subject. “I set up a meeting with Dad’s accountant. We need to figure out where we stand if we’re going to get things back up and running as smoothly as possible. We can’t do anything about the water supply, but we can gather the information we need to make the best decisions for the farm from here on out.”

Cole was quiet for a minute. “What if I decide I don’t want to stay, Preston?”

I'd known that was a possibility. Cole's dreams had never revolved around the farm, but I hadn't wanted to assume or ask anything. I wanted it to be his decision. It would be strange to live here on this farm without him—strange to live *anywhere* without him, being that we'd never lived apart—but now Dad was gone, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. What I'd told Annalia was true—my heart was here. It always had been and it always would be.

"I'd understand, Cole. I want you to be happy and Dad would have, too." I didn't let myself question what it would mean to be in this town with Annalia while Cole was living somewhere else, making a life for himself. But I couldn't deny the small flare of possibility that lit inside me.

We were both adults now. What would happen if it were just the two of us here in Linmoor and Cole was off living his own life? If we had time . . . space . . . opportunity?

"I'll give it some time. Nothing needs to be decided immediately." He paused for a moment. "You've never questioned it, have you? Moving back here, running the farm."

"No."

We were both quiet for a few minutes before Cole pointed up at the ceiling. "Remember that time I convinced you those cracks in the corner were a family of spiders?"

I smiled. "Yeah. Mom and Dad were fighting and I didn't want to go downstairs, but I didn't want to fall asleep and have the spiders land on me either. I stayed up for hours after you'd fallen asleep watching them before it occurred to me that even spiders needed to stretch their legs now and again."

Cole laughed softly. "That was mean. I've played a lot of tricks on you in my life. Sorry."

"No, you're not." But I smiled at the memory anyway. "Nothing that did lasting harm, I guess. Although I do still have a slight spider phobia." Cole chuckled again and so did I.

My brother and I had lain awake together in this room telling stories since the time we could talk. Even when we'd turned thirteen and Cole had decided to move down the hall to his own room, most mornings I'd woken up to find him snoring in the bed that had always been his.

"How's it gonna be living with Mom?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Better maybe." Now that she didn't have Dad to fight with constantly didn't need to be said. Cole would know what I meant.

“Yeah, maybe. We can only hope, right?”

I distantly heard my mom’s voice calling our names downstairs and looked over at Cole at the same time he looked over at me. “Duty calls,” he whispered.

I grinned as I sat up. I could have lain there for the rest of the day, enjoying the cool air and the peaceful quiet of our childhood bedroom, but Cole was right. Duty called.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Annalia

The Thursday morning breakfast crowd was just beginning to dwindle, and I was taking the few minutes I had between tables to wipe down and refill the syrup bottles. It'd been an unusually busy morning, and I was glad because any extra tip money was always welcomed.

I'd like to get rid of the cable bill we'd taken on, but my mama sat in front of that used TV watching the Spanish channel most of the day, and I felt guilty to think of her with absolutely nothing to do. I tried to encourage her to get out and do the grocery shopping, or even take a short walk, but she didn't show any interest.

I worried about her. Although she'd never been a particularly happy person, I'd watched her slide slowly into deeper depression since she'd ceased working. But at the same time, I couldn't allow her to live in a constant state of physical pain if I could prevent it. She rarely complained about her back anymore and I took a small measure of pride in that. We still weren't close, but when we'd moved, she hadn't set up her shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe. I'd hesitantly asked her why but she'd only shrugged. Although I knew it might mean she'd given up all hope of her prayers being answered, I still breathed a sigh of relief. After all, her "prayers" had done nothing but hurt me, and there was no way to turn back the clock and undo what had already been done—Our Lady of Guadalupe could probably create many miracles, but the reversal of time wasn't one of them as far as I'd ever heard. And if she had an in with God, she hadn't used it on my mama's behalf.

I thought back to the days my mama had worked on the farms and remembered how much happier she'd seemed, despite the hard labor. And I, too, had loved being among people who spoke my mother tongue, who told jokes in Spanish and called me endearments their mothers might have called them: *pequeña*, *little one*, *florecita*, *little flower*, *muñequita*, *baby doll*. And though we'd all been poor and

desperate, living in such a limited world, I'd felt beloved among them. I'd felt a shared community and kinship that I'd never felt since. And I'd known my mama felt the same way. I'd loved watching her smile as she chatted with the other women who worked beside her.

I was so involved in my own thoughts, my mind lost in the fields of strawberries and lettuce and tomatoes, I didn't see Preston and Cole walk in until they were standing in front of me where I was behind the front counter, a syrup bottle in one hand and a warm, wet cloth in the other.

"We heard you serve a mean stack of pancakes here," I heard drawled in a familiar voice. My head rose quickly, my eyes widening, and a smile breaking out on my face to see Cole leaning on the counter in front of me. Preston was standing behind him, his hands in his pockets, and I let out a small gasp, putting the syrup bottle and rag down on the counter and rushing around it.

"There's my girl," Cole said as he scooped me up in his arms, laughing as he planted his lips on mine. I laughed against his mouth at the unexpected kiss, squeezing him back. Over his shoulder, Preston looked away. I didn't miss the flash of hurt that moved over his face and I felt suddenly awkward. I had greeted Preston with a physical show of affection, too, but I hadn't expressed it with such exuberance. Of course, the situation had been different—I'd just been made to feel like garbage by his grieving mother. *Dirty. Less.* And not only that, but my feelings for Preston had always been different: deeper, more intense, desperate even. My love for Cole was easier and less complicated. We'd always been able to pick right up where we left off. With Preston, that was more difficult because I felt as if every system inside of me was racing just at his nearness.

Cole put me down and took one step back, his eyes moving down my uniform-clad body. "God, you look good."

I laughed. "Yeah? You like this?" I teased, running a hand over my boxy, blue apron and straightening my nametag.

"Yeah, I do. It's proof that you can make anything look good."

I rolled my eyes, my smile fading as I took his hand, squeezing it. "Hey, I'm sorry about your dad."

He nodded. "Thanks. Pres said you came out to the farm."

I hoped the flush of embarrassment at the memory didn't show in my face. "Oh, I did but . . . I

couldn't stay long. I just wanted to pay my respects."

I went back around the counter and put two menus down, nodding my head to the open seats. "Hi, Preston. You're going to eat, right?" I said softly as he stepped forward.

They both sat down, Preston giving me a tiny lip quirk and a nod. "Hi, Lia."

"Surprise me," Cole said, shooting me a grin and tossing the menu in front of him aside.

"Two eggs over-easy with wheat toast and a side of bacon," Preston said, scooting his own menu away. I smiled as I turned away to put in their order, thinking about how they were such mirror images of each other. How could everything about them physically be so similar yet they were so opposite of the other?

I still had a few tables I was waiting on and so I chatted with Preston and Cole between taking orders and pouring drinks for my other customers. As I was re-pouring coffee for Preston, Cole said, "Hey, Lia, we're going to have a small get-together this weekend. A barn party. Will you come?"

Preston looked at his brother as if this was the first he was hearing about it. Cole winked at him. "Our mom's leaving tomorrow to visit her sister who couldn't be at the funeral because of an illness. We thought we'd take advantage of having the place to ourselves before we really need to get down to farm business."

"Aren't we too old for a barn party?" Preston asked quietly.

"One is never too old for a barn party," Cole replied. "We'll get a few kegs, do some cheers to Warren Sawyer, play some country music like the good Central Valley farm boys our father raised us to be. It'll be a far better memorial service than that uncomfortable tear-fest at our house. Come on, it'll be great. Dad would have wanted it."

Preston sighed and shook his head, taking a sip of coffee. It was pretty clear that when Cole said "we" what he really meant was "I." Using their father's memory to get Preston to agree to what he wanted was sort of manipulative, but that wasn't for me to point out.

"Come on, Lia," Cole said. "I'll pick you up."

"I, um . . ." I bit my lip, feeling uncomfortable about going to a party in the Sawyers' barn. I'd heard about barn parties. Apparently it was a "thing" around here, and I'd even been invited to a few, but I'd

always declined, not comfortable socializing that way with the other kids at my high school. I'd grown slightly more confident hanging out with others my age, or from IHOP, but I worried no one I knew would be at their party, and I'd linger on the sidelines. *Alone. Watching.*

Watching Preston talk to other women.

Preston had dug back into his food, and Cole was watching me with an expectant look on his face.

“Please?” He gave me that irresistible grin of his.

I let out a breath. “I never could resist you, Cole Sawyer.” I laughed, rolling my eyes at the same time. “All right. I'll write down my address.”

He grinned. “Great.” I glanced at Preston, but he was intent on his food, his jaw rigid.

“Great,” I murmured, wondering if I'd just made a big mistake.

I raised one eyebrow as I came down the steps of my apartment building to see Cole standing beside a beat-up motorcycle. “What in the world . . .?”

Cole grinned, sweeping his arm toward it. “Your chariot, madam.”

I laughed but didn't move. “Seriously? You want me to get on that thing?”

“Hey, I'm a good driver. And look,” he unhooked a second helmet from the back of the bike, “safety first.” He put a leg over the bike and nodded to the small space behind him.

I took the helmet but still didn't move. “Since when do you ride a motorcycle anyway?”

“It was my dad's a long time ago. Actually, my mom bought it for him—I think she thought it'd give him the cool factor.” He laughed softly. “My dad had many good qualities, but a cool factor wasn't one of them. It's been left to rust for years. I've been tinkering with it in the garage.” He gave me a persuasive grin. “I'll drive carefully, I swear. And it's not like we have to get on the highway.” That was true enough. We could go through downtown and take the dirt back roads to his farm.

I stepped forward, putting my helmet on as I swung a leg over and wrapped my arms around his

waist. “Drive slowly, Cole Sawyer, or I swear I’ll do a tuck and roll right off this thing. On purpose.”

“I promise, baby.” He put his own helmet on and we took off, wobbling a little and causing my heart to rise into my throat. But then he got us steadied and once he’d picked up some speed, I relaxed, the hot wind making my clothes ripple as we drove through downtown Linmoor.

I laughed as we turned onto the bumpy dirt road, remembering another ride on a bike with a Sawyer boy and the way my long, orange hair had streamed behind me. *Preston*. What a sight we must have been that day.

We pulled onto the grass beside his farmhouse, and Cole came to a jerky stop, causing me to let out a small scream/laugh, gripping his waist so I didn’t tumble off the bike onto the ground. He put the kickstand down and got off, holding his hand out to me. I took it and climbed off, too, removing my helmet and handing it to him.

The strains of music drifted from the barn in the near distance.

I was running my fingers through my hair when I caught sight of Preston, standing at the edge of the porch, a look of such simmering fury on his face that it caused me to freeze, my eyes going wide. “Did you seriously drive her here on that piece of rusted junk?”

My gaze moved uncertainly to Cole but he didn’t seem the least disturbed by Preston’s anger. He ran a hand through his thick, helmet-flattened, golden-brown hair and smiled innocently at his brother. “Yep. And look, we’re both in one piece.”

“That thing isn’t safe.”

Cole clapped Preston on his shoulder. “Don’t worry so much, big bro.” He turned to me. “He’s seven minutes older and look at how he takes the responsibility. Annalia, shall we join the party?”

“Sure,” I murmured, scooting past Preston. I felt his body heat as I passed, the tense way he held himself, and I wanted to put a hand on his shoulder and tell him I wouldn’t get on the bike again. I wanted to take my thumb and smooth the crease between his brows and reassure him, but I felt stuck between him and his brother, so I stumbled along behind Cole, heading toward the party.

Lights had been strung from the rafters and they twinkled, the large space glowing and somehow intimate despite the size. I couldn’t help the delighted smile that tipped my lips up as I looked around; the

effect was magical.

Different items had been pulled from around the barn to form makeshift seating—the storage boxes Preston and I had sat on the week before, a few ancient-looking trunks, and wooden pallets piled three-high. A few benches had also been brought in from somewhere, some lawn chairs, and three picnic tables. There was a table set up near the door holding three kegs, plastic cups, various snacks, and a few two-liter bottles of soda.

Cole took my hand and led me to the beer and took two cups, pouring soda for me when I told him that's what I'd prefer and a beer for himself.

We took a seat at one of the picnic tables and Cole introduced me to the other people sitting there. I listened to them all chat and laugh, smiling in the appropriate places and hoping I didn't seem too awkward. I had such little experience socializing, and I felt slightly intimidated by all the people I'd seen before but never spoken with. I scooted closer to Cole, needing the security of a friend, and he pulled me to him as I sipped my drink.

The night wore on and I relaxed a bit, lulled by the music and the happy chatter all around. I'd always liked people watching and there was no better place to do that than at a crowded party. Everyone was at least slightly drunk and uninhibited.

I blinked when I saw Preston enter the barn, my heart flipping once. His eyes scanned the vast space, landing on me, and I was caught for a moment in his gaze, my breath frozen, unable to move. Something seemed to spark between us, as if the twinkle lights overhead brightened for the brief span of a moment, the music fading around me and then resuming in a loud burst of melody as Preston broke the strange contact, looking away.

He walked along one wall, weaving in and out of a few people, and then back toward the door again. The way he moved—and I knew his movements, had watched them all my life—made me realize that his muscles were tensed, and I had the strange idea that he looked like a pacing panther.

Finally, he moved toward a bench and I watched him as he sat down, taking a long drink from the red plastic cup in his hand. He glanced at me again, very quickly then away, and even from where I sat, he looked slightly angry. Was he still mad about the motorcycle? When I thought about it, he'd been angry, or

at least tense, two of the three times I'd seen him since he'd been back. Was that about his dad? That would make sense, although I sensed his anger was at me, or *with me*. I just wished I understood why.

I thought back to the week before when I'd come here, and we'd sat together in the barn. I wanted that intimacy back. I wanted it to be just him and me again and not all these people, all this noise, and the way I felt out of place in the crowd, even with Cole's warm body next to mine as he chatted and laughed.

I thought, too, about how things were the same now, but also different. All three of us were back in the same town, but we'd all grown up in the last four years. I had been a confused, overwhelmed, longing-filled girl just dipping my toes in the swirling water of romantic relationships when they'd left for college. I didn't have much more experience now, but I knew *myself* better, understood the responses of my body. I was never going to love Cole as more than a friend. It was Preston I still loved, and whether or not he felt the same for me, his brother would never—*could* never—be a substitute.

I hoped Cole had come to the same realization and wouldn't try to kiss me tonight because I would have to tell him no. We were better as friends. I wouldn't go so far and tell him the reason. That the white-hot shattering feeling inside me existed for Preston but not for him. And it did no one any good to pretend it was, or to tell the lie that the absence of it didn't matter. I'd always settled in my life—but now I realized pursuing anything more than friendship with Cole would be exactly that, I couldn't do it. Not just because of myself, but because of Cole. He deserved a woman who was going to light up every time he entered the room. Not one who was going to look over his shoulder for a glimpse of the man she really wanted.

Yes, I loved two brothers—identical twins—but it was only one soul that spoke to mine. One soul I'd always belonged to.

I glanced at Preston again but didn't allow my eyes to linger. I wanted to think and each time I looked at him, all my thoughts became jumbled and discombobulated.

The noise rose and fell around me, lulling me into a kind of trance where I could escape into my own head.

If I did make it clear to Cole that I only wanted to be a friend, would there be a chance between Preston and me? My heart raced with the possibility. For a moment, in this very barn, our hands had

touched, and I'd thought maybe the attraction between us—that zing of electricity—might be mutual. And thinking back now, with the eyes of a woman, I wondered if maybe it had been there all along, especially that night in the Laundromat when we'd danced and he'd pulled me close. I'd been so uncertain, just a girl, and a girl who was so deeply in love that nothing seemed clear except the steady thumping of my own yearning heart.

Perhaps he'd given his blessing for his brother to pursue me once, but things changed, people changed, hearts opened. Even now, I was sitting across the room with Cole. But what if I got up and went over to Preston? What if I found the courage to help him see me in a different light than he had in the past . . . what if I made it clear that I wished he would? My heart began pounding more quickly in my chest.

The people around me suddenly exploded in laughter and I jumped slightly, coming back to myself and realizing Cole had said something apparently hilarious. I forced myself to pretend I'd heard, laughing along with everyone else.

When I looked back at Preston, he was talking to a redhead who had parked herself right next to him on the bench. He had a smile on his face and she was leaned in, talking closely, presumably to be heard over the noise. Jealousy made my tummy tighten, and I looked away again. I didn't want to be here now. I had been right to think this might be a mistake. I could pine for Preston as I always had—it was a miserable familiarity—but I couldn't sit here and watch him with other women, even if they were only talking. I hated it. I focused back in on the conversation around me and managed to listen for a few minutes before tuning out again.

When I looked back toward Preston again, it was just in time to see the redhead scoot even closer, put her hand on his thigh, and lean her head in to kiss him. Sick panic rose in my throat and ice filled my veins. Oh God, I couldn't sit here and watch Preston kiss her. I willed him with all my heart to pull away, but he didn't. He tilted his mouth over hers as their kiss went deeper.

For several horrifying seconds, I stared as they made out across the room before I stood, jostling Cole, and causing him to look up at me in confusion.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “I have to use the bathroom.”

“The house is open,” Cole said. “First door on the right. Do you want me to walk you over?”

I shook my head. “No, no, thank you.”

Cole looked at me for another beat before nodding, and I walked as quickly as I could to the door, making it a point not to look toward Preston as I left.

Once I was outside, I sucked in a big breath of the dry night air, holding back the sob that wanted to escape my throat. I didn't want to go in their house. The barn was one thing, but the house was where their mother lived, and she had made it clear I wasn't welcome. I didn't want to go in, even to use the bathroom while she was out of town, just on principle alone.

The thought of their mother and how much she disliked me, along with the desperate clawing jealousy of just having watched Preston kiss someone, rose up inside me so strongly I could no longer choke it back. A sob escaped and I picked up my pace, running toward the road. I just wanted to get out of here. My stomach was twisted in a tight knot of pain. *Oh God, I was an idiot.* I'd just been sitting across the room, questioning whether Preston might have feelings for me. Trying to work up the courage to let him know about mine. *I was going to be sick.*

“Lia!”

I stumbled, glancing behind me to see Preston emerging from the barn. *Oh no.* Tears were sliding down my cheeks, and I felt desperate to get away from him, from the agony I'd just experienced. I picked up my pace, running aimlessly now, just needing to get away, away, away.

“Lia, Jesus! Stop.”

I was sputtering and choking now, horrified by my own reaction. Preston couldn't see me like this.

“Go away, Preston,” I begged. But the pounding of his feet behind me didn't cease, and just a few seconds later he slammed into my body, causing me to yell out in shocked alarm at the impact. He wrapped his arms around me from behind, halting my forward movement completely, and although I fought him, crying harder in his arms, I was no match for his strength. We'd been here before—just like this—that night in the Laundromat when he'd held me from behind as I cried. Was I doomed to repeat every painful, embarrassing experience in my life? *Especially every moment with him?*

He murmured my name over and over, his breath hot against my ear, and I finally went limp, my soft cries disappearing into the night around us. “Shh, Lia, what's wrong? What's wrong? Did someone hurt

you? Was it Cole?"

I turned my head away, filled with self-hatred, because I was the one who'd hurt *myself*—by coming here tonight, by watching as Preston put his lips on someone else, by never quite figuring out how to let go of my love for him.

Misery overwhelmed me to know that even if he was holding me now, he'd go back to the party soon enough and take that girl back in his arms, not as a sister, not as an old friend, but as the desirable woman he saw her as. God, I could *smell* her on him. "You should go back inside," I choked. "The redhead must be waiting for you." I knew I sounded bitter and hurt, and I clenched my eyes closed in humiliation.

"The redhead . . ." he muttered, as if he had no idea who I was talking about.

"The one you were kissing," I blurted, a nasty edge of accusation I had no right to in my tone.

He froze behind me for a second and then spun me around so quickly I gasped and stumbled toward him, falling into his body and bracing my hands on his chest. He grabbed my wrists and held me away slightly so he was looking into my face, his expression intense and . . . baffled. "You're jealous?"

I sucked in a shaky breath, trying to get hold of myself but feeling the misery rising up in me again, the embarrassment of this awful moment.

Preston's eyes were moving intensely over my face as if he were trying to read my mind. I turned my head away, unwilling to answer him, unwilling to let him see what must be clear in my expression. But he let go of one wrist and put his fingers on my chin, turning my face and forcing me to look at him again. I let out another soft cry. "Yes," I rasped miserably. "Yes, I'm jealous." The anguished, painful emotion was clearly evident in my voice.

He stared at me for another tense second—something so thick in the air between us I was tempted to reach out and grab for it so I could examine it in my hand and figure out what it was. But then he made a sound that was almost a growl. It shocked me and caught me off guard, and before I even understood what was happening, he'd picked me up and was carrying me toward the house, his stride long and sure, his breath coming out in sharp bursts of sound.

What was happening? What was *happening*?

CHAPTER NINE

Preston

I barely registered the walk from the yard, up the stairs and inside the house, but suddenly we were there and I was setting Lia on her feet. The sound of my own breath, my own heartbeat whooshed in my ears, but above that, the vague sound of music came to me and I turned and locked the front door of the house so no one could disturb us.

Lia was backing up through the foyer, stumbling away from me into the kitchen, her eyes wide and her expression confused. I stalked her as if I were a predator, my physical hunger for her so intense I felt out of control. I was sweating and my heart was pounding like a drum. She was looking at me with the stunned fear of prey, but I couldn't manage to find the words to reassure her. *Yes, she'd said. Yes, I'm jealous.*

I'd felt tense and angry all day, knowing Annalia would be here tonight and that she'd be with Cole. And then he'd driven her up on the back of that damn motorcycle he barely knew how to drive, and I'd had to hold myself back from kicking his ass on our front lawn. And then the torment of watching her sit with him, his arm draped around her, her slender body close to his. I knew just the way she felt, remembered the way she smelled, and the memory of it tortured me and made me feel like a caged animal.

Lia's butt hit the large farmhouse table, stopping her retreat, and she let out a small squeak.

"Why are you jealous? Tell me why."

I heard the desperation in my voice but didn't much care. Suddenly it seemed as if my very existence hinged on her answer. My voice sounded far away as if this moment might not be real, as if I might be dreaming it.

Her eyes darted around as if she, too, was questioning whether this was actually happening, and then her eyes met mine again, filling with resolve, and her lips parted and she breathed, "Because I don't want

you to kiss anyone else. I want you to kiss *me*. I've always . . . I've always wanted you to kiss me."

Oh God. At her words, my heart lurched. The desire that had been contained for so long surged inside me like a violent squall, causing me to sway on my feet as if in time to the internal motion. My body tightened, the tsunami that followed on the heels of the storm making my blood rush suddenly downward. I swelled and hardened, so aware of her and *only* her that nothing else existed in the room, maybe even the whole entire world. Only the two of us and the energy leaping between our bodies, the words she'd spoken echoing in my head. *I want you to kiss me.*

Our eyes held as I stepped forward, her gaze tracking me, her head tilting as I pressed myself into her. A guttural sound came up my throat. It had been too long. I'd suppressed my need for her my whole damn *life*, and in one unexpected moment, I'd given myself permission to release it. I struggled to hang on to even a small modicum of control. Her body was shaking and I thought maybe mine was, too, and so I wove my fingers into her hair, leaning my forehead against hers for just a minute as I attempted to rein myself in. I didn't want to scare her. My God, I was scaring *myself*.

She tipped her face up, letting out a small gasp as if she'd held her breath for a few seconds too long. Her warm breath brushed over my cheek and I turned my head, bringing my lips to hers, brushing them together lightly at first, once, twice, breathing in the scent of her mouth, feeling the luscious softness of her lips right against my own.

She whimpered softly and I shivered, unable to keep myself from pushing my tongue into her mouth and tasting her. *Sweet Jesus.* She was delicious. I thrust deeper, and she met my tongue tentatively with her own, and then sucked gently on mine. My erection surged in my pants and I moaned, lifting her up on the edge of the table so I could step into the warm cradle of her thighs, wanting desperately to get closer to that soft, sweet place between her legs.

Oh God, was this happening? Lia, Lia, Lia.

Mine.

I tore my mouth away just so I could see the expression on her face and when she gazed back at me with half-closed, lust-filled eyes, her bee-stung lips wet and swollen from the pressure I'd exerted with my own, I moaned and returned my mouth to hers.

Her fingers pressed into my shoulders and we were both moaning and writhing against each other in a primal dance that our bodies knew how to perform even without rational thought, or maybe more so because of the absence of it. My own tenuous control slipped and I felt the hot rush of arousal increase, my brain foggy with lust.

I needed to feel her hot skin on my own, was shaking with the urgent desire to explore the velvety softness of it. I leaned back and attempted to undo the buttons of her shirt, but my fingers felt thick and clumsy. I couldn't make them work properly, so I ripped at the material, the buttons popping off and scattering across the floor. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly and I took a moment to gaze at the silken skin of her breasts spilling out of her bra. "Annalia," I groaned.

"Preston, I . . . please." She pulled at my T-shirt and in one swipe I pulled it over my head. I unhooked her front-clasping bra, baring her breasts completely. Oh, sweet Jesus, they were so beautiful. Firm and high, her nipples taut and a deep brownish-rose, straining toward my eager mouth. I trailed my lips down her throat, over her collarbone, and to her breast where I sucked gently on one peak. Lia cried out, her hands coming up to my head to weave into my hair, pressing her nipple more firmly into my mouth. Oh God, I was going to orgasm before I got inside her.

She was clawing at my back and letting out sweet little gasps as she rotated her pelvis against mine, my raging erection nestled in the V of her legs, pulsing in time to her movements.

Our skin was slick with sweat and I wanted to go insane with the pleasure. Maybe I did for a minute because the next thing I knew, I'd lifted her with one arm wrapped around her waist, pulled up her skirt and pulled off her underwear, tossing them somewhere on the floor. My mind whirled with the urgency of our need for each other and the almost violent nature with which we were coming together now. Like desperate animals. Like a pressure cooker that had finally gone off.

"I've waited so long for you, Lia. So long," I choked.

"I want you, I want you, I want you," she was murmuring, the words going straight to my groin.

I sucked and licked at her breasts for several minutes, her cries of pleasure radiating through me like hot bursts of fire. She was shaking when I raised my head from her breast to her face and kissed her again, thrusting my tongue into her mouth. She met me with equal fervor, sucking on my tongue again in that way

that made me even wilder for her.

I yanked frantically at the button of my jeans, releasing my penis which was standing hot and hard in aching, ferocious need. It was painful, but oh God, it was the best sort of pain in the world. Part of me desperately wanted relief and another part wanted this to go on and on and on. Lia's thighs opened to accept me, and I growled fiercely as the engorged head of my erection probed at her slick opening. Lia's head fell back and she gripped my shoulders again, her fingers digging into my muscles as she braced herself against me.

I couldn't wait any longer. I guided myself to her soft opening and pushed inside, swearing in a rush of half-formed words and breath at the tightness of her body. She froze and cried out in alarm, trying to scoot her butt backward on the table, but I held her to me, gathering every ounce of control I still had not to plunge into her. "It's okay. I'll be slow, all right? It's okay."

"You won't get it in," she said, panic causing her voice to crack.

Despite the intensity of the situation, despite the fire coursing through my veins, and the feeling that I was about to explode, I couldn't help the small chuckle that rose in my throat. It was a soft, pained sound and it ended on a groan. "I'll get it in, Lia. Just relax your muscles, okay? We were made for this."

She relaxed slightly in my arms, her eyes big and trusting, and my guts twisted. I rocked into her as slowly as I could manage, sweat dripping down my face and into my eyes at the exertion of holding back. I continued to rock slowly, moving inch by inch into her until I came to the barrier of her virginity. I halted, a surge of primal satisfaction moving through me, the instinct to claim the woman I loved hot in my veins.

She hadn't been with anyone else. *Only me. Only me.*

I pressed forward, needing to break through, to claim her in a way no one else would ever again. *Mine.* With one quick thrust, I felt her tear and pressed all the way inside her, shuddering with the hot clasp of her muscles. "Oh God, oh Lia."

She cried out in pain as I was uttering the words of pleasure and I paused momentarily, clenching my teeth, so she at least had a second to get used to my invasion. I felt the heavy throb of my erection and my balls drew up tight in preparation for climax. I knew I wouldn't last long. It embarrassed me slightly, but

mostly it excited me. I was still in the strange grip of frenzy that had started this whole thing in the first place.

I thrust inside her in small movements, trying to be gentle but so caught up in the tight, wet bliss that I was only holding on to a string of control. *Mine, mine, mine.*

Annalia gripped my biceps, her forehead pressed against my shoulder, her breath hot and heavy on my skin, her teeth nipping out to bite me now and again. I wondered blearily if she was doing it to stave off pain, but I couldn't form the words to ask if she was okay. The scent of her—sweet and musky—combined with the light fragrance of sex, of *us*, caused a burst of something hot and wild to move through me and then we were just a blur of thrusting pleasure and sound—our skin slapping, my own grunts and Annalia's soft cries as I moved in and out of her. The first tingles of orgasm ran along my spine and seconds later, I yelled out as I erupted inside her in an intense rush of ecstasy.

Mine.

As I drifted back to earth, I looked at Annalia and she was blinking at me, looking stunned and so beautiful I could only stare at her in awe. There were tears in the corners of her eyes and a glance at my shoulder showed me she'd bitten me several times. I pulled myself out of her and she winced with the movement. I felt half out of my body, still half out of my mind, but it registered that she hadn't come and my blood roared with the need to give her pleasure, too. I gently laid her back on the table. "Preston?" she asked, her voice sounding breathy and confused.

"Shh." I pulled my jeans up quickly, leaving them unbuttoned and lifted her skirt higher on her waist, kissing down her flat stomach and gently, opening her legs as I knelt on the floor between them. She moaned softly and attempted to close them, but I kissed her inner thigh, darting my tongue out and she let them drift apart again.

"Oh, Preston," she whimpered and I felt myself stir again, that wildness taking hold once more. My God, I'd never felt this way, never been so insane with lust over any woman—not ever even remotely close.

This was an experience all its own—new and wonderful and terrifying.

I licked up her thigh until my nose was right over her core and I used my tongue to circle her tiny

swollen bud. She startled, lifting her hips to press herself into my face. I tasted the metallic tanginess of her blood, and the salt of my own orgasm, and something about it was so raw that I surged in my pants, coming fully erect once again.

I licked and sucked at Lia's tender flesh, soothing and exciting it intermittently, using her sounds as indication of what she liked. Her hands gripped my hair and her moans increased in volume until she thrust herself into my face, screaming my name.

The satisfaction I felt was so intense, the arousal at pleasing her so overwhelming, that I stood, letting my jeans drop again and pushed inside her, lying over her where she still lay on the table.

Our eyes met, hers large and slightly drunken, and the beauty of her face stunned me as it always did, bringing me back to myself. *God, what was I doing? I felt slightly crazed.* "Oh, God, Lia. You must be sore. I'm so sorry," I choked, trying to untangle myself from the grip of passion. I started to pull out of her, but she let out a resistant squeak and brought her legs around my hips, pinning me inside her with her feet digging into the muscles of my backside.

My lips tipped up, and I leaned my forehead on hers as I moved rhythmically, the storm passed, and just the sweet, gentle lap of the waves remaining. It felt so damned good. I could have lived right there in that moment forever.

She took my face in her hands and brought my lips to hers, and we kissed long and deep and slow as I pressed and retreated, pressed and retreated.

I felt her toes curl against the naked skin of my ass and I groaned into her mouth. Even through the haze of bliss, my mind felt clearer than it had the first time I'd been inside her, and I thought dazedly, *I love you, I always have.*

Pleasure built and I thrust more quickly, Lia's thighs tightening around my hips, her tongue sweet and wet, twisted up with my own.

I moaned deep and low, pressing myself into her as my second climax hit. "Oh, God, Lia," I breathed as I lifted my mouth from hers, rotating my hips to squeeze out every last drop of the tingling pleasure.

We lay there for a moment, my rasping breaths calming, reality slowly trickling back in. She adjusted herself slightly beneath me and I realized I was probably crushing her where we lay on . . . my kitchen

table. *Oh holy hell.*

I pulled back, sliding out of her and she made the same small mewling sound she'd made the first time I'd pulled from her body. *The first time.* I ran my hand through my sweat-drenched hair, my eyes widening as I blinked down at her. I'd just taken Lia's virginity on my kitchen table like some out-of-control wild animal. Like some plundering Viking.

I pulled my pants up quickly, looking around at the clothes flung everywhere, the small glints of the buttons that had torn from her shirt when I'd ripped it open, the overturned chairs I didn't even remember pushing away from the table with such apparent violence that they'd tipped over. God, I hadn't even heard them clatter to the floor and that wouldn't have been a soft sound. My eyes moved to the windows and I was relieved to see the curtains were shut tight.

People might have been banging at the front door for all I knew and I don't think it even would have registered. *How could it? I'd been with the girl I'd loved for years.* Beautiful Lia. *My Lia.*

My eyes flew back to her and I couldn't read the expression on her face. She looked shocked, but her eyes were still lazy with satisfaction. The way she glanced at me was shy and unsure and her cheeks reddened as she pulled her skirt down and slid to the edge of the table.

I gripped her upper arms gently as she put her feet on the floor, wobbling slightly and gazing up at me. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, putting her palms over her naked breasts, biting at her lip, and glancing around at the scattered clothes. "We, um, we . . ." She didn't seem to know how to finish that statement and neither did I, although a few things came to mind: lost control . . . went a little crazy . . . I didn't know if I'd use those phrases because they implied that I might make a different choice if I'd been thinking rationally, and that wasn't true. I didn't regret what we'd done. I only regretted how we'd done it, or rather, the fact that her first sexual experience would always be remembered as being ravaged by a wild beast on the edge of a kitchen table. *Jesus.*

I felt ashamed. Her first time should have been in a bed with sweet words and tender touches. Her body should have been slowly and lovingly prepared to ease the way, not torn open by a thrusting, half-hinged savage. *Fuck. What had I been thinking? Answer: I hadn't.* "Your first time shouldn't have been

that way. I'm sorry about—”

She put her fingers to my lips. “Don't be sorry. Please don't be sorry. I'm not.”

A sense of relief flowed through me, but my personal shame lingered. I should have controlled myself. That was *my* responsibility, not hers. I let out a shaky breath, nodded and kissed her again lightly. *Because I could. Because she was mine.* Because . . . she'd always wanted *me* to kiss *her*.

We gathered our clothes and dressed in silence. I picked up the chairs and returned them to the table, using a napkin to wipe the wood—I'd do a more thorough cleaning of it later so I didn't embarrass Lia any more than necessary.

When I turned toward her she was attempting to close her shirt with the two buttons that remained, hanging loosely but still attached. I grimaced. There was a coat tree by the front door in the foyer and I went and grabbed a sweatshirt of mine hanging there and returned quickly, handing it to her. “Stay here. I'm going to go tell Cole you're not feeling well and that I'm driving you home.”

“What if he comes in here?” She looked mortified at the thought.

“Tell him you got sick and your shirt was ruined. I'll encourage him not to, though. He's been drinking. I would have had to drive you home anyway.”

She nodded resolutely, pulling the sweatshirt over her head. It swam on her and was far too warm for the weather, but it would do for now.

“The restroom's that way?” she asked, pointing toward the foyer.

“Yeah.”

She nodded, looking shy again.

“I'll be right back.” I took one last look at her, my heart swelling with love, despite the awkwardness in the aftermath of our first time together, and left to find my brother. My brother whom I'd just betrayed by breaking our oath. *Fuck.*

A man is only as good as his word. And I was currently pretty worthless. So why did I feel so fucking happy? Why did I feel like instead of *breaking* my word, I'd kept some promise? A promise that had been buried deep inside my heart and was finally, finally seeing the light of day.

CHAPTER TEN

Annalia

The dirt road was bumpy and I felt the soreness between my legs with each jostle and jolt. It wasn't a pleasant feeling and yet with each twinge of discomfort, I was reminded that that was where Preston had been and also felt the soft fluttering of joy within my heart.

Preston had made love to me. Preston *wanted* me. It still felt like a sweet, turbulent dream or one of the fantasies I tended to conjure as I walked somewhere far away and got lost in my own mind.

I stole a quick glance at him and though he was looking straight ahead, I could see that his expression was pensive and it made me feel insecure.

“What did you tell Cole?”

“That you'd gotten really sick, and I needed to take you home right away.”

I nodded. “Okay . . . thanks.” I wasn't exactly sure what I was thanking him for, but it felt like the right thing to say.

He glanced at me and smiled, taking my hand in his and holding it for the remainder of the ride into town. “You'll have to tell me where you live,” he said softly.

I directed him to my apartment building and doing so reminded me how separate our lives were, how little he really knew about me. Was he thinking the same thing?

He pulled into a space in the parking lot of my building, looking at it for a moment before turning my way. “We have to talk.”

I nodded, knowing we did but feeling anxious. “I know.” I fidgeted with the hem of my skirt, biting at my lip.

When I looked up, Preston was looking at me, his expression tender. “Come here,” he said and I did so quickly. He chuckled softly as I flew into his arms, needing reassurance, needing comfort, needing *him*.

He'd swept me off solid ground, happily, *wondrously*, but now I needed him to help me regain some footing.

He whispered my name as he held me, kissing my forehead, my cheeks, my eyelids, and my nose. He ran his hands over me, but not in the same way he had earlier. This felt calm and tender, and I soaked it up like the sponge I'd always been when it came to physical affection. But this was even more pleasurable because it was coming from Preston. The intense longing I'd felt for him all my life was being quenched tonight in so many ways. I felt giddy and unsure and joyful and hesitant.

Finally, he pulled back from me slightly and said, "We have to tell Cole what happened."

I nodded. "Cole and I aren't together, Preston . . . we just . . ." I looked away, considering my words. "I don't know, we've just sort of tiptoed around being more than friends with a few benefits but it's never actually happened." I blushed, not liking the way that made me sound. Sort of easy? The kind of girl who let a guy kiss her whenever he was in the mood but never demanded more from him? Or maybe just shallow? My feelings for Cole weren't shallow, though. They just weren't any more than friendly. If tonight had proven anything it was that Preston was the one I wanted with every fiber of my being. *He* was the one I craved. He was the other half of my heart.

He blinked at me for a moment, appearing slightly confused. He blew out a breath as he ran a hand through his thick, already tousled hair. "You waited for him, though."

"I . . . no. He asked me not to give myself to anyone else. I agreed, but not because I was waiting for him. I love Cole, but . . . it's you I've always wanted."

He let out a shuddery breath. "Oh, Jesus." The words were such a small wisp of sound that I barely heard them, even though I couldn't have been much closer to him. He looked tormented as if my words had caused him pain. But he took my face in his hands and kissed me so gently and sweetly—*thoroughly*—that I melted into him. His kiss told me in no uncertain terms that he wanted me back. *Finally. Oh, finally.* When he finally broke the kiss, wiping a bit of lingering wetness on my mouth with his thumb, he said, "I think we have some time to make up for. A whole lot of it." He tilted his head, seeming to consider something. "Or actually, maybe this is exactly where we were meant to start. Tonight. *This* is our beginning, Annalia."

Yes. Our beginning. That felt right. As if time and circumstance needed to come together perfectly so that both of us were in the right place in our lives to start something special—something that was going to last where there would be no separations, no major growing up to do, nothing in our way. Nothing at all.

“It was . . .” I smiled slightly, teasing him, “a really nice way to start.”

He let out a breath and gave me a bashful half smile. Oh God, he was so handsome. Beautiful. “I can do better than that.” He winced slightly. “I should have done better than that.”

I grinned, kissing him quickly, letting my lips linger on his. “I can’t imagine better.”

“Me neither. Just . . . I can be slower.” He paused. “Maybe.”

I laughed and he did too, bringing his lips back to mine so I could feel the curve of his smile against my mouth. *I love you, Preston Sawyer. I always have and always will.* The words bubbled up inside me but there was time to tell him all the things I’d always wanted to say. *This was our beginning, so we would have time.* I wanted to make sure I told him at just the right moment. Maybe the next time I was curled up in his arms. Or maybe we’d walk through his property hand in hand. We’d stop under the huge oak tree in his backyard and he’d pull me against him and I’d say the words.

He smiled softly, kissing my nose and my forehead. “You’re dreaming again,” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“About you.”

“I’m dreaming about you, too, Annalia.” He kissed the side of my mouth, his tongue darting out to lick the place where I had a beauty mark as he groaned softly.

I smiled, turning my head so I could kiss him again, long and deep and then quickly once more, wanting nothing more than to stay tangled up with him in the intimate cocoon of his truck. I brushed back the lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead. “Do you have to get back?”

“I should. I’m supposed to be hosting a party.”

Remembering the barn party, my stomach dropped. The surge of jealousy I’d felt earlier hit me again when I remembered Preston kissing the redhead. “I suppose that redhead will be wondering where you ran off to.”

Preston blinked at me, appearing slightly confused for a moment, and then he grinned so suddenly that I almost startled. What in the world was there to grin about? He pulled me to him and kissed my neck, chuckling softly against my skin. “She kissed me. And I only let her because . . . I thought I was going to have to watch you kiss Cole and I was trying to distract myself. It wouldn’t have gone farther than that, though. I didn’t want her. I wanted you.”

“Oh,” I breathed.

“And obviously, it didn’t help lessen that.”

I pictured the frenzy of lust that had happened on his kitchen table. “No, I’d say not.” I bit at my lip. “So you won’t kiss anyone when you go back to the party?”

His face became serious, his eyes moving over my face for a moment. “No, I won’t kiss anyone when I go back to the party.”

I nodded, pressing my lips to his for a short kiss. “Okay.” I scooted away from him and smoothed my hair as much as possible. It still felt like it was in wild disarray, though I’d tried to fix it as much as possible.

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“Yeah. From seven to three.”

He nodded. “I should be done working by then. I’ll pick you up after your shift. Do you have a cell number?”

I blushed. We couldn’t afford the extra bill. “No, but I have a house phone.” I hardly wanted to talk on the phone to Preston in the same room as my mama, though.

He studied me for a moment, pressing his lips together as if he was displeased. I wanted to apologize but didn’t.

He brought his cell phone from his pocket. “What’s your home number?”

I gave it to him and he typed it in and then returned the phone to his pocket. “I’ll see you at three.”

I smiled at him and leaned forward for one final kiss. “Okay.”

Once I’d run up the steps to my apartment, I stood at the top of the landing, watching as his truck left the parking lot and drove out of sight. I wrapped my arms around my body, tilting my head back to grin at

the night sky, feeling gleeful and happy, and deeply, deeply in love.

I was tempted to simply stand out there all night staring at the stars and thinking my own happy thoughts, but I didn't. I let myself inside quietly. My mama was sound asleep in her chair in front of the TV that was still on. I flicked it off and grabbed a blanket from her bed, going to spread it over her when she stirred slightly. A piece of paper had been in her hand, and with the movement, it fluttered to the floor.

I picked it up and looked at it with interest. A letter postmarked from Texas forwarded from our old address to our current one. Confused and deeply curious, I hesitated only a moment before I opened it as quietly as possible and read the short note written in Spanish and signed from Florencia. "Florencia," I whispered, causing my mama to stir and open her eyes.

She blinked at me sleepily, her gaze moving to the letter in my hand and then to the open drawer of the small table next to her where I noticed more letters addressed to my mama in the same looped cursive.

I looked back at my mama in confusion. "Why didn't you tell me you had a sister in Texas, Mama? I have an aunt?" It had only ever been my mama and me. I'd always longed for family, just to know something about the people I'd come from, but once I'd understood that I was a product of rape, I never brought it up—not even to ask about my mama's side. I just didn't want to bring up the subject, knowing where it might lead. Maybe I was ashamed of my own existence, much like mama.

She sighed. "Yes. I wrote to her only once when you were a baby. She still lived in Mexico then and I let her know I was alive. That was all."

"I'm . . . I'm glad to know we have family—and that they're here in the United States, too. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

She waved her hand as if it had nothing to do with me anyway and my heart sunk. "She has written me several times, but I have never written her back." I had already deduced that much from my aunt's letter. My aunt—Florencia—had also said that their mother passed away a few months before. I wanted to pepper my mama with so many questions, but she turned her head and closed her eyes again. As I had so many times over the years, I kept the questions inside, and simply covered her with the blanket.

Once inside the bathroom, I got in the shower, the soreness as I washed bringing to mind Preston and the joy in my heart. Everything else floated away. For the first time in my life I didn't let my mama's

remoteness bother me. With Preston's love I could face anything. Anything at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Preston

I spent the entirety of the next day alternating between the shame of my actions, the blissful joy of having made love to Lia despite how it'd happened, and the weight of knowing I had to tell my brother. Cole had asked Annalia to save herself for him, but he had been far from celibate in college. He hadn't dated anyone seriously, but his bed had rarely been empty. And he hadn't seemed to have any guilt about it. Maybe he envisioned them becoming more serious *now*, but that wasn't going to happen. And anyway, he'd be leaving at some point, perhaps somewhere far away. I hoped fervently he'd be okay with what I was going to tell him, but it wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to.

Despite the hard physical labor of farm work, my mind insisted on turning the situation over again and again. On one hand I felt guilty and dishonest, and on another I felt completely justified in my actions. Lia and I both wanted each other. And we'd both held back from telling the other the truth of that desire. For years, it seemed. We'd talk about all of that later today when there was nothing standing in the way of us being together, especially ourselves.

I sighed, thinking of that long-ago race and wondering if that's where everything had gone wrong, suspecting it probably was. But I could hardly wrap my mind around everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. I needed to sit with Lia and untangle it all slowly. All those years when I'd thought about Lia, the word that had come to mind was *mine*, and I'd denied it, tried to push it away. It suddenly seemed like a stupid, worthless endeavor. We'd wasted too much time.

“What are you scowling about?”

I jerked my head up at the sound of Cole's voice. He was approaching me where I'd been washing my hands off under the spout on the side of the house. I turned off the water and used the hem of my shirt to dry them off. “I didn't realize I was.”

“Didn’t I always tell you that your face would eventually stick that way?” He sat down on the back stairs next to the water faucet I’d been using. “I think it’s finally happened. You’re going to have to wear that grimace forever.” He moved his face into a mockery of a frown and I couldn’t help chuckling softly.

Cole pointed his finger at me. “Ah! I’ve cured you.”

I used the still-damp hem of my T-shirt to wipe at my sweaty face. I needed a shower badly. I took a few steps and leaned against the stair railing. Cole was staring out to the fields behind me. He looked tired, probably still hung over. “Doesn’t look good,” he said.

I sighed. “No.” We’d have to talk about the details of the crops, the soil, the financial outlook for this year and next once I’d gathered all the information I could—I’d probably have a good picture by the end of the week—but right now, there was a topic that was more pressing: Lia.

As if his mind had followed some path to Lia as well, he said, “Remember that little creek we used to go to with Lia?”

“Yeah. It’s dried up,” I said, thinking he might be wondering if we could use the water somehow.

He squinted up at me and then looked back to the crops. “I know I said I’d give it some time, but . . . I’m not going to stay, Preston. I feel bad about that because I know you’ll need the help.”

I stared at him for a moment and then blew out a breath. “I knew that was a possibility. It’s okay. I understand.” And frankly, though it would make running the farm harder, it was going to make the whole thing with Lia a lot easier.

He nodded. “I’m going to ask Lia to come with me.”

I froze. “What?” *What the hell? I hadn’t considered this. Why hadn’t I considered this?* Denial? Wishful thinking?

Cole turned slightly, leaning his back against the railing so he could look directly at me. “She’s always wanted to get out of here. And how is that ever going to happen? She works at IHOP for fuck’s sake. Do you think she’ll ever manage to save up enough to go to college? To do anything more than wait on people for the rest of her life? I don’t know, I just . . . hanging out with her last night felt so simple, so . . . *easy*. It’s always felt easy with Lia.”

Easy? For a second the description confused me. Loving Annalia was many things for me, but easy

had never been one of them. Wild, breath-stealing, joyful, heart-wrenching even, but easy? No.

“You’re not even an actual couple, Cole. Christ, you slept with as many girls, if not more, as I did in college. Why the hell would she go with you?”

He watched me for a moment. “We’ve never really given it a try. Things just haven’t aligned right until now. But we’ve always been attracted to each other. That’s as good a place to start as any. And I want to get her out of here, to give her a chance at a real life, to make some of her dreams come true.” He paused, looking behind me for a moment. “With my degree, I can get a good job, rent an apartment for us, she can take classes during the day. I’m betting it will work out with us, but hell, even if it doesn’t, she’ll be a hundred times better off than she is now.”

For a moment I almost agreed with him. For a moment I thought that if anyone deserved *easy*, it was Lia. For a moment I could see the logic—and the *rightness*—of what he was thinking, but then a vision of what had happened between us last night came into my mind bringing with it the reminder of how much time we’d already lost. Now that I knew Lia had feelings for me, I’d be damned if I was going to let her go. If Cole had told me before last night about this plan of his, things might have been different, but last night had happened and I couldn’t pretend it hadn’t. *I wouldn’t.*

“You can’t. You can’t take her with you.”

Cole’s expression was confused. “Well, not against her will. Jesus. I’m going to ask her. But she’s not going to say no.”

“She is, though. She is going to say no.”

Cole’s brows furrowed and he shook his head. “What? How do you know?”

“Because we were . . .” I ran a hand through my hair, letting out a breath. “We were together last night. She has feelings for me.”

For a frozen second, Cole just stared at me as if he didn’t comprehend what I’d just said. “Together . . . what? You mean . . .” His face flushed and he surged to his feet. “What. The. Fuck?” he gritted out. He shook his head, his face screwing up into surprised confusion. “Last night? She was sick last—” He grabbed the hair at the top of his head, chuckling softly, but with no amusement in the sound whatsoever. “You lied to me. Jesus Christ, what’d you do? Fuck her in your truck on some back road?”

Rage and shame engulfed me, rage that he'd spoken about her in such crude terms, shame because I'd *treated* her crudely. It'd actually been even worse than Cole knew—I hadn't taken her virginity in my truck. No, I'd taken her virginity on a cold, hard tabletop, my pants around my ankles, and her skirt pushed up to her waist. I grimaced. She hadn't seemed upset about the manner in which we'd had sex, but why would she? She had nothing else to compare it to. "No," I said, unwilling to give him the details, not because I was ashamed—though I was—but because what Lia and I had done was private. It was between her and me.

"You motherfucker," he said. "Did you even use a condom?"

My stomach dropped. In the midst of all my swirling emotions, I hadn't even thought about that. No, I hadn't used a condom. He must have known the answer by the look on my face because he swore viciously. He stared at me for a moment with daggers in his eyes before saying, "You must really care about her to want to give her a disease."

"Fuck off, Cole. I've always used protection." Only not last night. It'd been the one time I hadn't even considered a condom. Of course, I hadn't considered much. I'd been out of my mind with lust and love and the burning desire that had built up for so many years. And then today, I'd been so immersed in my own thoughts to even consider that we'd had unprotected sex. *Jesus*. I was a selfish asshole. *I* was the asshole Cole had been trying to save her from all those years before when he'd asked her not to give herself to anyone while he was gone.

"So getting her pregnant at nineteen so she can be trapped here forever in this two-bit town working days at IHOP and spending her nights caring for a squalling kid who'll repeat the process all over again was your plan?"

He jumped down the steps to stand right in front of me and it shocked me. I'd never seen Cole so enraged over . . . anything. "Oh wait, *wait*, maybe it's your plan to marry her so she can live here on this dusty, godforsaken farm serving *your* needs for the rest of her life. It worked out real well for Mom and Dad. I actually can't decide which option sounds better. Lia must be thrilled with all the choices suddenly opening up to her."

I felt sick and confused by the things he was yelling at me. "It's not like that," I gritted out. But maybe

he was right. Maybe giving in to my lust for Lia had been the most selfish thing I possibly could have done to her. He was right—she'd always wanted to leave this town. And strapping her with a baby would be a sure guarantee that I'd squashed that dream. My guts twisted with remorse at the sudden vision of Lia and her dream-filled eyes.

Oh God, please don't let her be pregnant.

Please, please don't let her be pregnant.

Cole's fist slammed into my face. I let out a loud grunt at the shock of it, rage exploding in my blood at the sucker punch. I reeled back a few steps but caught myself, massaging my jaw and then working it to make sure there was no real damage. "I'll give you that one, Cole, because I wasn't honest with you. I broke our oath. I broke my word," I said, my voice filled with the anger I felt, "but hit me again, and I'll hit you back."

"Fuck you, *brother*," he spat out before his fist connected with my jaw again. I reeled back and then I threw my own punch, connecting with his cheekbone. He grunted and threw himself at me, and we scrabbled on the ground for a few minutes, sweating and yelling, fighting for dominance the way we'd done when we were boys.

I felt hands on my arms and someone was pulling me backward and when things cleared around me, I saw someone pulling Cole away, too. We simultaneously shook the hands off us, facing each other from a few feet away in a standoff. The men who'd separated us were two of the farmhands we'd been able to keep on the payroll and they were saying words about calming down and no way to solve problems. I tuned them out, not knowing if Cole was going to come at me again and preparing for it if he did. His right eye was red and already swollen shut and there was some blood dripping from his lip. I felt the sick punch of shame to my gut as if it was a second attacker. I wanted to start this whole conversation over, to do it better, to make him understand what I felt in my heart, but I'd fucked it up and now it was too late. We were staring at each other as the adversaries I never wanted to be.

I let out a harsh breath, stepping back as I nodded to the men. "We're okay." They glanced at both of us and nodded, turning away and walking back toward the fields where they'd been working the bone-dry, ravaged earth.

Running a hand through my damp hair, I took a second to calm my still-ragged breathing. “Jesus, Cole. I love Lia. You’ve got this all wrong. I loved her that day we ran the race for her. It wasn’t *just* because I thought she was pretty, or because I was *sort of* interested. It was never as casual as that. I’ve always loved her—as long as I can remember. I’m sorry I never told you.”

Cole stared at me from his one-sided gaze. “The day we ran the race?”

“Yes. I shouldn’t have done that. It wasn’t just a contest to me. I loved her and I gave her up for the honor between us, the honor I tried so hard to hold on to despite my feelings. It’s tortured me for years, Cole. Please try to understand.”

He shook his head slightly as if he wasn’t computing what I was saying. He stared at me again for one silent moment, a myriad of emotions moving over his face, too quickly for me to discern. He took his head in his hands as if it hurt before he whirled around, striding away.

I suddenly felt as stripped as the land, standing alone under the blazing sun, as the sound of that damn rusted motorcycle sputtered to a start.

I caught sight of Cole as he rode out of our yard, his head turned strangely and I realized it was because he could only see out of one eye. “Fucking idiot,” I mumbled, feeling a stab of anxiety in my chest. It rumbled loudly down the dirt road in front of our house, dust flying up in its wake, until I couldn’t hear it anymore.

It was the last time I saw my brother alive.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Present Day

Annalia

It still seemed surreal that I was really back in Linmoor, that I'd gone to Benny's diner the night before and had seen Preston for the first time in six months. It seemed surreal that I'd ever left. As if the last year and nine months had never even happened. As if I'd woken the morning after Preston made love to me, gone to work, and Preston had been waiting there afterward as we'd planned and we'd walked off hand in hand to begin our forever.

Oh God, if only. *If only . . .*

But it hadn't happened that way. I'd waited for him on the bench outside IHOP, the time going slowly by, the dusk sweeping in and scattering a handful of stars into the sky, my heart thumping with worry and insecurity and fear.

And then . . . oh, then the sinking horror. The news that a man had been killed on the highway not too far from where I was. And the ambulances that had screamed in the distance earlier suddenly made sense.

When I'd heard it was a motorcycle accident, the driver riding some small rusted thing that didn't stand a chance against the truck that came up too quickly on its right side, my blood had frozen solid in my veins and I'd known.

Cole.

I pulled myself from the past, from that terrible, gut-wrenching day, stepping from my car parked in the Sawyers' driveway and walking slowly up the two stairs to their front porch. *You can come out on Sunday morning*, he'd said. *Nine o'clock*. So here I was.

I raised my hand to knock on the farmhouse door for the second time in the space of two days, my

heart racing with nerves and anticipation just as it had the last time. *Then*, Mrs. Sawyer had answered. Her expression had hardened, and her hand fluttered to her chest as if she'd opened the door to find a demon returned from the dead and back to haunt her—which was probably pretty accurate as far as what she was thinking. *This time*, the door opened to reveal Preston, and I let out a controlled breath, pulling myself straighter. “Good morning.”

He nodded, his expression blank, and opened the door wider, moving back so I could enter.

I stepped through the wide doorway, glancing around as Preston shut the door behind me. Everything looked the same as it had the day I left. It made me ache because I loved this house. I loved the high ceilings and the wide-planked pine flooring. I loved the curved staircase and the view of something lovely through each window. I loved the sounds the old house made as it settled around me at night—the tiny creaks and the soft groans as if it was telling the tales of all those who had lived and loved here before.

Once, I'd walked slowly through every room of this house, my eyes finding each beautiful detail and taking it all inside: the pretty glass doorknobs, the elegant chair rails, the charming built-ins. The quiet grace of the old house had spoken to my soul and I had hardly been able to believe it was my home.

My belly had been slightly rounded with early pregnancy, and I'd still had dreams in my heart. I'd still had hope that things would be okay.

I'd stood in front of the gallery of family photos in the upstairs hallway and was drawn to each one, intrigued by the people, what they were wearing, the stories their expressions told, how the farm had changed from one generation to the next.

The Sawyers were solid, stoic-looking people who wore practical clothes and even more practical expressions. Camille Sawyer, whose picture graced a spot near the bannister, was the exception. She brought glamour to the wall with her coiffed, golden hair, red pouty lips, and seductive eyes. And though her boys were both tall and strong, and at least one of them looked into the lens with the dispassionate Sawyer stare his ancestors had perfected, their mother had bestowed upon them a level of physical beauty the generations before them didn't possess.

Looking at the photos told me that the hardy, tenacious-looking Sawyer men of the past had worked

the *land*, but this *house* spoke to me of the *women* who had loved them—women who themselves were sturdy but also graceful, with strong backbones and gentle hearts. I wanted to *be* one of those women. For Preston. For the life that grew in my womb, tiny butterfly wings of promise.

Sadness threatened to overcome me and I moved my mind quickly from that time. That was *before*. This was now and it was reality—not fanciful hopes, not wishes or dreams of happiness that had never materialized. Just contempt.

I turned around to face Preston and his eyes widened slightly as if I'd caught him unaware. For one heartbeat, I thought I saw pain in his eyes, but then the shutters came down and I wondered if I'd only imagined it. Or maybe it was simply my own pain reflected back at me.

I clasped my hands in front of my body, waiting for him to instruct me on what to do.

He paused, his brow furrowing momentarily before he raised his hand, gesturing to the family room on the right. “Do you want to wait in there for a minute? I’ll go get him.”

I nodded, my heart squeezing at his formal, stilted demeanor. It was as if I was some door-to-door salesperson and he was leaving me for a moment to fetch his checkbook, rather than our son. *Our son*. Still, I knew it would be better if I let Preston make the calls here. “Sure.”

I walked into the family room and heard his feet on the wooden stairs as he went up to Hudson’s nursery. I sat down on the couch and put my hands between my knees. The temperature in the house was comfortable, but I was cold with nerves.

I heard Preston moving around upstairs, heard quiet murmurings as if he was waking Hudson from a nap. I wondered if his nursery still looked the same, wondered if he’d kept the gray and white décor I’d done the room in as I waited for the baby to arrive, not knowing if I’d accent it with blue or pink. Flashes of that time filled me with a heavy anguish, not just because of the memory of my own deep loneliness, but of the helplessness of seeing deep grief in Preston’s eyes, day after day after day, and not knowing how to ease it for him, knowing that if anything, the very sight of me compounded his stress.

I shook myself slightly. I couldn’t do this now. Not now. The sound of footsteps descending the stairs snapped me completely from the painful thoughts, and I held my breath as Preston came into view, holding our son. My breath released in a loud whoosh of sound and I stood, unable to keep myself from going to

him.

Preston had only taken a couple of steps into the room, and he stopped as I approached them, my eyes homed in on the little boy in his arms. My breath caught and I swallowed down the lump in my throat, my heart simultaneously squeezing in pain at how much he'd grown and soaring with joy at seeing him again. *How I'd missed him.* I smiled and it felt shaky, and though I didn't want to cry in front of the baby and possibly scare him, I couldn't manage to stop my lips from quivering.

Hudson eyed me with sleepy interest before putting his head on his father's shoulder and smiling sweetly. I let out a very small laugh. "Hi, there." My first words to the boy I'd yearned for every day for six months. "You have four teeth," I said with wonder.

"The first one came in right after you left. He gave me a hell of a time over it."

My eyes moved to Preston and lingered momentarily on his face, but I couldn't read the thoughts behind his eyes or if his words had been meant with anger and blame or not, so I moved my gaze back to Hudson. "They're perfect. He's perfect."

My eyes drank him in greedily from those four tiny teeth to his thick head of dark hair, his eyes—*my eyes*—thickly lashed and that strange green color I'd always seen staring back at me from the mirror. Eyes I'd almost felt guilty for giving him, as if I'd unwittingly passed on the most unlovable part of myself. But there was nothing unlovable about the baby boy who had been placed in my arms, and unlike my mother who had used my eyes to strengthen her antipathy, the sight of them staring from my baby boy's face made me feel fiercely protective of him.

Other than his eyes and his dark hair, he was the spitting image of his father—and his uncle. I had had that thought as I'd sat rocking him in the chair in his nursery once but I hadn't shared it with Preston. I didn't know if it would be comforting or if it would poke at his grief, so I'd kept it to myself. Had he thought the same thing and never said it to me? We'd both been grieving . . . and yet we'd both been so alone. So painfully alone.

I wanted to ask if I could hold Hudson but I felt strange and insecure doing so. I was his mother, but I didn't think I had that right. Not after leaving him, and definitely not from the scowl on Preston's face. I thought I would be prepared for the way that would hurt when he was right in front of me, but I hadn't. Not

really. I took what I could. I ran my finger over his silken cheek and he giggled, batting at me, his grin increasing. Ah, he reminded me of Cole so much when he did that. He'd always been such a smiley baby, easy to laugh, a sweet, little flirt. I smiled back at him, joy filling my heart to know that hadn't changed. To know me leaving hadn't stolen the innocent, unabashed sweetness of his personality.

How long had he remembered me? The nights those little teeth were budding, was he crying for his mama? The ache that resided permanently in my chest throbbed.

"Where have you been, Lia?" Preston asked softly and my eyes flew to his. His jaw ticked once, but other than that, I saw no evidence of emotion.

I looked away from him, back to Hudson, pressing my lips together.

"We have to talk. You do realize that. I want to know why you're back."

What he meant of course was that he wanted to know what my intentions were as far as our son was concerned. "I . . . yes, of course." I paused, gathering what strength I could muster. "I've . . . been at my aunt's house in Texas."

I glanced up at Preston's face and he was staring at me with a stormy sort of confusion as if my answer had surprised him, and not in a good way. "Texas? That's over a thousand miles away. You drove yourself all the way to *Texas*?"

I smoothed a hand over Hudson's hair. He was looking back and forth between the two of us, his eyes wide, obviously having felt his father's mood. At my touch, he reached up and caught my hand in his, and smiled again, showcasing those four tiny teeth. I took a deep breath. I saw Preston's chest rise and fall as if he'd done the same thing. "Yes, I did."

"You have a son, Lia. A woman alone in a car that's practically falling apart on a road trip of that distance? Did it enter your mind that anything could have happened to you? Goddamn it," he practically growled, "it wasn't safe."

"Neither was this house." *In a different way, but dangerous nonetheless. Dangerous to my heart. My soul.* I'd tried. I'd tried to bring some light into a household filled with overwhelming grief, sadness, and anger. Just as my mother had looked at me with disdain and contempt, Preston's mother had done the same. *I'd gone from one cold tomb to another.* This place had been just as toxic for me, and I'd been

suffocating beneath the animosity. I remembered wondering if I'd ever be wanted? Ever be warmly accepted into a home.

Preston stilled again at my statement, his jaw tense, but the anger seemed to have faded from his eyes, leaving a weary hostility in his expression. "You couldn't have told me where you were going? When you'd be back?"

I paused for a second. "No, because I didn't know." That was partly true. I hadn't known when I'd be back, but the reason I hadn't told him where I'd be was because I worried he'd come after me or ask me to return. And I hadn't been strong enough to tell him to let me go, especially if he persisted. I would have come back and things would have continued as they had been, and I couldn't have survived it. It was a selfish thing to do and I hated myself for it, but I couldn't make a different choice now. I'd done what I thought I had to do to regain a small piece of myself, to heal, to be a better mother.

Preston stared at me for several long moments and his shoulders seemed to sag minutely as the fight went out of his eyes. He glanced down at Hudson and said softly, "We can talk about this later. When we're alone."

I nodded.

Hudson spotted something on the floor and lifted his head, reaching his arms toward it, indicating he wanted to be put down. Preston walked him over to a toy box I hadn't noticed and set him down on the floor. He knelt up and plucked a toy out of the box and then sat down to play with it.

I could have watched him all day, just noting all the things he'd accomplished since I'd seen him last, all the ways he'd changed.

"Do you want to sit down?" I turned and Preston had his arm out toward the couch.

"Sure." I sat down and turned my attention back to Hudson who was kneeling back up at the toy box, removing toys one by one.

"He'll take them all out and then decide what he wants to play with." Preston still seemed tense, but he was obviously trying to turn this visit back toward the baby, and I appreciated that.

"It's good to see all your options right in front of you, I guess." I turned to Preston with a small smile on my face and he blinked and looked away.

“Yeah.” He brought his hand up and massaged the back of his neck, the moment strangely awkward all of a sudden. I guessed it was too soon to try for a relaxed demeanor.

“I can watch him . . . I mean, if you have some other things to get to.”

“No, it’s fine.”

We sat in silence for ten more minutes just watching Hudson play and then Preston stood. “It’s almost time for his morning snack. I’m going to have to cut this short.”

“Oh.” Surprise and disappointment jolted through me at what was obviously a dismissal, and a sudden one at that. I’d hoped he might give me longer than this. But I was still grateful he’d given me any time at all, so I wasn’t going to push it. I no longer had that right.

“I could, uh, watch him here tomorrow if you have to work. We could talk later in the day—maybe dinner?” I held my breath.

“I hired a girl to watch Hudson here while I work.”

“Oh. I . . . I didn’t know.”

“How could you?” The words came out harsh and I understood the resentment behind them. *He hates me.*

I let out a breath, deciding to sidestep that completely for now. I *couldn’t* know. I had no idea what had happened in this house since I’d left. I wanted to, though. I wanted to know if Preston was doing any better, I wanted to know if it was allowed to mention Cole’s name, I wanted to know if the sounds of muffled tears still echoed through the house at night. I had been surprised to find him in the diner eating dinner the other night and wondered how much he was getting out now, after a year of barely leaving this house. “Will you let me know when you’re ready to talk?”

His jaw ticked but he nodded. “How do I get hold of you?”

“Oh, I’ll have to call you. Or you can use my mother’s landline.”

He stared at me for a moment, and I saw some emotion slip through that blank façade he kept up so well, but too briefly for me to name it. He let out a breath. “Your cell phone is up in my room. I’ll get it for you.”

“You kept paying my cell phone bill?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. I have no idea why,” he mumbled almost as if to himself.

Hudson crawled over to Preston, looking up at me on his way and grinning that four-toothed grin. “Dada,” he said and I sucked in a breath at the sound of the word, of his sweet voice. To me it was his first word because it was the only one I’d ever heard, and I worked to keep the tears at bay.

If Preston noticed my emotion, he didn’t comment. He bent down and picked his son up easily, settling him on his waist. “Hey, buddy. Hungry?”

Hudson babbled something I couldn’t understand. “Okay. We’ll get you some apple juice,” Preston murmured and emotion welled up in me again. I didn’t know if Hudson’s babbles indicated he’d wanted juice or if Preston had merely known he would by the time. I *did* understand that Hudson must have at least a few sounds and baby gestures that Preston understood and which I would be clueless about.

But I now knew he liked apple juice. I wondered what else he liked, wondered what Preston would give him for a snack and later, for lunch and dinner, felt almost desperate to know what he was eating these days—what were his favorites? Was he good about eating his fruits and vegetables? Of course he must be. Preston would make sure of that.

We walked into the foyer and Preston turned toward the stairs, telling me he’d be right back. I waited by the front door, holding my hands together in front of me, feeling sad and awkward, longing for more time with Hudson but knowing I had no bargaining power whatsoever. I was at Preston’s mercy because my actions had put me in this position.

Preston came back down the stairs still holding Hudson and handed me the cell phone he’d bought me when I’d moved in with him. I took it from his outstretched hand, our fingers brushing. He jerked his hand away, and I blinked up at him. He looked tense and angry and I wondered if it was because of the phone, or because there was still a physical spark between us. After what I’d done, we both knew it could never be more than that. I was too emotionally overwhelmed by the visit with Hudson to dwell on it.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “I’ll start paying the bill as soon as I get a job.” I would pay him back for the months he paid it while I was gone, too, but we could talk about that when we got together without the baby. I would have to make arrangements to pay him back for my mother’s rent, too. I sighed inwardly. I had been hoping we could talk about all of those things today, but apparently, Preston wasn’t ready.

I guessed I could use the remainder of the day to begin job hunting. My first stop would be IHOP. They were always short of waitresses. Hopefully they needed one now and would give me my old job back.

“I’ll be in touch. We can set up a time then to figure out . . . what’s best for Hudson.”

What’s best for Hudson. I wasn’t sure what that meant to Preston, but I knew we needed to talk. I wanted to figure it out as much as he did. *I needed to be near my son again.* “Yes. Please.” I glanced at Hudson. “Please call me soon.” I sounded like I was begging and it made me feel ashamed, so I cleared my throat and took Hudson’s small hand in mine. “Bye, baby boy. I’ll see you soon okay? Ma—”

“Bye, Lia,” Preston cut in.

My eyes shot to his and he was looking at me warily. He’d cut me off before I could refer to myself as “mama.” My heart squeezed painfully but I managed a tremulous smile. “Bye.”

I turned and pulled the front door open, letting myself out. I heard the door close behind me and then walked as quickly as possible to my car, pulling away, and getting halfway down the road before I allowed the tears to fall.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Preston

Hudson picked up a piece of ravioli and stuck it in his mouth, gumming it happily. He caught my eye and grinned and I smiled back, but inside, my heart was still beating too fast, and I felt like I hadn't quite caught my breath since Lia had walked in the door.

I hadn't been prepared for what was so glaringly obvious on her face as she gazed at our son: raw love. Her blatant, helpless pain knotted my insides. The way she'd stared so longingly at Hudson had gutted and confused me. It made one thing very clear—she hadn't left because she didn't love Hudson. She'd left because she hadn't loved me.

I let out a shuddery breath, running my hand through my hair. *Christ*. I knew I hadn't made it easy for her, but to leave that way with no note, not a word, nothing. Hadn't she realized what it would do after I'd just lost my father and my brother and was barely hanging on? Why hadn't she known that losing *her* would tear the last piece of my heart to shreds?

She'd wanted to hold Hudson. Her hands had fluttered toward him, but she'd forcefully pressed them against her hips as if she needed to ground them somewhere to keep from reaching for him. I hadn't made it any easier on her by offering and she obviously hadn't felt secure enough to ask to hold her own baby. Whom she'd left. And so we'd stood awkwardly watching the baby I'd put inside her in a moment of lust and love and lost control on the kitchen table across the foyer.

My body still tightened with need when I thought of that night. My heart still broke for the tragedy, the grief, the tears, and the silence that followed. And yet, despite the unceasing misery, there had been that one joy-filled moment when the sweet, high wail of my newborn son had broken through the despair, even if only for a moment.

I glanced at Hudson who was happily making a mess of the food on his tray and smiled softly. He

was done and I should take him out of the chair and wash him up, but he was content to play with his food, and I needed the time to collect myself.

I looked away, gazing out of the window. The funny thing was—not that there was anything remotely funny about it—Lia *leaving* had actually been the catalyst that brought me back from the emotional brink I'd been teetering on.

. . . that night the rain had finally come . . . the way Lia had grasped at me . . . her sweet moans.

I let out a harsh breath, the memory buzzing through me like a sweet pulse of electricity, bringing with it the sharp pang of yearning that I'd tried so hard to deny. God, it still made me ache. Not just my body, but the sacred places in my heart that had always been reserved for her—no one else. Never anyone else.

I swore softly and Hudson paused momentarily in his high chair art, smiling at me, and repeating proudly, “Fuw!” before going back to smearing with relish. I would have laughed and internally scolded myself for swearing in front of the baby if I wasn't so torn up inside from Lia's visit.

Fuw was right.

My mind returned immediately to Lia, and that rainy, passion-filled night, and then forward to when I'd woken in the morning and she was nowhere to be found. And for the first time in just over a year, I had felt a fire light within me and gain strength, knew the sudden wild need to *fight* to get my life back. To fight to *begin* a life with Lia, because circumstances had prevented any true beginning. I wanted to marry her if she'd have me, to bind us together as a family now that I had finally gathered a full breath. Even one.

And so I'd looked for her relentlessly, even hired a private detective. But as the months went on and on, my bitterness escalated, and my hurt returned.

I thought back to her words from so long ago. Had she loved me then? “*Someday I'm going to leave here, but a part of my heart is going to remain. With you.*” I had touched the sea-glass shape she'd given me so many times, wondering if that was what she'd meant. That she would just up and leave without a way to contact her? But, she'd left *more* than a *part* of her heart. And it had devastated me. I'd just hurt. Ached. That's the state she'd found me in, sitting in the diner, eating dinner alone.

No wonder there'd been no trace of her. She'd gone all the way to *Texas*. Goddamn her! Didn't she realize that any number of horrors could have befallen her if she'd broken down on the side of some dark road without a cell phone? I was surprised that beat-up car she drove had made it across the California state line, much less almost halfway across the country and back. Not to mention I had no idea what type of situation she'd been in once she'd arrived at her aunt's house. An aunt I'd never heard of. But that wasn't surprising, was it? Lia had always been so damn closed-lipped about herself.

Still, to know she'd been with family brought some measure of relief. For a time, I'd questioned whether she'd met another man and run off, but when would she have met anyone? And then I'd been worried sick something awful had happened to her. At the memory of the torment I'd experienced wondering where she was, a sick, helpless anger ran through me and I took another deep calming breath, attempting to gain control. God, I'd meant to question her more, to make demands, to force her to spell out her intentions. Seeing her gazing at our son with such heart-wrenching love in her beautiful eyes combined with hearing the danger she'd put herself in to get away from me, had made my need for answers dematerialize like a wisp of smoke.

My guts churned.

I heard the front door open and close and my mother's voice calling a hello before she came around the corner to the kitchen. "Hey, Mom."

"Is she gone?"

"Yeah, she's gone."

My mother pressed her lips together in disdain. The sudden twist of anger was unwelcome and made me feel vulnerable. Even after everything, I still couldn't deny the knee-jerk reaction of my heart to defend Lia.

"Well, thank God. And how are you, my little sweetheart? How's Grandma's sweet boy?" she crooned to Hudson, putting her nose against his. She'd never accepted Lia, but even my mother couldn't deny Hudson's charms. And though we'd never spoken the words, Hudson's personality was so much like Cole's that he'd healed a piece of both of us.

Sometimes he reminded me of my brother so strongly, it was both a joy and a jab at the aching wound

that would hurt forever. But then I'd look in his eyes where he was all Lia—not just the color and the shape, but the sweet defenselessness so present in his watchful stare—and a wave of love would wash over me so strongly, I'd almost have to sit down so I wouldn't fall. Because despite it all, despite how we started and how we ended, the baby boy in front of me was the product of the unceasing love I'd carried in my heart since I was nine years old.

“Goddamn it,” I muttered, pushing back the chair I'd been sitting in and standing. My mother, who'd been bent toward Hudson jerked slightly and straightened.

“My goodness, what is it?”

“I need to do some work. Do you think you could watch him for a while?”

“Well, all right. Or I could call Tracie.”

“No, this is Tracie's day off. I don't want to bother her.”

My mom shifted on her feet. “Preston . . .”

“What?”

“Well, I'm no matchmaker, but have you thought about taking Tracie on a date?”

I frowned. “A date?”

“I know you're going to say you don't need the complications right now, but I've been thinking about it, and Tracie's such a pretty girl, and she's wonderful with Hudson, and well . . . I can tell she's attracted to you. Don't you think it just makes sense? It might be a good way to help you move on from Lia. I know you still harbor feelings for her and clearly that won't do anyone any good. Dating someone else—someone sweet like Tracie—might be just the thing you need. Just the thing Hudson needs.”

I stared at my mother, taking in her words. I'd hired Tracie a few weeks after Lia left. My mother was willing to watch Hudson here and there, but she wasn't going to watch him full-time while I worked, so I'd needed someone. Tracie had come highly recommended by my mom's friends in town who had used her to watch their children until they went to nursery school. Tracie was sweet and pretty, but I'd never thought of her in that way. And I'd never seen any sign that she thought of me in any romantic sense either.

“Tracie's a teenager, Mom.”

“She's nineteen. She's only five years younger than you.”

She was the same age Lia'd been when I'd gotten her pregnant. I glanced unconsciously at the farmhouse table and winced, rubbing the back of my neck.

"I don't have time to date anyone, and I need Tracie to watch Hudson." I couldn't risk making things awkward and losing her as a babysitter—Hudson liked her, she was sweet but firm with him, and I liked her easygoing manner. And moreover, I didn't *want* to date her. Why were we even having this conversation?

"Thanks for thinking of me, Mom, but no." I kissed Hudson on the top of his head and turned and walked toward the back door.

"Have you considered that Lia might be back to take Hudson?"

I halted but didn't turn. Did she mean kidnap him from me? Disappear with him? A harsh shiver ran through my body, a flash fire of panic, the memory of what it'd felt like to discover Lia was gone without a word. What would it feel like if it hadn't only been her, but if she'd taken my son, too? "She wouldn't do that." My voice was quiet and steely and even I wasn't sure if I believed the words. My trust in Lia had been irrevocably damaged.

Without waiting for my mom to reply, I opened the back door and stepped out into the mild warmth of the springtime sun. The farm workers' heads bobbed in the distance, moving down the rows, collecting the ripe fruit. Strawberries. *La fruta del diablo* I'd heard them called, and I understood why. Hard, low, backbreaking work that *had* to be done by hand, packed in plastic containers as they were picked. And packing those suckers could be like working out a puzzle while being timed. It took skill and practice to get them to fit perfectly with the best ones on top—no stems showing—so they looked pretty in the grocery store produce section.

I walked to the edge of the farmland, gazing out at it for a minute before squatting down and picking up a handful of the rich soil. I took comfort in the feel of the dirt as it slipped through my fingers, and the vision of the abundant harvest in front of me.

The pride I felt went as deep as the roots of all the things that grew here. Generations of Sawyers had fed this land with blood, sweat, and tears. They had returned to the same farmhouse I did at the end of the day dirty and sunburnt but filled with the satisfaction of wrestling with the land and reaping the

rewards.

They'd washed the dirt from beneath their fingernails, their hands rough and callused from hard, physical labor, their skin gritty and weathered. They were men who were used to harshness: from the rocks that needed to be plowed from the earth, to the relentless heat of the sun on their necks, and so when they slipped between the sheets upstairs and gathered their wives to them, they'd gloried in the clean softness of a woman's body and the tenderness of her love.

The knowledge of that flowed through my blood like an ancient memory that spoke in feeling instead of words.

That's what I'd wanted Lia to be for me—a gentle haven. I'd wanted it—desperately—and yet, I'd kept fouling it up, over and over. I'd pushed her away instead of gathering her close, a part of me believing that my punishment should include denying myself the comfort she might provide. And yet . . . in punishing myself, hadn't I really punished both of us? She'd loved Cole, but she'd wanted me. I sighed, feeling weighed down with sadness, with missed opportunities, and with the consequences of my poor choices.

And the bitterness that refused to abate.

I focused on the farmworkers in the field again. At least it had been a good season and the farm would make a profit this year—though barely—after two years of drought and hardship. We were one of the lucky few—many farms in the region hadn't been able to survive and were now nothing more than scorched, barren land and empty farmhouses owned by the bank.

I squinted past the fields to where I'd just completed a man-made lake at the south end of the property, ensuring that if we ever had a drought again, we would have accumulated rainwater and irrigation runoff to use for the crops. My dad had talked about creating one for years, and I'd finally made it happen. It wasn't much more than a large, clay-lined pit right now, but eventually—God willing—it would be filled to the top with the one thing more precious than gold to a farmer: water.

In the year after my father and brother died, I'd worked my body to exhaustion just to keep the farm running and then to build the water reservoir, most days falling into bed practically unconscious before I'd even hit the pillow.

And yet, I'd been relieved to have the mind-numbing work to keep my anguish at bay. And I'd gathered some amount of comfort just being present in the fields. If I could find Cole anywhere, my heart had insisted, it was there—his spirit running through the rows of strawberries, his laugh floating on the wind, the echo of his feet pounding the earth. If I could capture his joy for just a fleeting moment, just one, it would be all I'd ever ask.

In all truthfulness, I wasn't sure I'd have even made it through that time if I hadn't had the farm to keep me sane.

How had Lia made it through that awful time? She'd lost a friend, too—one of her *only* friends. And then she'd become a mother. Her life had been altered so dramatically. Forever.

I stilled, the thought causing a spear of guilt and pain to wrench at my heart. I hadn't even thought to ask her how she'd managed. I'd been so focused on my own torment—the bittersweet reality of *my* survival—the deep burden of grief that held me underwater, the aching misery of feeling like a piece of me was missing, I hadn't had the presence of mind to focus on anyone other than myself.

The very sight of Lia swollen with my child had caused a low hum of joy in my blood, but mostly, mostly it'd been a reminder of what *I'd done* that had caused Cole's death. *My decisions—my actions—changed so many lives.*

Since Lia had gone, I'd vacillated between terror and pain and finally anger and bitterness, but I'd never dwelled on the idea that she, too, might have needed me. That maybe, I'd let her down as well.

Would I have had anything to give if I'd realized sooner? Or would it have just caused me to feel more guilt, more responsibility for the suffering of someone else?

And did it even matter? Had it simply happened the way it happened, bringing us to a point where there was no turning back anyway? So what was the point in going over the many *what ifs* now?

And maybe my mother was right. If there was no fixing the situation with Lia and me, if there was too much water under the bridge, then perhaps focusing on something simple—something pure and straightforward—would help me gain some control over the never-ending ache in my heart when it came to Lia.

I swore softly, standing. I didn't have answers to all these questions just now and so I would do what

I did so well—I'd lose myself in some physical labor until I was too fucking tired to think. It was a vice, I realized, but every man needed at least one.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Annalia

The smell of pancakes and bacon quickly brought me back to a simpler time, and I smiled slightly as I let the door of IHOP fall closed behind me. Funny that I thought the years I'd lived in the small apartment with my mother, scrimping and saving every dime, now felt like the easy life in my mind. But compared to what had happened afterward, it had been. As it turned out, financial strife—even financial desperation—was much easier and more pleasant than emotional despair.

I smiled at the girl at the hostess stand—someone new I didn't recognize—and asked if Ron was available. He had been the day manager when I'd worked there a little over a year ago and I hoped that hadn't changed. We'd never been close friends, but he was efficient and fair, and he'd always treated his employees well. I'd resigned before I had Hudson, but I'd left on good terms.

“He's in the back. I'll go get him. Can I tell him your name?”

“Yes. Annalia. I used to work here.”

The girl nodded and went off toward the back. I'd purposefully come in during what I knew was the slowest time to ensure that the manager on duty had time to see me.

As I waited, I glanced around. Everything looked exactly the same and I felt a sort of comfort to be here. I'd been worried that it would hurt to come back, but it didn't and for that I was grateful. Because I would have to bear it regardless of how I felt. I needed a job because I needed money. It was really that simple.

I had gone to what I now considered my mama's apartment the night before and asked if I could stay with her. She'd seemed *almost* happy to see me, which had been a small blessing, considering the way we'd parted. I'd left her for six months and honestly expected a bitter and terse reception. She hadn't asked me any questions, although I felt she wanted to and was holding herself back. But she'd been civil

and I was relieved. I'd wait for her to ask me about her sister. If she ever did.

Preston had continued to pay my mama's rent, which I'd believed he would. Preston was many things, but he wasn't cruel, nor was he vindictive, and so I'd left my mama's continued financial care in his hands—the care he'd taken over when I'd moved into his farmhouse with him and his mother. I'd been almost five months pregnant.

But I didn't expect him to *keep* paying my mama's bills now that I was back, and I also felt an obligation to reimburse him for the support he'd continued to extend to her while I'd been gone.

“Annalia?”

I was snapped from my thoughts and turned back from where I'd been glancing around the restaurant to see Ron coming toward me. I smiled and stepped forward. “Hi, Ron. How are you?”

He seemed hesitant as he stuck his hand out and shook mine. “Been good. I didn't hear you were back in town.”

My smile faltered slightly at the statement that made it obvious he'd heard I'd *left* town. “Oh, well, I just got back yesterday actually.”

“Hmm-hmm.” He looked at me expectantly, his discomfort obvious. I glanced nervously at the counter where two older women were whispering to each other as they looked back over their shoulders, their gazes directed toward me. I swallowed. How had I forgotten how small this town was? How everyone learned everything about others—sooner or later. I'd seen evidence of it at the diner a few days before and now knew the gossip had spread far and wide. I could only hope there were a few people in Linmoor willing to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Only *now*, I wasn't just some girl who'd infected the high school with the bedbugs on her sweater. Now, I was the girl who'd publically shamed a Sawyer, and that crime would have me strung up in the public gossip square to give everyone the chance to throw their stones in my direction in the hopes of drawing blood.

I straightened my shoulders and looked Ron in the eye. “I'm hoping you have a waitressing position open and I could have my old job back.” I put the hope I'd spoken of in my smile as I waited for his response.

He shifted on his feet, his eyes darting away toward the two ladies at the counter. I thought I recognized one as a friend of Mrs. Sawyer, who had shown up with a casserole after I'd come home from the hospital with Hudson, though I couldn't be sure. It was a deep sadness inside me that that time was still such a blur. "I'm sorry, Annalia, but we don't have any positions available right now."

My heart dropped. "Oh. Because I thought I saw an ad in the paper. That's why I came here first. I was hoping you'd remember how hard I worked. You once told me I was the best waitress you had." I smiled again, trying to tap into the employee/employer mutual respect we'd had. I hadn't really seen an ad in the paper—I actually hadn't bothered to look—but the turnover at IHOP was high and there had *always* been an ad in the paper in years past, so I took my chances with that small fib.

His cheekbones colored slightly, and I knew I'd been right about the ad. I also knew I was embarrassing him and myself, too, but I really needed a job. I'd been so sure that if I could get one quickly anywhere, it would be here.

He sighed. "That position has been filled. Sorry again." His jaw set and I knew from the experience of working with him that he wouldn't change his mind.

I sighed too, nodding. "Okay. Well thanks anyway." I almost offered my cell number in case a position became available, but I highly suspected he was lying to me, and that would have only further embarrassed us both.

I turned and headed for the door and as I did, I heard the hostess whisper, "Is it true she abandoned her own baby?"

"Yeah," he answered. "You can't always understand some cultures."

The words slammed into me, the sound of the door closing providing the additional sound effect of rejection. *You can't always understand some cultures?* Had he assumed I'd left Hudson because my Mexican heritage left some moral void inside me? I tried to muster some indignation but it only flared for a second before it fizzled out like a fire being lit in the rain.

I walked to my car and got in, sitting in the parking lot with the window rolled down for a second. Movement outside my car surprised me, and I sucked in a startled breath as I turned my head.

"Sorry, ma'am, didn't mean to scare you." He was an older Mexican man with a weathered, though

handsome face and an easy smile. He removed the hat that had been on his head and smoothed his black hair away from his face.

“That’s, uh, that’s all right.” I felt at a disadvantage sitting in my car while he stood outside my window, but he stepped back and put some distance between himself and my vehicle as if he’d read my mind. I instantly felt safer.

“I couldn’t help overhear you were asking for a job, and see, my family owns a restaurant just down the road and we sure could use an extra waitress.”

“Oh . . . I . . . really?”

His smile widened. “Seemed kinda like fate the way I was just passing by and happened to hear the exchange.”

“Yes, I . . . thank you.” I tilted my head, considering the restaurants I knew were nearby. “Abuelo’s?” *Grandfather’s*. I’d seen the restaurant from the outside, but I’d never been there. Hope soared inside me at the sudden change in circumstance.

“Sí. You go today and ask for Rosa. Tell her Alejandro sent you for the waitressing position.” He smiled and tipped his hat before replacing it on his head and walking away.

I leaned out the window and called, “Thank you.”

He shot a wide smile over his shoulder and then got in an old truck parked a few spaces away and drove out of the lot.

I hesitated for just a moment, attempting to regain my equilibrium. I’d just gone from hopeful, to disappointed, to angry and humiliated, to hopeful again in the space of fifteen minutes, and that was a lot of internal bouncing around, even for me.

I drove the short distance to Abuelo’s and parked in the lot, telling myself not to get my hopes up too high from the word of a stranger I’d just met.

When I opened the front door, the delicious smell of grilling meat and the soft sounds of mariachi music playing on overhead speakers greeted me.

The space was open and airy with tall, beamed ceilings and lots of windows, but the décor was quaint and decidedly Mexican inspired with vibrant colors, large, wooden chandeliers that appeared

rustic and handcrafted, and a mural that took up one entire wall. I tried to take in the details of the art, but I was too far away.

“Hello. One?” A smiling young girl approached me, holding a menu. Though she spoke English, her Spanish accent was pronounced.

“Oh. No, actually. I’m here to see Rosa?”

“Ah. Sí. Un minuto.” She walked away, turning toward a set of double doors and disappearing inside. I stood waiting, my nerves building. After a couple of minutes, the doors opened again and an older woman appeared, walking toward me.

“Hello. I’m Rosa.” Rosa was a lovely Mexican woman who looked to be in her forties, with her black hair in a low bun at the nape of her neck, wide inquisitive eyes, and a lilting Spanish accent.

I smiled and held out my hand. I hoped she couldn’t feel that it was shaking slightly. I’d never been very good at putting myself out there—and I’d done it once this morning to terrible results. Rosa’s hand was warm and soft and her smile was the same.

“Alejandro said I should ask for you about a waitressing position that may be open.”

For a second she appeared confused, but then she smiled again. “Ah, Alejandro.” Her gaze became more scrutinizing, and I held myself still so as not to fidget under her assessment. “Yes, we do have a position open. Do you have experience?”

“Yes. I worked at IHOP for three years. I could provide a reference.” *Not from Ron.*

Rosa smiled again. “A reference from Alejandro is more than enough. He’s my husband. I trust him.”

I wasn’t above a white lie now and again, especially when it came to acquiring a job I really needed, but something about this woman’s kind eyes and gentle manner made me hesitant to be anything except completely honest with her. “Well, see, I . . . don’t actually know Alejandro. I just met him about ten minutes ago.”

Rosa laughed, a pretty, sweet sound that made me smile, though with some confusion. She put a hand on my shoulder. “That’s enough, too. What size shirt do you wear?”

I blinked. “Size?”

“For a uniform.”

My heart soared. “Oh, um. Small.”

“I think we have several of those already in the back. Good. No need to order one. We’ll just get you a nametag. What’s your name, dear?”

“Annalia. Thank you so much.”

“No, thank you. How soon can you start?”

“Right away. As soon as possible.”

“Ah! Even better. Okay. Come with me, and I’ll put you with María today so she can train you.”

I felt one hundred pounds lighter than I had when I’d left IHOP. I had a job, and I could begin getting my life back on track. I was near Hudson, and I hoped and prayed Preston would work out a schedule with me so I could see him regularly.

I didn’t know what was possible as far as our relationship, and I wasn’t even sure what I was hoping for in that regard. We’d gone so far past what I assumed was the point at which we might have been able to salvage something—even friendship.

I couldn’t help the hurt and bitterness that still clung to me like a second skin, and I knew Preston felt the same. I knew he had been lost to his grief—understandably so—but I never understood why he had seemed to hate me. One night he’d claimed he’d always wanted me, and then . . . then . . . nothing. I never understood why he had barely been able to look at me without wincing. We’d once been friends. And then, though briefly, lovers. *I’d once dreamed for much more.*

But . . . this was a step in the right direction as far as my own life was concerned, and that’s what I had to focus on right now if I was going to be any kind of mother to my son.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Preston

The screen creaked with familiarity as I pulled it open, using my forearm to wipe the sweat from my brow. The day was mild but the kitchen felt stuffy, and I told myself for the thousandth time I needed to get this old house wired for central air. Money was still tight though. It'd probably be another few years before I could afford to do something like that.

"I thought it was supposed to rain today," Tracie said, coming into the kitchen and shooting me a smile. Hudson was in her arms, having just woken from his nap. He was clutching his favorite blanket, his thumb in his mouth.

I gave Tracie a small smile in return before I went to the sink to wash my hands. "That's what they said, but I don't see any sign of it." Then again, I hadn't seen any sign of it *that night* either and still, the rain had come.

I leaned forward and used my hand to put a little bit of the cold water on the back of my sweaty neck. Grabbing a paper towel, I dried my hands and then turned around, enjoying the feel of the water droplets that were still sliding down into the collar of my shirt. The material would catch the excess.

I held out my arms for Hudson and Tracie handed him to me, her eyes lingering on my throat. I felt a single bead of water move over the skin there and Tracie swallowed, moving her eyes away and turning abruptly.

I stilled, Hudson in my arms. Was my mom right? Was Tracie attracted to me? I'd never noticed it before . . . but would I have? Probably not. I'd been in my own world for what felt like a long time now.

I suddenly felt awkward as if the mood in the room had changed, and we both knew it. "Hey, buddy," I said softly, kissing Hudson's sweet-smelling hair and focusing on the baby in hopes of moving past the strange tension I suddenly felt. "Did you sleep good? You thirsty? It's warm in here, isn't it?" I set him in

his high chair and strapped him in before putting the tray in place and then filled his sippy cup with a quarter apple juice and three-fourths water. I handed it to him, and he took it with a toothy smile, sticking it in his mouth and tipping it back. “Good boy,” I murmured.

Tracie had moved to the counter and was heating up a bowl of pasta. I moved out of the way when she approached Hudson’s high chair, taking a seat and putting the bowl on his tray. He set his sippy cup down and she spooned some soft noodles into his mouth. “That good?” she crooned, smiling at him affectionately.

She was good with him and obviously cared for him very much. I was lucky to have found her after Lia left. At the thought of Lia, my stomach squeezed as it usually did. Christ Almighty, would I ever find peace when it came to even the very thought of her?

I sighed, taking a seat in a chair on the other side of the table and leaning on my forearms as I watched Tracie spoon-feed my son.

I hadn’t called Lia yet like I’d told her I would. I was still getting used to the idea that she was back in town. I felt like I needed a couple of days to get my bearings, to regain some calm, and try to let go of some of the resentment that had built up for six long months. It wouldn’t do Hudson any good for us to be at each other’s throats. She was his mother. We’d have to work something out. It was just that the idea of her being back in my life regularly made me feel like I couldn’t breathe. As much as I’d tried desperately to find her, as much as I was grateful she was okay for Hudson’s sake, I didn’t know how to sort all my own feelings out. We’d veered too far off track to make anything work between the two of us, so how was I going to handle seeing her on a regular basis as . . . what? Sort of friends eventually? Co-parents who tolerated each other?

“I ordered the cake for tomorrow,” Tracie said, glancing over at me and snapping me from the turmoil going on in my head. When I looked at her blankly, she tipped her head, giving me a wry smile. “You didn’t forget about Hudson’s party, did you?”

Oh God, Hudson’s first birthday party was tomorrow and I *had* forgotten. Jesus. “No, I didn’t forget. Thank you for taking care of so much of it, though. It’s not really in your job description. I appreciate it.”

She grinned at me. “I’m happy to do anything to celebrate this sweet kiddo. Plus, it kept me busy

during his naps.” She turned back to Hudson and spooned some more food into his mouth as he babbled happily. I took a second to really look at her. She was fresh and pretty with her wavy blonde hair and direct, blue eyes. A classic farm girl. There was something so straightforward and simple about her. She didn’t have eyes that clouded over with private dreams or lips that curved with secret thoughts—expressions that tormented a man with the need to know what was behind them. No, she’d be frank and honest, sweet and forthcoming. Not like Lia who said nothing was wrong as she turned away with an injured expression and tear-filled eyes. Not like Lia who *ran* away rather than making a stand. Each time I’d run after her because I couldn’t fucking help myself. Look where it’d gotten me. Look where it’d gotten *her*.

Or maybe it was *me* who had been the coward. Maybe it was me who needed to make a stand. *Goddamn it!* I raked my fingers through my hair, trying desperately to shut out the torment. I wished I drank. If I did, I could have spent the whole last year shitfaced. I could be three sheets to the wind right this second.

“Are you okay, Preston?”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry, just wool gathering.”

She nodded and without looking at me said, “Camille told me Hudson’s mother is back in town.” She shot me a quick glance, looking slightly uncomfortable as if it might not be a topic she should bring up. She took care of Hudson, though. She had a right to know about things that pertained to him.

“Yeah. She is.”

“Is that, um, good or bad?”

I sighed. “I’m not entirely sure yet. We haven’t really talked.”

“Are you going to invite her to Hudson’s birthday party?”

God, I hadn’t thought about it, but I guessed I’d have to. It would be cruel not to. There was no way she wouldn’t know her son’s own birthday, so it would be awful to leave her out. I had a hell of a lot of negative emotions regarding Lia, but I wasn’t going to be purposely vindictive. I certainly wouldn’t be giving her much notice. *That* wasn’t on purpose, though. If Tracie hadn’t reminded me, I might not have shown up. Nice. I’d text her later tonight.

Tracie nodded, focusing back on Hudson and biting her lip.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure.”

She glanced at me again quickly and her cheeks had colored slightly. A soft shade of pink that made her eyes an even more striking blue. “Are you and she going to try to work things out?”

How could we? There was no way back from where we’d been. Too much bitterness, too much animosity, far too much baggage and mistrust.

“No.”

She glanced away and then back at me shyly, nodding her head. “That’s . . . I mean . . .” Her cheeks colored even more. She was . . . pleased. I hated that my own words had brought me distress and a hopeless sock to my gut, but I didn’t know what to do about that. *Never* knew what to do about that.

“Tracie, do you want to go to dinner with me tonight?”

Her eyes widened slightly but she smiled. “Dinner?”

“Yeah . . . I . . .” I ran my hand through my still sweat-damp hair. “Just a meal.” Simple. Straightforward. Maybe exactly what I needed. Maybe it would help me find some answers.

“I’d love to.” *And there was her smile.* It wasn’t a smile I’d known since I was a boy. It wasn’t a smile I’d loved desperately with every beat of my heart. It wasn’t a smile that completely shattered my defenses. But it was a sweet smile. Tracie’s smile.

The Mexican restaurant was busy on a Friday night and I wondered if I should have made a reservation. But when I told the hostess there were two of us for dinner, she smiled and told us to follow her to a table by the window.

I pulled Tracie’s chair out for her and sat down, glancing around. I’d never been here before, though I’d driven by it often enough, and was glad Tracie had mentioned it. It had a charming old-world feel that

appealed to me and the lighting was bright enough to see the cleanliness of the surroundings while not being so bright that it didn't also provide a calming ambiance.

The wall in front of our booth was covered in a colorful mural, depicting an outdoor scene in Mexico. The clothing the people wore and the presence of horses told me it was a depiction from the early nineteenth hundreds. My eye was caught by a couple, the woman sitting on a low wall with her legs crossed demurely at her ankles, holding a flower to her nose while a man was on one knee before her, gazing upward with such naked adoration it snagged my heart for a second. The artist was good—I *felt* that look because I knew the emotions behind it, the gut-churning, soul-crushing *need* for a woman who was just *it* for you. I'd felt that way. For a moment, I felt true pity for the poor guy in the painting.

Tracie picked up her menu and gave me a shy smile and I managed a smile back, feeling slightly off balance at being so swiftly pulled back to the moment. Not only that, but the truth was, even though I'd enjoyed female companionship in college, I really never found anyone I'd been interested in dating. This was a somewhat new experience for me.

“Are you as nervous as I am?” Tracie asked.

I looked up from my menu, and she was looking at me shyly from beneath her lashes. “The truth is, I haven't really dated much,” I said, voicing what I'd been thinking a moment before.

She tilted her head. “What about Hudson's mother?”

I felt the heat rise in my face and hoped Tracie couldn't see it under the tan I had from working outside all day. What did I say? We didn't really date? The extent of our romance was twenty earth-shattering minutes on top of my farmhouse table? But that wasn't true either. I'd loved Lia fiercely since we were children. “It's complicated,” I murmured.

She stared at me for a moment before looking down at her menu.

“What about you?” I asked, desperate to change the subject. “Do you go out a lot?”

She shrugged. “With friends sometimes. But you may have noticed that Linmoor isn't exactly hopping as far as a social scene goes.”

I laughed, feeling the mood lighten. “That's for sure.”

Tracie smiled and looked at her menu again. “Gosh, everything looks good. What are you going to

get?”

I looked at my own menu for a second and when I looked up, I noticed a waitress at the table across from us delivering their food. I paused, frowning. I *knew* that slim figure, that straight back and curved—
Oh, Christ Almighty.

It was Lia.

She turned, her eyes tangling with mine as the color washed from her face. For a moment the world stopped, and we were the only two in it. It felt just like it had felt a few days before when she'd stepped into the diner and spotted me in the back. Only then, I'd had the span of an entire room to prepare for her to arrive in front of me, to rein in my emotions and attempt to calm my racing heartbeat. Now, *now*, she was three steps away.

She looked behind her quickly, appearing to either be looking for an escape route or checking to see if there was anyone else who could take over for her.

She turned back around and her shoulders raised and fell minutely before she took the few steps that brought her to our table. She gave us a tight smile. “Hi, I’m Annalia and I’ll be serving you tonight. Have you ever been to Abuelo’s before?”

I stared at her for a beat. Was she going to pretend we didn’t know each other? I wondered at the reason. Who was she trying to make things easier for?

“Lia,” I let out on a breath. I felt as if someone had taken my body and given it a good shake and everything inside still hadn’t quite settled back into its proper place.

Tracie looked from me to Lia and then back to me, understanding dawning in her eyes as her face paled slightly just as Lia’s had. She looked at her menu as if it might hold some sort of protocol on how to act in this awkward situation. *Jesus, what were the odds?*

Lia let out a soft breath. “Preston.” Her eyes moved to Tracie and lingered for a second before she looked back at me.

“I didn’t know you worked here.”

“No, I see that.” She didn’t say it meanly, though, just as a sort of agreement.

I looked at her nametag and noticed her name was spelled incorrectly with only one *n*. Something

about that made a quiver of anger race through me, not the misspelling but the fact that Annalia wouldn't say anything about it. She'd let it go because she wouldn't want to be a bother. *Why* did that anger me? I didn't know and I was too shaken to think more about it.

"I was hoping I'd hear from you this week," she said softly, her eyes shooting over to Tracie again who was still focused on her menu.

I cleared my throat. "I meant to, uh, I just hadn't gotten around to it." She tried hard to hide the hurt that filled her eyes but didn't manage it. My throat felt tight and my skin itched from the inside. "By the way, Annalia, this is Tracie. She, uh, cares for Hudson while I'm working."

"Oh." The sound that came from Lia was mostly breath and sounded more like a strange moan than the word I knew she'd intended.

Tracie smiled at Lia and it conveyed what I could only guess she was feeling, some discomfort, but possibly sympathy for the situation we were all in.

"It's nice to meet you, Tracie. I'm . . . I'm Hudson's mother. Thank you for all you've done."

"Yes, I know your name," Tracie said gently. "And I love watching Hudson. He's a true joy."

"Yes," Lia whispered and she looked so shattered that I wanted to hit someone. I wasn't sure exactly who—maybe me. Maybe I wanted to beat myself senseless.

"Lia," I said and her eyes moved slowly to mine. "I meant to call you and tell you that we're having a small party for Hudson tomorrow if you want to join us."

She blinked at me for a moment, those gorgeous eyes round and full of pain. God help me, I wanted to take her in my arms and soothe away the hurt, and it filled me with helpless distress. I didn't *want* to feel this way. This was *exactly* why I'd asked Tracie to dinner and now the fates had walked me straight back into the eye of the storm when all I needed was some calm, some damn peace. Some *stillness* instead of the swirling, turbulent emotions that Lia always evoked inside me.

"I . . . of course. Yes. Thank you. What time?"

What time? I had no idea. I looked at Tracie and she smiled up at Lia again. "Eleven to one."

Lia nodded. "Okay." The loud strains of whatever mariachi music was playing suddenly sped up and it seemed to jerk Lia out of the small awkward circle the three of us were creating back to the restaurant

floor. "I'll just get you some waters. Would you like anything else to drink? A margarita?"

I looked at Tracie who shook her head. She wasn't even twenty-one anyway. "Water's fine," I said.

Lia pivoted and walked away, stopping at a table on her way and checking on them.

I turned to Tracie. I hoped the look on my face conveyed the regret I felt inside. I hadn't meant to do this to her. I would have never knowingly done this to any one of us.

"She's really beautiful," Tracie said softly. "Hudson, he has her eyes."

I nodded. "Yeah, he does. Tracie, I'm sorry about this. If I'd known she worked here—"

"Well, Preston Sawyer, is that you?"

Surprised, I looked up to see Alicia Bardua standing a few feet from me. There was a hostess standing behind her where she had been about to seat Alicia and another blonde at a booth across from us. The hostess handed the menus to Alicia's friend and smiled politely before walking away.

"Alicia," I said, the surprise I felt obvious in my tone. I'd managed to hide the displeasure. "I didn't know you were back in town."

"Oh, just temporarily. I'm here for my sister's wedding." She walked closer to our table and gave a snooty smile to Tracie, holding out one hand with long, hot pink nails. "Hi, I'm Alicia."

Tracie smiled politely and shook hands. "Tracie."

Alicia put her hand on my shoulder. "I heard about Cole. I was absolutely devastated. I had to leave work early I was so distraught. I work for Vera Wang in New York City now if you didn't hear," she added.

I wasn't sure which part she meant for me to address but preferred not to discuss Cole with her. "I'd heard you're doing really well, Alicia. My mom runs into your dad pretty often at different social events."

Alicia swept her pale blonde hair over her shoulder and preened for a moment. "Daddy's real proud of me." Daddy had spoiled her rotten, but I didn't care enough about Alicia to be anything but cordial to her, and so I simply nodded, giving her what I hoped looked like a sincere smile.

She'd expressed her forgiveness for me breaking our prom date at our high school graduation. Of course, I knew it really had more to do with the fact that she'd gotten another date immediately with the captain of the football team—whom she considered a step up from me and was still dating at graduation

—than with any true soul-searching about her disgusting behavior.

“I also heard you have a kid with that girl who used to hang off you and Cole.” She went on, giving me a smile full of fake sympathy. “Then I heard she ran off and I thought, well, doesn’t surprise me. But I’m glad to see you haven’t let it bring you down.” She glanced at Tracie and gave her a bigger smile.

I felt a small jolt of anger. Lia had *never* hung off Cole and me. If anything, she’d made a concerted effort to avoid us in public. It had pissed me off actually. “Thanks for stopping by,” I said tersely, hoping she understood the dismissal.

She looked slightly off-put but nodded and smiled back. “Have a nice dinner. I sure do hope I see you around while I’m here.”

A water glass was set down in front of me and Alicia moved to the side slightly. She looked at Lia and her eyes shot open so wide she looked like a shocked owl. For a second I almost wanted to laugh. “You have got to be kidding me,” she said. “You work here?”

Lia’s eyes widened as well when she saw Alicia, but she gathered herself quickly and nodded. “Hi, Alicia.” I remembered that long-ago day Alicia had been so cruel to Lia at school and felt the weight of sadness fall over me. Of course, Alicia had been even uglier to Lia with her words after Lia had run to the nurse’s office, but I’d never told Lia that. She had enough hurt to contend with as it was.

Alicia looked over her shoulder to where her friend sat waiting for her and smiled tightly. “I’d better go. See you later.” She nodded to Tracie and me and then turned and sashayed the short distance to her table.

“Are you ready to order?” Lia asked. I heard the tremble in her voice. Lord knew how many times I’d caused that tremble. I once again wished I could draw her close and provide comfort.

“I am,” Tracie said. “Are you?”

I hadn’t even taken in any of the words on the menu but at this point I just wanted to eat and get the hell out of there. “Yeah.”

Tracie ordered and I pointed to something on the menu, hoping it was an entrée of some sort. Lia’s hand paused where it had been writing on the small pad of paper she held. “You want an order of tripitas?”

“Uh . . . sure. What is it?”

“It’s pig intestines. It’s considered a delicacy, but . . . I’ve never known you to be a very adventurous eater.”

Pig intestines. My stomach roiled at the thought. “Just bring me whatever you think I’d like.” I closed the menu and handed it to her. She took them and walked away.

Tracie and I talked stiltedly for a little while. I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable. I didn’t think either of us were under the impression the date—if it could be called that—hadn’t been shot to hell. I just hoped we could make the best of it, get out of here and . . . what? Did I even want to try again somewhere else? Another time? I was too mixed up to even think right then. I should have stuck with the tripitas. If anyone deserved to eat pig innards, it was me.

I started to say something to Tracie but was distracted by Alicia’s loud, snooty voice coming from behind me. When I glanced back, she was talking to a busboy and asking for a manager. Not thirty seconds later an attractive older woman with her black hair in a twist at the back of her head and wiping her hands on an apron, came out of the back and approached Alicia’s table.

“I’d like to request a different food server than the one I have.”

“Was there a problem, ma’am?” The woman’s voice was soft yet firm. The people at the tables around us seemed to quiet slightly as if they, too, were listening to the exchange.

Alicia’s voice lowered an octave as if she were trying to speak privately, but being that the voice she’d started in had been overly loud, this new “softer” voice could still be heard from four tables away. In every direction, I imagined. “That *girl* used to come to school with bugs on her,” she said and my heart dropped. “I don’t want her serving my food.”

Every muscle in my body froze. *You fucking bitch, Alicia.* I looked back and the woman in front of her had crossed her arms over her chest and seemed to be standing taller. I couldn’t see what was on her face, but by the look on Alicia’s, the woman wasn’t cowering to her—at least not in her stance or expression.

There was a lengthy pause as if the woman was deciding how to reply. “I’ll have Raul take your order,” she finally said, her voice clipped. I didn’t know her but I swore I heard the low simmer of anger

in her tone. “I do hope he’ll meet with your approval.”

“That’s fine,” Alicia said, obviously not catching the note of sarcastic disdain in the woman’s voice. Or not caring.

Motherfucking hell.

As the manager walked away, she passed our table, her eyes lingering on me for a moment.

I frowned, looking at Tracie to see her expression was pained. “Wow, that Alicia’s a real bitch, isn’t she?”

I let out a raspy breath. “She always was.”

“Did you go to school together?”

“Yes, we were friends, kind of.” We’d actually dated for a short time, which I was too ashamed to admit.

“What . . . what did she mean about bugs?”

My breath hissed from my lips in a loud exhale. “That . . . it wasn’t Lia’s fault.” I wouldn’t dredge up the story for Tracie—it was in the past, where it should be.

She nodded, pursing her lips, studying me. “You’re still in love with Annalia, aren’t you?” She reached across the table and put her hand on mine. “It’s okay, Preston.” She looked down for a moment. “I had hoped . . . well, I’d hoped there could be something between us; I’m not going to beat around the bush about that. But after seeing you two together, I know there can’t be. And I won’t take it personally. I don’t think you’re available for anyone. You’re not over Annalia.”

I stared at her for a moment, wondering what she’d seen exactly, because Annalia and I had barely spoken. From my point of view, it’d been stilted and painful and awkward.

I glanced behind her at the depiction of the Mexican couple, my eyes lingering on their linked hands for a moment before I looked back at Tracie. No, I didn’t know exactly how she knew how I felt, but I couldn’t deny she was right. I couldn’t. Not even to myself. “No,” I said, letting out a humorless sound that was half-chuckle, half-breath and closing my eyes very briefly. “I’m not available for anyone else.” *I haven’t been, not really, not since I first looked into Lia’s eyes when I was only a kid. And over her?* No. I wasn’t over her—far from it. Only . . . I didn’t think she loved me back, and I had no earthly idea

what to do with my feelings.

“I’m sorry, Tracie. I wasn’t trying to play games with you. I respect you more than I can express, and we couldn’t have survived this past six months without you. I wish,” I released a harsh breath, “I wish it could be more than that.”

She smiled softly and patted my hand again. “I love Hudson, he’s—”

“Excuse me,” Lia’s voice came from above, and Tracie pulled her hand away where it’d rested on top of mine on the table. I pulled my hand back as well and Lia put our entrées in front of us. “Will there be anything else right now?”

Tracie looked at me, regret in her eyes and then she smiled up at Lia. “No. Thank you, Annalia.”

I glanced up at Lia to see her nod, her expression drawn, and then she turned and walked to the table next to us.

I sincerely hoped the woman Alicia had complained to hadn’t told Annalia the truth about why she was sending someone else to take her order. I watched out of the corner of my eye as she began clearing her other customers’ plates and focused on my food.

Lia had brought me some sort of burrito and I cut into it, taking a bite of the steak-and-vegetable-filled concoction. It was delicious, and I felt bad for eating it quickly, but I really just wanted to finish and end this torture for all of us.

“We could get the food to go,” Tracie suggested, eyeing me as I swallowed the overly huge bite I’d just stuffed in my mouth.

I gave her a wry smile and raised my eyebrows. “Would you mind?”

She laughed a short laugh. “No. I’d prefer it actually.” But she gave me an understanding smile. “And I think Annalia deserves to work without the distraction of—” Her words suddenly cut off as her brows drew together and then she immediately sucked in a breath, moving as if she was about to rise out of her chair. Behind me I heard a small scream and a massive crash.

“She *tripped* her,” I heard Tracie say incredulously as I whipped my head around to see Lia sprawled on the floor in a heap of broken dishes and half-eaten food.

Adrenaline surged through my blood and I jumped out of my seat just as a man rushed up to me,

putting his hand lightly against my chest. “Please sir, thank you, but no need to help. I’ve got this. “

He turned so quickly he almost seemed like a blur and shocked me by throwing a plate on the floor with a purposeful flourish. “¡Óóoorale!” he shouted over the sound of the shattering dish, scooping Lia up off the floor in one elegant movement and dipping her as she let out a squeak, her eyes wide and still full of what looked like shocked horror.

As he pulled himself straight, supporting Lia with one arm until she was standing, he said with a grin, “We’re here every night, folks. Don’t forget to tip your food server.”

The diners around me laughed and clapped at the impromptu show—what had turned a cringe-worthy moment into something light and funny—then turned back to their meals.

A couple of busboys rushed in to clean up the mess and the waiter who’d held me back and helped Lia up—Raul I assumed—ushered her in the other direction and quickly toward the back. I looked over at Alicia who was smirking as she sipped innocently on a margarita.

Red rage clouded my vision as I walked over to her table and put my hands down heavily on the edge, startling her as I leaned forward. “Leave. Now.”

Alicia’s face screwed up before she laughed. “Or *what*, Preston?”

“Or I’ll forward every lewd picture you ever sent to the guys you *dated* in high school straight to Vera Wang. Maybe I’ll post them in the Linmoor Times. A full-page ad. I’ll at least put them on the Internet. And you know how it goes once something’s on the Internet. It’s forever. I have a lot of material to choose from, don’t I, Alicia?”

Her face drained of color and her smile faded. She looked at her friend who was staring at her and then around at the other diners. “You *liar*,” she hissed.

I narrowed my eyes and smiled. I was bluffing. I hadn’t kept any pictures, and I had no idea if anyone else had either. But the horror in Alicia’s eyes told me my bluff was working. My smile increased. “You don’t think men keep that type of thing? You don’t think we share them with our friends? Not only do I still have the ones you sent *me*, I could make six phone calls and have a hundred saved pictures to choose from in ten minutes. Too bad you burned so many bridges. I imagine quite a few of them are looking for an excuse to burn you right back. Now I’ll say it once more, get the hell out of here. *Now*.”

Alicia gave me one final look of death, reached for her purse, and threw some money on the table. “I’ve lost my appetite anyway,” she bit out. “Come on,” she said to her friend, standing up and bumping me as she moved to leave. Her friend kept her head down as she followed behind. I stayed in place, looking over my shoulder to watch the door shut behind them.

Huffing out a breath, I returned to Tracie. I sat back down, grimacing as I finally made eye contact. “I imagine this will go down in history as the worst date of your life.”

Her lips tipped up in an amused smile. “It’s been . . . interesting, I’ll give you that.” Her face became serious. “I think it’s time you drove me home and figured out what you’re going to do about Annalia.”

I flinched but it ended on a sigh. Yeah. That’s exactly what I needed to do. No matter what, she’d always be the mother of my son. I only wished she wasn’t the one who still owned my heart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Annalia

I stared at myself in the mirror, the eyes that gazed back full of all the misery I felt in my heart. Could this night have been any worse? Only if I'd gotten fired . . . which I still might.

A tear slipped down my cheek and I swiped at it hastily as I turned away from the mirror. I'd cleaned the food splatters that had been in my hair and on my shirt as well as I could. It was time to face the music. But I couldn't. I sagged down onto a small, upholstered bench in front of the female employee lockers in the women's restroom and let the tears fall.

My shoulders sagged and I felt the mortifying weight of the earlier catastrophe. For a few brief moments I just let it hurt. I wasn't sure I had the energy to do more than that.

I heard the door swing open and sat up abruptly, attempting to clear the wetness from my cheeks. I was more than willing to linger in self-pity for a little bit longer, but less inclined to do it in front of anyone. When I looked up, Rosa was standing there. The look on her face was sympathetic, but I was so embarrassed I was falling apart in front of her—my *boss*—the woman who'd been so kind and patient with me all week, making me immediately feel a part of the team.

I had worked hard to learn the menu and table numbers and figure out the computer system in record time, not only in order to make things easier on myself, but because I wanted to show my gratitude by being the best employee I could be for the people who'd already been so good to me.

Not only was I thankful for the job, but I genuinely liked it, too. The food was amazing, the people were welcoming, and I loved that my ability to speak Spanish allowed me to talk to other employees and customers who spoke limited English. Yes, I already loved working at Abuelo's.

And now . . .

Rosa sighed. Helping me to my feet and hooking her arm in mine, she led me out through the door and

across the short distance to her office. “Sit down, cariño.”

Cariño. I felt the tears rise again at the sweet term of endearment, at the hope that rose inside me that she might be kind to me about the terrible scene on the restaurant floor.

I sat down in a chair, and she pulled one up right next to me. I turned toward her and she took my hands in hers, squeezing them as she offered a smile. “Oh, Lia. Tell me what’s going on.”

I sucked in a huge gulp of air, trying hard not to cry. I couldn’t help the wave of emotion her gentleness brought on after I’d been so afraid she was going to be angry and tell me to leave.

I was already on shaky ground after Preston being in the restaurant on a date—a date with the woman who took care of my son, which somehow made it all the worse. Not only did she have Preston, but she spent each day with my baby, too, and the jealousy and pain I felt had wrenched my heart and made it difficult to draw a full breath.

And then Alicia had shown up and asked for another server. I’d overheard one of the busboys telling another the reason why and wanted to die of humiliation. And then she’d tripped me. For a minute I was the same insecure, shame-filled girl I’d been in high school, and I’d just wanted to lie on the floor and cry.

Before I could answer, Rosa frowned at my shirt. I glanced down, seeing the smears and stains and feeling embarrassment all over again.

“Isn’t your name spelled with two *n*’s?”

“What?”

“Your nametag. Your name is spelled incorrectly.”

“Oh. I . . . yes. It’s not a big deal. I didn’t want to make a fuss,” I murmured.

“Oh, Annalia.” Rosa stared at me for a moment, an intensity growing in her eyes that I wasn’t sure I understood. She let go of my hands and grabbed my upper arms, shaking me slightly. “Make a fuss, mi amor,” she said with such conviction I could only stare back. “Make a *fuss*. Okay?” She suddenly stood, startling me again. “Come on. I’m going home for dinner with my boys and you’re coming with me.”

“I . . . dinner? Oh, you don’t—”

“Meet me at the back door. We’ll take my car and I’ll drop you back off at yours later.”

It seemed as if she wasn’t going to take no for an answer, and the truth was, I didn’t want to be alone

tonight, not when the anguish of seeing that Preston had moved on had been right in front of me. Even now, it felt like a weeping wound. It had been six months since I'd been held by Preston. I shouldn't feel so raw. *He'd moved on. He'd. Moved. On.* But it did. Oh, it did. And so I stood and nodded, thankful for a listening, sympathetic ear that had somehow softened the desolate pain in my heart. And thankful I wouldn't have to face Preston and Tracie again tonight.

She scooted me out of her office, and I went to get my sweater and purse from my locker and met her at the back door a few minutes later. As Raul was passing by, I called to him. "Raul, thank you. For what you did. Thank you for that."

Raul winked at me. "We've got each other's backs around here, Annalia. Next time I slip and fall, I know you'll be there for me."

I let out a relieved breath. "Yes. I hope I don't have to be." I smiled. "But, yes."

He smiled back and walked away, off to deliver a tray of food to a table.

Fifteen minutes later we were pulling into the driveway of a tidy-looking house in a residential neighborhood in Linmoor. The house itself was small and relatively modest, but the paint was fresh and new and the front yard was beautifully landscaped with a gorgeous, vining, deep-pink flower arched over the doorway. It was clearly a home that was well loved. *Something I'd only ever dreamed of.*

The sun was only a glimmer on the horizon, but I was glad we'd arrived here when we had and I was able to see the yard in the last vestiges of evening light. It charmed me and made me feel just a bit lighter somehow.

"Your yard is so beautiful," I said as we walked up the flagstone path. I admired the vibrant colors, leaning toward the lilac bush that was heavy with purple blooms and inhaling its sweet perfume.

"Oh, thank you. It broke my heart when I couldn't water them last year. But . . . so many lost their farms, their businesses, I can hardly complain. And luckily, many of my plants came back." She smiled. "We still collect our shower water and use it in the watering cans. Good habits, I suppose, even now that the drought is over."

"Yes," I agreed as she opened the door. We'd all learned habits that would be hard to break—and maybe shouldn't anyway.

I pictured Sawyer Farm and how ravaged it had once looked, envisioned Preston's drawn, weary face as he came through the back kitchen door day after day, looking exhausted and half dead. Most evenings he'd eaten and gone straight to bed. In the beginning I'd been glad for it, glad he was sleeping, glad he could shut out his grief for a little while. And even after the baby had come, I'd tried so hard to understand . . . tried to be patient . . . tried to put my own needs aside, hoping, hoping that despite everything he'd grow to love me . . .

He'd *wanted* me once, and I'd clung to that small hope.

"Joaquín, Alonso, Diego," Rosa called as I followed her inside and she shut the door behind us. A big, black dog appeared, and Rosa made a clicking sound. "You've been on the sofa, haven't you, you big, naughty beast." If dogs could smile, this one did. Grin might be a better descriptor.

A boy who looked to be about twelve came down the stairs and greeted Rosa. Following closely behind him were two handsome older teenagers who both gave me shy smiles and kissed Rosa on her cheek. Rosa introduced them to me. Diego was the youngest and Joaquín, who looked about eighteen, the oldest.

Rosa pointed to a pile of what looked to be sporting equipment and told them in a quick burst of Spanish to put it in the mudroom or face the consequences. I wasn't sure what the consequences were, but they must be serious because alarm filled the boys' faces, and they picked up the items hurriedly and rushed ahead to a door to the left, presumably the mudroom.

"Follow me, Annalia," she said. "These boys are going to cook for us while we have a drink and watch the sun set."

The boys all grumbled and put up some mild protestations, but Rosa shooed them toward the kitchen. "There are makings for cheese enchiladas in the refrigerator. I think you three can manage that. Make a small salad and bring me a glass of wine and Annalia . . ." she looked at me and I said I'd like any type of soda she had, "a Coke. In a glass. With ice."

A few more grumbles and a few "this isn't fair" and they were off and Rosa, smiling, looped her arm with mine. "Teenagers," she said, but there was such affection in her voice that I knew it wasn't a criticism. "Someday their wives will thank me for teaching them how to cook."

She led me through her home, which was both pretty and lived-in, out through a sliding-glass door to a brick patio and huge backyard overlooking the grove of trees I'd seen from the front yard. The patio lights cast a soft glow that reached to the edges of the lawn and there was a comfortable sitting area featuring many brightly colored pillows, and a fire pit just beyond that. "Oh," I breathed. "It's so pretty back here."

Rosa pointed to the outdoor sofa and we sat down. She put her feet up on the table in the middle and sighed. Joaquín brought our drinks out, giving me a shy smile as he handed me my glass. "Thank you," I said quietly.

Rosa smacked him lightly on his hip as he was walking back past her, and he pretended to be surprised, jumping slightly and saying, "Ouch." I laughed and he grinned back at me.

"Flirt," Rosa said, sipping her wine. She looked over at me, tilting her head. "Feeling better?"

I nodded. "Yes, thank you."

She studied me for a minute until I was tempted to squirm before she asked, "Who was the man in the restaurant tonight?"

I swallowed the sip of soda I'd just taken. "The man?"

"Yes, the man. The one who appeared to be on a date but couldn't keep his eyes off you. The one who looked so tormented I almost sent him a complimentary shot of tequila. Or three."

I laughed, but it was without much humor. "Preston," I said, and I could hear the pain in my own voice though I'd tried to say it casually. "He's my son's father."

Rosa sipped her wine as she watched me again, finally nodding once. "So you're not together?"

"No, we're not."

"So why is it he had words with the blonde perra who tripped you, and she left the restaurant looking terrified out of her mind—what little of it there appears to be?"

Perra. Bitch. Alicia. I blinked. "He did?"

"Oh yes. But even after that, he still didn't look satisfied."

Preston had defended me. A tremor of warmth moved through me. Preston had *always* defended me, had always been my champion, and I was surprised yet moved by the knowledge that he still was, at least

in some instances. Maybe that's why it had hurt so deeply that he'd watched me suffer for so long and not done something about it. And yet . . . I'd watched him hurt, too, and not done anything about it—not because I didn't *want* to, but because I didn't know *how*.

Confusion overcame me and I took a large, shaky inhale of cool, evening air and let it out slowly. I still felt as if there was an iron band around my chest.

I thought about how kind Rosa had been to give me the job at Abuelo's with nothing more than the mention of Alejandro's name, a man who really knew nothing about me. I thought about how understanding she'd acted toward me tonight when I'd made a big scene in her restaurant and left them short a waitress during the busy dinner hour. That hadn't been completely my fault, although it was because of my personal life that it had come to pass at all—a personal life I'd brought with me, unwillingly or not. I had to contend with it, but that didn't mean Rosa should have to.

And I thought about how above and beyond she was going now, inviting me into her home and having me over to dinner—a dinner her sons were making.

“Rosa,” I choked, “the truth is I left them both, Preston and my son. I think you should know because a lot of people in this town dislike me for it, and I'd hate for it to affect your business in any—”

“Oh, Lia, I already know about that, *cariño*. Linmoor is a very small town.” She took a sip of her wine.

I stared at her, blinking. “You . . . know?”

“I do. But I don't judge people based on the gossip of shallow people. I like to make my own judgments. You know what *I've* come to see from the experience of getting to know you this week?”

“No,” I breathed. I felt suddenly raw and far too tender. I wanted to wrap my arms around myself but I was holding the glass of soda in my hand and I felt frozen with nerves. I remained still, trying desperately to hold back the threatening tears.

“I know you're the hardest worker I've ever employed. You go above and beyond for your fellow employees, and you do more than what's asked of you. You're kind but shy and you carry a whole world behind your eyes, and I wonder if you ever let anyone be a part of it. And I imagine that if you don't, you must be very, very lonely.”

Twin tears slipped out of my eyes and I didn't bother to brush them away. Rosa stood and came over to me, taking my glass and setting it on the table, and then pulling me to my feet. Inside, I heard a burst of noise come from the kitchen, raised voices as if the boys were arguing over something, and it jolted me slightly.

Rosa linked her arm through mine. "Let's walk. The yard is so big, sometimes I like to stroll around like it's my own personal park."

We strolled for a minute, and my emotions settled as we walked. I soaked in the warmth of Rosa's closeness, the motherly way she held me against her. "Do you want to talk about it?" she finally asked gently. "Do you want to tell me why you left?"

Her question confused me slightly because no one had ever asked me to share my feelings with them. I wasn't sure how I felt about doing so, or even how to go about it. And furthermore, I wasn't sure there were even words to put to my emotions. *Do you want to tell me why you left?* As if reading my mind, she smiled over at me. "Sometimes it's best to just spit it right out. Why did you leave, cariño?"

"Because no one wanted me there, and I felt like I was dying slowly inside." I let out another long, shaky breath, feeling both the shame in me rise at my admission and something else loosen slightly, allowing me to breathe more fully.

Rosa tightened her grip on my arm, and I leaned in to her as we neared the trees and then turned to walk along the border of the wooded area. It smelled earthy and damp back there and I filled my lungs with the rich smell of spring, of newness. And it wasn't just the newness of the earth filling my senses. There was a sudden newness *inside* me, too—a curious unfurling—as if a seed of growth had pushed its head out of the shadows and into the open air, eager to flourish and bloom.

I spoke briefly of Cole and how he and Preston had been my friends growing up. All this time and I'd been so afraid to mention Cole's name, had thought it would open the wound to speak of him at all, and yet I found it was the opposite. Talking about him to Rosa felt like a slow stitching inside as if something was being gently pulled back together—something that was still thin and delicately woven, but no longer torn wide open.

I told her hesitantly, and with some amount of shyness, that I hadn't known I was pregnant until a few

months after Cole had died. I'd gone to Preston, so terrified, so filled with grief not only for Cole's death but for the fact that Preston hadn't reached out to me at all since the night he'd dropped me off at my apartment. I confided in her how each day had stretched emptily into the next.

“Oh, Annalia, sweet girl.”

We'd sat on his front porch swing and I'd told him I was pregnant. I was already almost four months along by the time I'd gotten up the nerve to tell Preston.

I . . . I'm pregnant. I know you're probably not very happy about that.

An unplanned pregnancy was never cause for celebration, I supposed, but I was well aware that the timing for mine was particularly terrible. Preston had stared at me in shock and some type of dawning horror that sliced at my heart and made me flinch and look away. That look had made me unconsciously put my hands to my belly as if to comfort the baby inside, to let him know that he was wanted, at least by me.

But then Preston had taken my hands in his, and though his were shaking, he'd told me I'd have to move in with him, that he wanted to look after me. And it'd given me a sad kind of hope because I'd thought it would be an opportunity not only to help him through his grief, but for us to get closer, to form a family, to reclaim what we'd had for one sweet moment in time. To rekindle the true and pure friendship we'd shared for years. And God, I wanted to be looked after. I needed it, was desperate for it. Surely his mother would warm to me. I'd convinced myself everything would be okay. Reality had proven to be far more complicated than my own wistful dreams.

“Oh, cariño, that must have been so hard. Didn't you have anyone to talk to? Anyone to help you navigate the rocky path of new motherhood? You're so young, mi amor. You must have felt so alone. Alone and scared and heartbroken.”

Emotion welled up in my chest so fast, so suddenly, that I barely managed to choke back the sob that accompanied the deluge. All I could do was nod as more tears gathered and fell down my cheeks. Rosa smiled softly and hugged me to her side. “What about your own mother, Annalia? Where is she? Was she any help?”

I let out a groan that sounded like the mixture of a laugh and a sigh. “God, no. But . . . she's lived a

hard life, too.”

Rosa sighed softly. “I’m sorry.”

One of her boys leaned out the sliding glass doors and called his mom, telling her dinner was ready. It jerked me back to reality. I felt embarrassed and exposed. I’d shared far too much with someone who was a virtual stranger and . . . my boss. I’d been out of line. She’d asked me with such sincerity to tell her about myself, but I was certain she hadn’t expected that much detail. I hadn’t said too much, but I’d certainly shared more with one person than I ever had in my life.

I wiped the drying tears and felt the heat that had risen in my cheeks. “I—”

“Thank you for trusting me with your story, Annalia. We women need each other. For whatever His reasons, God deemed it appropriate to strap me with a wild band of male hooligans who I can barely understand half the time. It is so nice to experience the softness of a daughter and talk of the things I know.”

I was so overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation for her unbelievable kindness and the love she’d shown me, though she hadn’t really known me at all before tonight, that I could barely speak. “Thank you,” I managed and by the look in her eyes, it seemed like enough.

“Now come on,” she said. “I can only imagine what those boys concocted for dinner. Let’s just hope it’s somewhere in the same arena as enchiladas.”

I laughed and followed her inside. Alejandro had just arrived and when he saw me, a knowing look came into his eyes and he smiled warmly at me and then at his wife. He took her in his arms and kissed her mouth, and I smiled at the blatant show of affection as the boys muttered sounds of disapproval.

We linked hands as Alejandro said a blessing and then dug into the food. And I would always remember my first real taste of familial love as having the flavor of slightly burned cheese enchiladas. Darkness fell over the yard outside as laughter filled the room, and even though it had started as one of the worst nights of my life, I felt a warm glow in my chest and the lightness of having shared a piece of my heart and of being embraced for it. *Embraced.*

Not shunned. Not ignored. Not gossiped about. Not ridiculed. Not demeaned. Not passed over.

Embraced. Welcomed.

Make a fuss, mi amor, she'd said. I wasn't sure how to do that yet, but I would work it out. I *would* work it out.

After saying goodbye to everyone and thanking Rosa again, she drove me to my car and I drove home. When I arrived and shut off my engine, I heard my cell phone beeping from the glove box where I'd left it and took it out to find several texts from Preston and a few missed calls. Surprised, my heart quickening with apprehension, I scrolled through the texts. They simply asked me to call him back. There was a voice message, and I listened to it, holding my breath as his deep male voice began speaking:

"Lia <sigh> I'm sorry about tonight. <rustling and pause> We need to talk . . . about the baby and about . . . us. I hope you'll call me tonight. If not, uh, I'll see you tomorrow at Hudson's party and we'll figure on a time then. <long pause> I hope you're okay."

I sat back, leaning my head on the headrest and closing my eyes as pain radiated through me. *We need to talk . . . about the baby and about . . . us*. It was glaringly clear to me what the talk about us would entail. He was dating Hudson's nanny. The agony of seeing them together gripped me, but I breathed through it. I'd left, and I had to accept that Preston was now seeing someone else, even if he did still have a protective streak where I was concerned.

Had he really ever been seeing *me* anyway? Had we *ever* really been a couple or had I simply moved in with him, had his baby, and then . . . Mostly, that's how it felt. *Except for that night in the rain . . . except for that . . . but only for a moment that was far too brief*. Because in the end, it had been nothing more than sex. I'd recognized that then and I knew it now.

I let out a shuddery-sounding sigh. I had to rebuild my life . . . once again. It would be painful to see Preston with someone else, but I could manage it. Tracie seemed like a nice girl, and she obviously cared for our son. Hudson was most important, the one I would fight for. I could put my own feelings and needs aside—I'd have to. It was my only choice.

It was too late to call now. We hadn't started eating dinner at Rosa and Alejandro's until eight, and it was almost ten o'clock. Hudson would be asleep and Preston would, too, since he woke before sunrise every morning to start the day. Or at least, he had.

I'd have to talk to Preston tomorrow at Hudson's party. I was almost grateful it was too late to call.

Every ounce of emotional energy was gone, and I knew I could do nothing more than fall into my bed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Preston

It was the perfect day for an outdoor party. The temperature had dropped slightly and the air felt fresh and pleasantly cool. The farm was lush with new green leaves on all the trees, flowers blooming everywhere, their scents wafting in the air, and the rows of plants in the distance a vivid, healthy green.

The land around us had once been dry and withered, but it had recovered and was now bursting with new life. I wondered distantly if *people* who had once been stripped bare and cracked open could recover, too, and thought that it was at least worth hoping for. *Wasn't it?*

What was the alternative? The alternative was living as my parents had lived—just existing, mostly in silence with short bouts of anger that ended in more distance. God, it'd been exactly like that with Annalia the year we'd lived together, minus the short bouts of anger because Annalia would bite her tongue rather than lash out at anyone. Maybe it would have been better if she'd gotten angry. I'd needed *something* to snap me out of the fog I'd existed in. That night the rain had come had done it . . . but then she'd fled. I sighed heavily, scrubbing a hand over my face. I'd been too late. When it came to Annalia I was *always* too damn late. Just a little too slow, too many steps behind.

In the backyard, blue balloons moved gently in the spring breeze and a few tables had been set up on the lawn for those who wished to enjoy the fresh air and comfortable warmth.

I placed one of the gifts I'd gone out that morning and picked up for Hudson on the table next to the cake that was still in its white bakery box.

“What'd you get him?” I turned around to see Tracie and smiled.

“I got him a train table, but it was too big to wrap so I left it inside. That's a couple of trains to go with it.”

“Oh gosh, he'll go crazy for that.”

“I know,” I said, pleasure sliding through me at the thought of how my son would react to seeing the train table. He was obsessed with them. We’d read his few Thomas the Tank Engine books so many times I had them memorized. So did he, as a matter of fact. I knew because when I tried to skip pages, he’d call me on it by making a sound of outrage and turning back to what he knew I’d missed. “Is he awake yet?”

“He should be in a minute. I’ll go change him and bring him down.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I went back into the house. Lia hadn’t called me the night before, and I’d woken up with her heavy on my mind.

I don’t think you’re available for anyone. You’re still not over Annalia.

I’d admitted it to myself, and I’d admitted it to Tracie. The question was, what in the hell was I going to do about that? Anger hadn’t worked. Denial definitely hadn’t worked. So what now?

Open up to her, my mind whispered. Do it. Be brave. Could I? And after I’d closed myself off, turned away, hurt her when she’d been so vulnerable, would she even listen to anything I had to say? Could I take the chance that she might just be . . . done?

I’d almost picked up the phone and called her first thing this morning, but I’d known I was going to see her in a few hours so I’d held off. It would be better to talk in person anyway. That and part of my morning had been spent running out to get a gift for Hudson.

“Preston, darling, there you are. Have you seen Tracie?”

“Yeah, she’s out back.”

“Wonderful. Didn’t she do a marvelous job with the party setup? She really is a gem.”

“Tracie’s great, Mom.”

“How did your date go?”

“It wasn’t really a date. We just had dinner.”

She put her hands on her hips. “It sounded like a date to me. And I’m so glad you took my advice. I think—”

The doorbell rang, and I used the excuse to escape my mother, walking out of the kitchen into the foyer. My heart skipped a beat to find Lia on the other side, biting her lip, and for a moment I felt like a

seventeen-year-old boy, tongue-tied and dry-mouthed at the mere sight of her. Annalia gave me a nervous smile. “Good morning.”

“Hi,” I said, pulling the door open wider. “Ma’am.” I nodded to Lia’s mother who was standing beside her, and she nodded back, giving me a thin smile. I’d never given her too much of a reason to like me, although I *had* paid for her apartment and any minor expenses she incurred when Lia had stopped working and moved in with me. And I’d kept supporting her financially when Lia left. She was Hudson’s grandmother and what had happened between Lia and me wasn’t her mother’s fault. Plus, I was the one who had gotten her daughter pregnant and essentially put the family breadwinner out of commission.

In any case, though, I was pretty sure her mother was a withdrawn person and getting her to warm to me would be a Herculean task that I definitely didn’t have the skill or the charm to tackle. Cole could have. Of course. But not me.

During the few times in the past year she’d visited, she’d barely looked at me and had seemed impatient to leave. Of course, given that her English was so limited, if she’d wanted to say anything to my mother or me, Annalia had to interpret. That probably added to her discomfort.

When Lia left, we’d had no way to communicate that wasn’t cumbersome and inconvenient. The time I’d gone there to question her about whether she knew where Lia had gone, I had to use Google translate just to ask simple questions. It had been awkward and strange, and I’d been wrung dry with panic and hurt and only stayed long enough to find out Lia had told her she was leaving but hadn’t told her where she was going.

Lia stepped forward and the mere memory of that time made me want to reach out and grab her, shake her, and then wrap my arms around her and beg her not to leave me again—not ever to cause me to experience the misery and dread of loss.

I forced myself to relax, my eyes moving from her hair to her sandal-clad feet, her loveliness washing over me like a balm. She was wearing a flowered sundress in different shades of purple and the bright colors made her bronzed skin look rich and flawless. Her hair was loosely braided and fell over one shoulder.

A sudden vision filled my mind of Lia curled up in the upholstered rocker in Hudson’s room with her

hair in just the same way, the baby at her breast and how I'd stood and stared at them, a desperate pride filling my heart so full that it had *hurt*. She'd opened her eyes and the look in them had been . . . desolate. I felt a dull throbbing in my chest now, the phantom pain from a memory I'd purposely put away, because looking at it out in the open made me feel guilty and raw.

I'd turned away, walked out of the room, and gone into mine. When I'd closed the door, I had stood with my back pressed to it as if I'd needed to bar it against something. Only . . . the thing I was running from was inside of me—a deep, aching torment I couldn't escape. Not with hours and hours of backbreaking work, not with the silence I'd built around myself, not by pretending I didn't see how much Lia was hurting, too.

Is that why you left, Lia? God, it must be. How did you stay as long as you did?

My heart clenched. She held a gift in her hands, and judging by the look on her face, felt incredibly unsure as if she wasn't certain she was wanted . . . at her own son's first birthday. I'd been an asshole. *What mother should fear that?* I smiled at her and put my hand on her arm and she glanced at it, understandably surprised by my touch. "I'm glad you're here."

Her eyes met mine and the relief that passed over her face was like a stab to my heart. God, she'd always been so incredibly tender. She'd never lost that—through all the heartache she'd lived through, she'd somehow managed to hang on to that. It suddenly seemed like a small miracle that life hadn't hardened her. In some ways she was still that little girl with the wide eyes and the strawberry-stained lips. *The one I knew I'd always love.*

"Are you okay? You didn't hurt yourself when you fell last night after—"

"No, I'm fine," she said softly. I nodded, wishing I had a few more minutes alone with her.

I guided them into the kitchen and out through the back door where several other people who'd come straight around the house into the backyard were mingling. Mostly my mother's friends. Lia looked around at the decorations and smiled. "The farm looks wonderful. All your hard work paid off."

I wasn't sure about that. The farm, yes, but then the truth smacked me. All that time I'd been trying so desperately to keep it alive, had Annalia been dying right in front of me?

Christ.

“It’s getting there. We only planted half of what we normally do. But . . . it’s more than I’d hoped for. Do you want to sit down?” She looked around, obviously searching for Hudson. “Tracie’s getting him dressed right now,” I explained.

She nodded and gave me a slight smile but it looked forced. Turning to her mother, she said something quickly in Spanish that I didn’t catch, and her mother nodded and sat down. “Do you need me to do anything? I’d be happy to help . . .”

“I don’t think so. I’ll check on the baby if Tracie isn’t down with him in a minute.”

“I guess he’s technically not a baby after tomorrow,” she said, a note of sadness in her voice. We were having the party today but his actual birthday was the next day, which was a Sunday.

“I guess he’ll always be a baby to us.”

Her eyes met mine and she let out a soft breath. “Yes.”

I saw my mom heading toward us and my muscles tensed. “Hello, Annalia,” she said coldly. “Mrs. Del Valle.”

Lia’s mother looked up and nodded politely, her hands in her lap.

“Preston, Tracie needs some help with Hudson. Why don’t you give her a hand?”

I highly doubted Tracie needed a hand with Hudson. My mother had just said that to rub salt in Lia’s wound. A few days ago I might have even thought she deserved it. But now . . . I was confused and shaken up and couldn’t seem to get my footing. A very small part of me still wanted to punish Lia, to castigate her, but I knew I was far from faultless and was beginning to think I might even hold the majority of the blame. And regardless of who was responsible for what, looking in her eyes told me she held deep, deep pain. And now that I was seeing her clearly, seeing the *situation* more clearly, I didn’t want that. I never had. I’d just been blind with my own grief and self-hatred.

“I don’t think—” I started to say, but Tracie appeared at the back door, holding Hudson and the “ahh’s” directed toward him, startled him slightly and he began crying. Lia tensed and moved forward so slightly I didn’t think anyone had noticed it except me. Her reaction had been to go to him, and she’d held herself back. It caused my chest to tighten. He was her baby.

“Oh, doesn’t he look adorable?” my mother asked, leaving us to go to Hudson. He was wearing a

shorts outfit with a tiny vest and bow tie and he looked sweet if just a little bit ridiculous. His dark hair was parted on one side and combed back, curling up at his collar. A tiny pair of glasses would have completed the little professor look.

I went toward Hudson, too, and stepped in front of my mother, taking him from Tracie's arms with a soft thank you and heading back toward Lia. When I reached her, I held Hudson toward her, and for a second I worried that he wouldn't go to her, but he reached out his little arms and Lia took him with a small laugh and a quick joy-filled glance at me. My heart swelled.

He'd stopped crying when I took him and now he snuggled into Lia's arms, taking the end of her braid in his hand. She used it to tickle him and he giggled, his tears completely forgotten. "Gan!"

"Again?" Lia laughed. "You like being tickled, silly boy?" She did it again to his delight and elicited more giggles. My heart felt achy and far too full as I watched them together. My son and the woman who'd given him to me.

I had a sudden flash to the night he was born. I'd been so *proud* that night. I had a boy. A *son*. We named him Hudson Cole though I could barely stand to say the name. I'd held him in my arms that first night while Lia slept and had promised him I'd work even harder to bring back the farm so it would be his legacy as well as mine if he had farming in his blood the way I did.

God, maybe I had missed the whole point though. Instead of vowing to work harder to save his legacy, I should have vowed to save his *family* by working to mend the relationship with his mother. Annalia. *Mine*. She'd *always* been mine. My God, I'd spent my whole life trying to deny it, and it'd brought nothing but pain. What if . . . what if I just *stopped*? What if I'd *never* attempted to deny it? What if I'd put all the reasons aside—my brother, a sense of honor that deep inside had always felt misguided, the guilt, the grief, and the pride. I couldn't change the past, but what if I put all the reasons aside *now*? *What if?*

With a head full of whirling thoughts and a heart full of tangled emotions, I left Lia with Hudson and four older women who were all standing around her now. They'd initially given her barely disguised disdainful glances, but it was difficult to maintain negative emotions in the presence of Hudson's sweetness. And Lia was obviously here by my invitation—me bringing the baby to her had to have made

that very clear. They were now all vying for Hudson's affection by leaning close and cooing at him.

More people arrived, and I got caught up in the duties of the party—taking pictures, cutting the cake that got thrust in front of me, a knife put in my hand as Hudson was plunked into his highchair. I looked for Lia and saw her sitting with her mother again but the look on her face was happy, and she was chatting to a woman next to them.

To everyone's delight, Hudson smashed cake in his face, his hair, and all over his outfit. I couldn't help laughing, too, but when my mother picked Hudson up and took him inside to clean him up, holding him away from her so he didn't get blue frosting all over her, I stood up to go to Lia who was still sitting at the same table. "Will you walk with me?"

She looked up, seemingly surprised and a little nervous, and glanced at her mother who was still sitting quietly where she'd been, sipping a glass of iced tea and eating a slice of cake. She leaned close and said something to her mother, and she nodded and went back to her cake.

"Will Hudson be okay?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder.

"He'll be fine for fifteen minutes. He has plenty of ladies to fawn all over him."

We walked along the fence that separated our property from the one next to it and stopped when we got to the large tree she used to sit under when she was a little girl.

She leaned back against the fence, staring out at the rows of farmland. For a moment I stood looking at her, feeling like a boy again, a boy whose heart lurched wildly with joy to see Annalia waiting for him. Only . . . this time she'd run from me. First in her mind, and then in her car. She was back, but she still felt distant as if I'd have to run after her and bring her back. I wasn't sure how to go about doing that when the chasing was figurative.

Open up. Talk to her. "There's nothing romantic between Tracie and me. We went to dinner last night—that was all," I said in a rush of words.

Lia turned to stare at me, her eyes wide with surprise. She was quiet for several beats as she tilted her head and studied my face. "Did you . . . want there to be?"

I thought about that for a moment, *really* thought about it, knowing I owed her the truth. "No." I just hadn't wanted to hurt so much over Lia. But maybe that's what I needed—to hurt, to regret, to finally *feel*

something—anything—after nearly two years of being the mere shell of a person.

Her gaze continued to move over my features for a moment as if she was trying to determine if I was being completely honest. Finally, she nodded, seeming satisfied with whatever she'd seen.

She looked back to the farmland, and I took in the classic beauty of her profile for a moment before I followed her gaze. "I used to stand here when I was a little girl and wish so hard that I had a home like this. I thought it was the biggest, most beautiful place on earth." She smiled, but even in profile, I could see that deep sadness dominated her expression. She turned her head to look at me again. "But then I did come to call this place my home, and it felt just as small as any other shack or apartment I'd ever lived in."

I let out a long breath, understanding that she was talking about the heart of the home, not the actual size. "I know, Lia. It felt that way to me, too."

She gazed at me thoughtfully for a moment and then looked away.

"What did you do? At your aunt's? What was it like?"

She leaned her hip on the fence and a ray of sunlight hit her face, making her eyes appear translucent. Her lashes fluttered, long and dark and lush, and her lips tipped up slightly. Ah God. She was so beautiful. She always had been. I was a simple man, a farmer who wasn't drawn to riches or finery. Except when it came to the bounty of Annalia's loveliness, a woman who offered all the treasures I'd ever seek in her fine boned features, her full pink lips, her rich velvety skin, and those jewel-like eyes.

It wasn't *only* her beauty that called to me, though. I wanted to *know* her. I wanted her to let me into those secret places inside of her.

"It was strange at first," she began, answering the question I'd asked about her aunt and bringing me back to the moment. "She'd written to my mother the year before and I'd found the letter and a few more she'd written over the years. Until then I hadn't even known I had any family at all, much less here in the U.S.

"When I showed up at her door I had the letters with me. She seemed happy to have me there and encouraged me to stay.

"She and her husband own a small pottery shop and I worked there to earn my keep. It felt good to be

among family but . . . they were also strangers and I . . . I spent a lot of time alone.”

She frowned slightly. Had she felt like she hadn't completely belonged there? The thought clawed at me from the inside because although I hadn't set out to do it, I had probably made her feel as if she didn't belong with me either. “She never asked me to talk much about myself, although maybe she sensed I wasn't in a place to do so. She liked reminiscing about the past, though, and what my mama was like as a girl. My aunt is a nice but very reserved person,” she went on, snapping me back to our conversation. “I see where my mother gets it from.” She let out a small laugh that didn't hold much humor.

“What else? What did you think about when you were gone?” *Did you think about me? Did you hate me, Lia?*

She was quiet for a moment, and it looked like she was picturing the place where she'd been. “I thought about Cole.” Her eyes shot to mine, and I gave her a small smile to let her know it was okay. “I thought about why I was such a bad mother.”

I frowned, taken aback. “You thought you were a bad mother?”

She stared at me for a moment before looking away. “Yes.”

I moved closer, turning her toward me in one quick movement, and she startled slightly. “You're not a bad mother, Lia. You never were.”

“How would you know?”

I took her words like a punch to the gut, clenching my eyes shut for a second. How *would* I know? I hadn't been around enough to see if she'd struggled or not. And the few times I'd seen pain in her eyes, I'd turned away because I'd felt ill-equipped to deal with my own pain, let alone hers. Was that my own innate selfishness, or just the way of grief? I didn't know but either way, I would take responsibility. Either way, I'd hurt her.

I blew out a gust of breath, raking my fingers through my hair. “I was checked out. You're right. But I saw enough to know you're a good mother.”

She bit at her lip for a second and then her shoulders sagged a little. “I can't blame you for being checked out, Preston.” She shook her head. “It was just . . . it was just what happened and you did what you had to do to get through that time.” She turned her head, looking away from me. And there it was. In

typical Lia style, she had offered me the olive branch, an offer of empathy and forgiveness, and then she'd retreated inside herself.

I frowned slightly. Yes, what she'd said held some truth, but why did it feel like she was still absent, even though she was standing right next to me? Even though I could feel the heat of her body and smell the sweetness of her skin, it felt like she was a thousand miles away—closed off, untouchable. A part of me wanted to shake her. *Stop being so understanding. Yell at me—something.*

Cole would have known how to draw her out. He would have either made her laugh or made her mad. But not so mad that it did lasting harm. Just mad enough to get her temper to flare and loosen her tongue. I didn't know how to elicit emotion from her without doing some sort of permanent damage. God, maybe we'd been doomed from the start, even if Cole hadn't died. Maybe Lia and I were just doomed in general—always managing to just miss each other. Like two people searching for one another in the dark.

I looked up at the big old tree next to us, the one she used to sit under sometimes. "Cole and I came up with this secret handshake under this tree," I murmured. "We used to do it all the time. Hell if I can remember it. In the beginning, right after he died, I used to go over and over it in my head—just trying to recall it—each time I passed this tree and I couldn't figure out *why* other than to keep my mind busy, or maybe just to torture myself. I can barely remember his funeral. It's like I was cocooned inside myself, just going through the motions. So I don't know. I thought . . . if I could just remember that handshake, I'd have a piece of him back however small."

Lia turned her gaze back to me and the sadness in her eyes had turned to surprise. I'd only mentioned Cole one other time since he'd passed away. I remembered because that time had hurt, too. "We fought that day. He hit me, and I hit him back. I never told you that, but we did."

Lia was staring at me in startled silence, and I forced myself to go on, to say the words that had been lodged inside me for so long. "One eye was swollen shut when he left and . . . I wonder if that was why he didn't see—"

"Oh, Preston," she breathed. "No. No, you can't do that to yourself. He was on the highway on a motorcycle barely fit for back roads, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. You'd warned him about that bike. I heard you. It was not your fault."

I let out a huge gust of air, clenching my eyes shut briefly. She stared at me for a moment, the look on her face so full of stunned heartbreak. “The fight, was it . . . was it about me?” She flinched slightly.

I didn’t want to hurt her, but I also knew this conversation had been long overdue. “Yeah.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, as I’d just done, and let out a long, slow breath. “You told him what we’d done and he didn’t like it.”

“No, he didn’t. But . . .” I let myself go back to that day. “It was because he cared about you. And the truth is, Lia, he didn’t know that I cared about you more because I’d never told him. And I should have.”

She turned her whole body toward me and nodded slowly, biting at her lip. She opened her mouth as if to say something and then closed it. I couldn’t blame her for not quite knowing what to think—it’d been so long and I still hadn’t settled on anything that felt right. I’d gone through grief, and self-blame, anger, and denial, but I was still searching. Maybe I always would, I wasn’t sure. Maybe if we kept talking, maybe we could help each other come to some conclusions that brought a measure of peace.

She shifted and the soft swells of her breasts rose very slightly in her sundress, drawing my gaze. I remembered how they’d looked when she’d been nursing, swollen with milk, her nipples dark and enlarged. I hardened so quickly, I let out a quick hiss of breath at the wonderfully painful sensation. Lia glanced at me and I attempted to adjust myself subtly. Between my legs I felt hot and heavy and I wanted to lay her down and connect my body with hers. If it was going to take us some time to find our way to each other in other ways, at least we could have that. But then I remembered how she’d left after the last time we’d made love, and my body cooled with the fear and regret that trickled through me.

But I *had* to touch her. I needed to feel her skin under my hands, wanted so desperately to taste her sweetness on my tongue. *I still loved her.* God help me, I did. And I wanted her so much I could barely breathe. I stepped toward her, and her eyes widened in surprise as her head tipped back to look up at me. “Lia,” I said, my voice gravelly, “I missed you. I’ve missed you for a long, long time.”

Her lips parted and her eyes blinked and a gust of breath whispered from her mouth. “I’ve missed you, too.”

I wove my fingers through her silken hair, supporting her head in my hand. “Do you think there’s a chance for us, Lia?” I rasped. “After everything, is there any chance at all?” I didn’t know myself, but I

wanted her to want it as badly as I did. If we both *tried* . . . maybe if we started over with the intention of repairing what had been so broken, there was a chance. However small, I'd take it.

She stared up at me for a moment, so many emotions flashing through her eyes that I couldn't identify them. "I . . . I don't know."

"Do you want there to be?"

She closed her eyes briefly, just a fluttering of her lashes, as pain flickered across her face. "Yes," she breathed. "It's all I've ever wanted."

My heart leapt and I took her mouth, hard and sudden, and she let out a tiny squeak as her arms came around my neck, her fingers weaving into my hair. She tasted just the same as I remembered and every cell in my body responded. *Mine*. I dipped my tongue into her sweetness and she moaned, tangling her tongue with mine and pressing her slender body against me. Blood surged through me in a hot, fast rush, but I willed myself to slow down. It'd only ever been that way with us. It's all Lia had ever known, and I wondered if she even realized there was anything else—lovemaking that was slow and languorous and didn't result in ripped clothing and bruised skin.

Ah, hell.

I pulled my mouth from hers, ending the kiss, resting my forehead against hers for a moment as we caught our breath. I leaned away, tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear, her full lips red and swollen from my kiss, her eyes soft and vulnerable as she looked back at me.

We stood together by the fence where I'd once waited for her with bated breath, and I felt something inside me open up, like a flower that had bowed its head and shut its petals when the darkness fell upon it and suddenly felt the warm, unexpected glimmer of a sunbeam.

Slowly, Lia reached out and took my hands in hers, her eyes not leaving mine. For a moment I was confused, not knowing what she was doing. I glanced down at our hands and then back to her. Then she curled her fingers toward her palm to create a loose fist and used her other hand to close mine, bumping our knuckles together once, then twice. She opened her hand and I followed suit, grasping her fingers as she grasped mine.

Oh. It felt as if my heart breathed the word.

Her hands were soft and gentle, and they moved with certainty. I watched as she went through the handshake that I'd had so much trouble remembering. Once and again, and then she let go of me and I did it on my own, imagining her hands were Cole's, swearing I could hear his laughter drifting to us from the fields, through the breeze, and in the rustling of the leaves above.

I laughed out a strange sort of choking sound. "That's it." I nodded. "That's it." She knew. She knew because she'd been there, and I recognized the sweet simplicity of the gesture for what it was: a gift.

Our hands dropped, and we looked at each other for a moment and something shifted in the air around us. I didn't know exactly how to name it, but it caused another spark of yearning to flare within me. "Come over tomorrow, Annalia. Spend Hudson's birthday with us. Please," I said, the words falling from my lips.

I didn't know if there was any chance we could ever wade through the years of miscommunication and loss between us. I had no idea if there was any way to reclaim what we'd once barely begun. But now I knew we both hoped for it, and that seemed like a pretty damn good start.

She watched me for a moment before she nodded, her face breaking into a smile that went straight to my heart. "I'd like that."

"Me, too, Lia. Me, too."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Annalia

I woke to the sound of rain softly falling on my window. For a minute I didn't move, just listened to the light, hypnotic drumming, my mind drifting. I thought about the party the day before and turned over, smiling softly at the memory of Hudson in my arms with his birthday hat and cake-smear grin.

My mind moved to Preston and how we'd stood at the fence and talked, really talked, for the first time in so long. And the way he'd kissed me . . . *Do you think there's a chance for us, Lia?* A shiver of hope moved through me, but I was still so wary, so afraid to invest my heart in Preston again. Had I ever really stopped? I sighed. Maybe not. *No, be honest, Lia.* Definitely not. Oh, but to love him had hurt me so deeply. Could I risk my heart that way again? *Should I?* Could I even stop myself if I wanted to? My heart, it seemed, knew only how to beat for him, like the wings of a bird soaring through an endless sky. As blue as his eyes and as warm as his touch had once been on my skin.

It was obvious we still had a physical spark. For a time I'd wondered if we'd even lost that. When I'd shown up at Preston's house with my measly suitcase, his mother had let me in and told me I could take my bag upstairs. I'd passed what I saw was his room, unsure of whether I should put my things in there or not, deciding instead on the room across the hall with the door standing wide open, obviously a guest room by the sparse furnishings and lack of personal items. If Preston wanted me to sleep with him, he could let me know. He hadn't. *And that had hurt. So badly.*

No, Preston hadn't asked me to move into his room, and when I found him looking at me with the same heat in his eyes he'd had for me the night I'd conceived Hudson, he'd look away as if troubled by his own feelings.

At first I'd thought it was the grief . . . and then I'd realized he needed every second of sleep he could get, considering the hours he was working and the physical hardship of trying to keep the farm

afloat. Then I'd grown so large with pregnancy I could hardly sleep, and I was glad not to be keeping him awake . . . and then those first few lonely, terrifying months with the baby . . . I'd tried so hard to nurse him, but he had trouble latching on and some nights he'd cry and cry, and I didn't feel as if I could soothe him. I'd wanted to cry right along with him. I *had* cried with him.

Preston had been so exhausted from doing the jobs of twenty men after having to lay off most of his workers, and the farm was dry and dead outside our window as if it was a reflection of the parched emptiness of the hearts inside the walls of the farmhouse.

How could I ask him to take over with our wailing infant when I didn't have to get up and work in the morning like he did?

And then I'd begun having visions of something harming Hudson. I'd clutch him tightly to my chest as pictures of him dropping to the floor, or being burned by the oven flashed in my mind making me feel shaky and anxious. I wanted to ask Mrs. Sawyer about it, but I didn't dare. She already looked at me with disdain and impatience as if I was a usurper in her home—which I supposed I was.

When I'd moved in, I'd vowed to do everything I could to make her like me. I'd cook, I'd clean, I'd do whatever was necessary to help her heal, and I'd win her over. Only . . . it hadn't worked. Nothing had worked. Just as it hadn't with my own mother.

How would Mrs. Sawyer look at me if she knew I was having visions of her grandson being harmed? And what kind of mother did that make me? Some days I still wondered if I could be a good mother to Hudson. I loved him desperately, had yearned for him endlessly, but I still doubted myself.

I hadn't had much of a role model—my own mother insisted I had the devil in me. Some nights I sat rocking Hudson, feeling so blue and so desolate I wondered if she was right—there was something *wrong* inside of me. I couldn't even find joy in my own baby.

The rain continued to fall and my mind continued to wander, backwards to the night I'd left. It had rained that night, too, after months and months of nothing but burning sun and hot, dry wind. Finally, finally the rain had come.

Hudson's head lay on my shoulder as I filled his bottle with water and shook it to mix in the

formula that, even after four months, still felt like a symbol of my failure. I gave him the bottle with a small smile, brushing his dark hair out of his eyes, still damp from his bath. He took it in his chubby hands and began drinking. I leaned in and took a deep breath of the clean little boy smell, letting it fill my lungs and my heart.

I sat down in a chair and held him in the crook of my arm. He was only wearing a diaper and his warm skin stuck to mine as I rocked him slightly, his luminous eyes gazing up at me.

He'd never been this serene when I'd nursed him. We'd both struggled, both been distressed. And I'd finally given up. I couldn't help feeling resentful of the way he grasped the bottle, looking sleepy and half-drunk. My own emotions made me feel guilty and low. I had failed, not the innocent boy in my arms.

My failure at nursing was the one thing Mrs. Sawyer had been understanding about, the one thing that hadn't caused her face to screw up with displeasure when it came to how I did things. "I don't know why you keep trying to force it when it's obviously causing you both misery," she'd said. "I didn't even attempt to nurse my boys, and they were perfectly happy babies." But then she'd teared up and left the kitchen, and I'd heard her crying in her room over the mention of Cole and I wished so hard I could do something to help her pain. I couldn't do anything to help anyone. And I'd wanted to nurse Hudson. Preston was single-handedly keeping the farm afloat, and I couldn't even nourish our son from my own body.

The house was quiet. Preston was working as usual even though it'd be dark soon and Mrs. Sawyer had gone to a book club at a friend's house in town and wouldn't be home for hours. I was glad she was finally getting out, and I was glad to be free of her for the night.

I ran a hand over Hudson's head, his eyes half-closed with the drowsiness that came with the late hour and a milk-filled tummy. He blinked up at me, struggling to stay awake so he could fit in a few more minutes of flirting and I smiled down at him. His eyes drifted half-mast again and I had the sudden picture of dropping him and his head hitting the floor with a bone-cracking smack. Fear lashed through me and I clutched him tighter against my body, my heart racing. I wanted to cry, but I held back the tears. What was wrong with me?

It felt like I swayed between moments of alarm and long periods of a dull hopelessness that wouldn't lift. Had the depression of this house settled into my bones so deeply that it was now part of who I was? Would I be this way forever? Carrying a sense of listless melancholy all the days of my life? A tremor of fear moved through me at the thought.

Sometimes I pictured myself picking up the baby and just walking away from this farm—out past the split-rail fence, through the scorched, abandoned farmland where I'd once lost myself in childish fantasy as I picked vibrantly colored wildflowers, wove them into crowns, and pretended I was a fairy.

Maybe I'd end up back at the small shack where I'd been raised, despite hating living there so much. Despite every effort to stay outside more than inside, I pictured it now as a refuge . . . somewhere quiet where the only reason the walls felt as if they were closing in was because the space itself was so limited, not because it had the ability to crush my heart. I'd still had dreams there. Here . . . here my dreams had died. They had crumbled to ash and that ash was still slogging through my veins, making me feel so very, very hopeless.

What was wrong with me?

The back door opened and Preston walked in, shooting me a weak smile, his eyes going to the baby now fast asleep in my arms. He came over and bent to kiss him on his forehead, giving me a kiss on my cheek. He smelled like sweat and soil—the deep, masculine earthiness that had once made my heart race and my blood heat. But now it just elicited a dim recognition and nothing more.

What was wrong with me?

He didn't seem to want me either, though, and the knowledge was an anguish that sat heavily on my heart. He'd never told me he loved me, just that he'd always wanted me. At least I'd had his passion . . . once. Even for just one shining moment in time—he'd wanted me that night. I didn't doubt it and I'd hoped that it had meant he'd want me again.

He glanced over his shoulder as he washed his hands. "Want me to put him down?"

"Sure. Dinner will be ready in ten minutes or so. You must be hungry."

He nodded and after he'd dried his hands, he walked back over to me and squatted down in front of the chair where I sat. I moved the baby forward in preparation of Preston lifting him from me, but he

didn't move to do so. I glanced at him and he was staring at me intensely, something flickering in his gaze that I wasn't sure how to read. Was it desire? Did he want me, after all? I stared at him, my muscles tense, waiting for him to say something.

"Lia—"

"Yes?"

"Are you . . . how are you?" His voice was soft, a little bit raspy.

I opened my mouth to answer him, but I didn't know why he was asking, what, if anything, he was looking for.

I don't know. Help me. I don't know. "I'm fine."

His eyes moved over my face again for a moment and I wanted to cry. But that was the last thing he needed. He was hanging on to the farm by a thumbnail, I knew that, and I couldn't add to what he was already struggling with.

He frowned slightly, hesitating. Then he reached up and trailed a finger down my cheek, sighing as his hand dropped away. He took the baby from my arms and stood, walking out of the room with him.

When he came back down a few minutes later, I was serving up dinner. He sat at the table and we ate in silence. When I looked up, he was staring thoughtfully out of the window. I looked back over my shoulder. "What?"

"If we get some rain in the next few days we could save one more strawberry crop. Just one more. It would save the farm."

My heart fell even lower than it already was. "There's no rain in the forecast."

"I know." He dug back into his food, and I tried to take a few bites but had no appetite. The dark cloud that followed me around seemed to have stolen all my physical pleasures, too.

"I stood out there tonight, though," he started and I looked up, surprised that he was talking so much. His mother was usually here providing the chatter and Preston was generally quiet, even if it was just the two of us, which it rarely was, "and I said a prayer to Cole." His eyes moved to mine. "I thought if anyone could bring the rain, maybe . . . maybe it was him."

I froze, my heart stuttering and then picking up speed. It was the first time he'd mentioned Cole's name since he'd died. A short huff of breath escaped my mouth, but Preston didn't seem to hear it.

His eyes moved away from mine to the window behind me. He looked sad, but he didn't only look sad and for a moment it shocked me out of the trance I'd been living in for months now. I couldn't quite discern the other emotions in his eyes but they were there. I waited, holding my breath, wanting him desperately to say more, to clue me in to what was going on in his mind, in his heart.

"Just for the farm to be okay," he murmured distantly. "It's all I want."

My heart throbbed, but only with a faraway sort of ache. Want me! my mind screamed. Let me be enough, or at least something. Just anything at all. Give me something to hope for.

"Preston," I murmured, just as his chair scooted out, startling me with the sudden noise. Preston came to his feet and the chair clattered to the floor behind him. "What is it?"

He had raced to the window, looking out at the darkened sky as an incredulous laugh/choking sound burst from his mouth. I stood, too, looking at the window as a fat drop of rain pinged on the glass. I sucked in a sharp breath. "It can't be."

Preston ran to the door and threw it open, leaping down the steps and rushing into the middle of the backyard where he stopped and held his arms up to the sky, laughing wildly. I walked more slowly down the steps and through the grass toward him.

The rain, which had started as a smattering of drops, was now coming down steadily, drenching my hair and my clothes with warm wetness. A soaking rain, the kind farmer's love. A disbelieving laugh bubbled up my throat and I looked up to the sky, too, raising my arms and mimicking Preston. I let my arms fall, but for several long minutes just stood with my face to the sky as it delivered the unbelievable gift of the rain.

As the rain picked up, I lowered my head, looking at Preston who was staring at me, his hair and his clothes plastered to his body just like mine. I saw the outline of his muscles and the way all the intense labor had hardened him even more than he'd been before. He looked carved from stone standing there—a beautiful god—and he was looking at me with so much intensity, I almost forgot about the miracle of the rain. I only saw him and felt the first flush of desire that I'd felt in so long. I

let out a small gasp, pushing my hair out of my face.

In a rush of movement, he was in front of me, and I let out another gust of sound that was swallowed up by the rain. I felt the heat of him. I heard him saying my name as his hands wove through my saturated hair and he tipped my head back, his mouth claiming mine with a force so hard I cried out at the impact.

Oh, God.

I gripped him tightly to me as we kissed, a feeling of desperate need overcoming me. Oh God, oh yes, I wanted, I needed the physical touch so badly. So very, very badly. If he hadn't been holding on to me, I would have fallen over.

I pulled at his shirt and he let go of me as he slipped it over his head. I cried out, feeling suddenly so cold and bereft, tears sprung to my eyes. I couldn't . . . oh please, don't pull away. To have him and then to be cast away . . . I couldn't, I couldn't. But mere seconds later, he had his arms around me again and he was murmuring my name, his breath hot on my neck, his hands going up the back of my shirt so he could glide his hands over my bare skin.

Yes, yes, yes.

The rain continued to fall, picking up in tempo, drumming on the ground all around us, a sudden torrent, as lightning sliced across the sky and a few seconds later, thunder rumbled. Preston scooped me up in his arms and started walking hurriedly toward the house, his lips never leaving mine.

He shouldered his way through the back door, and suddenly we were back under the bright lights of the kitchen. I slid down his body as he let go of my legs and my feet hit the floor. Our raspy breath echoed through the room, the soft masculine groans coming from Preston making me feel weak.

Preston walked me backward toward the foyer and I thought distantly that our second sexual encounter wasn't going to be on the hard surface of a tabletop, but in a bed, thank goodness.

When we got to the foyer, though, he backed me up against the wall and in one fluid move, pulled my shirt over my head. I cried out softly, wanting to cross my arms over my breasts even though I was wearing a bra. It was a nursing bra and wasn't very attractive and my own insecurity caused the foggy passion to fade.

Preston had only seen my naked body once, but it had been in much the same way as he was seeing it now—in a darkened room as our clothes were being madly torn off. I almost asked him to stop, to slow down so I could get my bearings, but I was so afraid he'd stop touching me altogether, and I was so very desperate to be touched. Part of me didn't care how or why, just that he was.

“Lia, Lia, oh God, Lia,” he was murmuring as he fumbled with the button on my pants, pushing them down and then pulling at his own jeans and letting them drop to the floor.

For a moment I was afraid he'd see the stretch marks on my belly and I wasn't sure I wanted him to. He'd put them there, but what if he found them unattractive? What if he spotted them and backed away?

I used my hands to cup his face and brought his lips back to mine, making sure he didn't look down as he lifted me with one arm and used his other hand to guide his hard length into me, impaling me against the wall in one swift motion and causing me to break away from his mouth on a loud, gasping cry.

He stilled. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes,” I panted. “I'm fine. Please.”

Please love me.

Please help me.

Please don't stop touching me.

I need you.

I need you.

“Please,” I repeated.

He began moving, moaning with so much desperation I wasn't sure if he was feeling pleasure or pain.

I felt slightly dry and was surprised that even after having a baby, I still felt stretched and full as he moved inside me. I clutched at his shoulders, watching the reflection of his bared backside in the glass of the front door as his muscles clenched and relaxed as he thrust and withdrew. The sight caused a surge of wet heat and a throb of pleasure in my core and I moaned, adjusting myself so

Preston's pelvis was rubbing mine with his movements.

I reached for the wild tumble of pleasure I knew existed from the first time we'd had sex, but I couldn't quite get there, not in that position. But just being close—having him inside me—was so wonderful I didn't really care.

After only a minute or so, he let out a deep groan and pressed me into the wall, stilling and circling his hips as he panted against my neck. He throbbed inside me and I rested against him, my arms around his neck, feeling slightly disappointed, but also enjoying the closeness, the calm after the storm.

His lips moved against my throat, as soft as butterfly wings, and his breath tickled my skin. I closed my eyes, a small smile on my lips as I wove my fingers through his hair. Outside the glass of the front door, I could see that the rain was letting up, now just a gentle pitter-patter against the roof. Had it been enough?

Preston let go of my legs and slipped out of me, and I made a small gasping sound of surprise. I hated that part—the sudden emptiness. But I didn't let go of Preston. I didn't want this to end. He didn't pull away from me either, though, and he seemed to be enjoying the aftermath, too.

"Sometimes," he said against my ear, "I think you must have the devil in you. No one else makes me feel so out of control." He smiled against my skin . . .

. . . as everything inside me went cold . . .

A faraway anguish washed through me, and I pushed at him gently, pulling my pants up quickly as he, too, pulled his up.

Devil eyes.

I grabbed my shirt from the floor as he stood staring at me. His skin was almost as dark as mine from all the time he spent in the sun, only with more of a golden cast, his muscles lean and strong. He was so beautiful, and I loved him so much. But it didn't matter.

It wasn't enough.

Devil girl.

I wasn't enough.

And in that moment, I felt my heart crack in two. Because it clicked. I loved him, but he only lusted for me, and felt some kind of miserable guilt every time he even gave in to that. Why had I thought differently? He hadn't ever touched me in love, with gentleness and adoration. He'd given in to his attraction again, and that was all. I'd even thought that would be enough, but it wasn't. It hurt, it just hurt. I couldn't stay. It would kill me. I already felt half dead. "Lia?" Whatever was on my face must have confused him. I heard it in his voice and saw it in his eyes.

I backed up, my shirt pressed to my breasts with one hand while I held the bottom of it over my belly to hide my stretch marks. I felt exposed and heavy with grief and aching disappointment, and I just wanted to get away.

"Lia," he said again, stepping toward me and holding out his hand. "Will you sleep in my room tonight?"

Oh no. I couldn't. That would only make things worse. It would only make it harder to do what I needed to do. "No . . . I . . . I'm tired, Preston. I just want to go to bed."

"Okay." He put his hands in his pockets, opening his mouth once as if to say something and then closing it.

I turned and walked swiftly up the stairs to my room and shut the door. I thought I might cry, but the tears wouldn't come. I felt a dull emptiness inside, with my back pressed against the hard wood of the door and Preston's semen a puddle of damp stickiness between my legs. At least I was on birth control this time. At least I knew I wouldn't find out I was pregnant later, alone in my bathroom as my shaking hands held up a positive pregnancy test, telling me what I already knew—what my body had been telling me for months. I wrapped my arms around myself at the memory of that lonely, terror-filled moment. Underneath that, though, there had been the warm rush of joy. I couldn't feel it now, but I remembered it had been there. Now only the loneliness lingered.

I couldn't stay here. I had to leave—back to my mama's apartment. I needed to get away, to try to get out from under the foggy sadness of this house, of my constant, unrealistic dream that I could be a good mama to Hudson, that I could ever win Mrs. Sawyer's affection, and my equally unattainable dream that Preston might come to love me.

I lay down on my bed—the guest bed in a house where I’d only ever be a guest in name only—and closed my eyes. I must have slept because when I heard the house creak as it settled, my eyes opened but I had to pull myself from the murky depths of dreams I couldn’t recall.

I sat up, still groggy, and listened to the quiet. Preston would be sleeping now. It would be the best time to leave—no confrontation, he wouldn’t even have to muster the will to ask me to stay when he had to know as well as I that this wasn’t working.

Slowly I packed my suitcase, a lump in my throat forming as I thought of the day I’d unpacked, the day I’d still cautiously had a secret flame of hope burning in my heart.

I made my way to Hudson’s room and was surprised to see the door cracked open slightly. Peeking through, I saw Preston in the upholstered rocking chair, Hudson on his chest. They were both asleep. Hudson must have woken while I was sleeping, and Preston had gotten up rather than wake me. I was surprised because he’d never woken to the baby before.

For a moment I just watched them, my chest tightening until it became difficult to breathe. Oh, I’d dreamed of this. Preston holding our precious baby while he rocked him on his chest. But in my dreams, I’d been looking on with love and joy, not grief and heartache. I put my hand over my mouth, so Preston wouldn’t hear the sound of my muffled cries.

Oh God, it would kill Preston if I took Hudson from him after all he’d lost. But how could I live without my baby—even if it was only across town?

But I had to escape this misery. I had to figure out what was wrong with me and try to heal. Living here was slowly killing me.

I loved Preston. Even though it wasn’t enough, I still loved him. Leaving might hurt him, but then again, maybe he’d feel relieved. But taking Hudson away would devastate him. And the truth was, I’d rather kill myself than bring Preston more anguish.

And maybe this was best for Hudson, too. Perhaps me being gone would be better for everyone.

I left the house quietly, rolling my car out of the driveway and down the very slight incline of the road, not turning on my lights until I got far enough away that they wouldn’t be seen from the farmhouse. Desolation threatened to knock me over, but I clutched the wheel and drove the short

distance to my mama's apartment in town.

When I unlocked the door, my mama was still up, sitting in her chair in front of the television.

"It's late, Mama. Why are you still up?"

She glanced up at me and her eyes lingered on my face for several seconds, which was longer than she usually looked at me. "The rain woke me up."

"Ah. The rain."

"A miracle, yes? Preston must be happy for his farm."

"Yes, Preston is happy for his farm." My voice sounded dull even to me, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

My mother glanced at me again. "What's wrong with you? Why are you here?"

I went to her and sank down on my knees in front of her, so desperate for affection, for love that I felt like begging her for it. Would it matter?

"Mama," I said, and then the tears did start, rolling slowly down my cheeks. "I know we've never been very close but . . . did you ever love me, Mama? Is there something lovable about me? Something more than the devil eyes that have reminded you of him all my life? Is there, Mama?" Oh please tell me there's something good in me. I need it so badly.

Her expression was wary and slightly stunned as she stared at me on my knees in front of her. Her hand lifted from her lap and fluttered in the air for a second as if she was going to touch me and my breath caught with the hope that maybe it would be with tenderness, with the love I craved so desperately from someone, anyone, but mostly from her. But then it dropped again and she looked away from me. "In the morning he went away, but he left me with his eyes. Devil eyes to watch and curse me all the rest of my days," she muttered, as if to herself more than in answer to my question. But it had been my answer all the same. An ache took up deep inside, making me feel as if I were a thousand years old. I pulled myself to my feet slowly, grimacing as if I'd been beaten, as if the pain might actually be physical. And maybe it was. I couldn't tell anymore.

Something was wrong with me. Very, very wrong.

And I wouldn't get better here either.

My eyes moved slowly to the table next to Mama's chair and I stepped around her as if in a trance. I opened the drawer, my gaze catching on the small, shiny knife my mama had always kept near her for protection, lingering, lingering . . . before I tore my eyes from it, ripped my mind from the thought it'd been moving toward, reaching to the back of the drawer where my mother kept the letters from my aunt. I stared at them for a moment, my heart thumping as I took them all, putting them in the pocket of my jacket.

My Mama remained silent, watching me. "I'm going away for a while. If Preston comes by, tell him I've gone, but please don't tell him where." I didn't wait for her answer before pulling the door closed behind me.

I didn't dare glance back at Linmoor as I drove away. My heart wouldn't have been able to bear it.

The memory of that night propelled me up and out of bed. But not because thinking about it depressed me—although it did—but because there was something else there . . . something I hadn't seen all those months I'd been away. When I'd remembered it, I'd remembered the pain, the way the hasty sex against the wall in the foyer had made me feel used and unloved, and the way I'd already been drowning, and that night had seemed like the final shove underwater.

But now, after talking to Preston the day before, I was seeing that night in a different light. I hadn't known about the fight with Cole. I hadn't known that Preston had carried the responsibility for Cole's death on his shoulders all that time in addition to all the other anguish he'd held inside. He was a man with a deeply protective nature. How had it tormented him to feel he was at fault for a situation that caused so much suffering?

I wished we had been in a place where we could have talked about it, but there were so many reasons why we hadn't. Grief, guilt, confusion, the baby, the farm. I'd never been good at opening up and sharing what was inside me, and the circumstances under which we'd been living certainly didn't help to encourage what would have been new and terrifying.

But Preston was good at stuffing his own feelings inside, too. Maybe it was part of being one half of

a whole, the half that had always seemed content to stay out of the spotlight, to let his twin take the stage. Perhaps he just came by it naturally. Maybe it was part of being a man. I didn't exactly know. What I did know was that together, we were a recipe for misunderstandings and unresolved hurt. But what I also knew was that if we identified the problem, maybe, oh, *maybe* we could fix it. At least we could try.

Do you think there's a chance for us, Lia?

Hope surged inside me.

Make a fuss, mi amor. Make a fuss.

Rosa's words came back to me, the way she'd said them with such earnest intensity. And a small spark ignited in a place that had never held light or warmth before. I knew what she meant, though she had just been talking about a nametag. She'd meant stand up for yourself, believe in your value. I'd been trying to find it in everyone's eyes except my own and that's why it was so easily taken away.

Oh God, I was going to have to figure out how to do that if things were going to work between Preston and me. I was going to have to try, and it scared me half to death because all I knew was how to focus on other people's needs—even to the detriment of my own. But that hadn't ever worked for anyone, not really. My mama had become a hermit, hiding away in our apartment unless I dragged her out almost by force, and Preston and I had drifted so far apart, I didn't know if we could come back together or not.

That was the result of trying to suck it up, trying to please, trying to fade into the background so no one had to be bothered by me, embarrassed by me, forced to associate with me. I sighed. That wasn't the example I wanted for my son. I wanted to be strong, to make him proud . . . and if at all possible, I wanted to fight to give him a family.

The rain was letting up and the sun was shining through the slats of the blinds on the windows of the apartment, softening the drab ugliness. My mama was stirring, and I moved quickly to the bathroom so I could shower before she got up. I dried my hair and braided it loosely for the sake of ease and then applied a bit of makeup.

I got dressed and went to the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee, taking a cup back to my mama where she had moved to her chair. "I'm going to spend the day with Preston and Hudson, Mama. And then I'm going to come back here and make us dinner. I'm going to tell you all about your sister because I think

you want to know even though you won't ask. You don't have to listen if you don't want to, but I'm going to talk and . . . well, that's that."

She looked annoyed but her foot bounced the way it did when she was nervous. She didn't say anything as she took her coffee from my hand and took a sip, looking at me skeptically over the rim of the cup, but not saying no. "Okay then," I murmured.

I grabbed my purse and left the apartment, making the familiar drive to Preston's. It was a beautiful early spring day. It was my baby boy's first birthday.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Preston

My mother breezed into the office where I sat going over some paperwork. “Where’s Hudson?”

I glanced over at the long drapes and nodded my head toward them, raising one eyebrow. “I have no idea,” I said loudly. “He was here a minute ago.”

My mom grinned, taking a step toward the curtains where there was obvious rustling and a baby laugh. “Hmm. Well it seems as if he’s disappeared. You really should watch him more closely. Now I’m going to have to look for him.” Another giggle and more rustling.

My mom took several minutes to pretend to look for him as I went back to my paperwork. Finally she pulled back the curtain and gasped as if in surprise. Hudson let out a delighted burst of laughter. She picked him up and kissed his cheek. “Happy birthday, sweetness.”

I smiled up at them. My mom could be a snob and a pain in the ass, but she loved her grandson. There was no denying that.

“What are your plans for today?”

“Lia’s coming over, and we’re going to spend the day with her.” I’d actually asked Tracie to come over for a couple of hours and stay with Hudson while he napped so I could take Lia out.

My mom gave me a displeased stare. “Is that really a good idea? What if the baby gets attached to her and she leaves again? Oh Preston, you have to think of your son.”

I let out a breath. If things were going to work with Lia and me, it was past time I put up some boundaries with my mother. “I am thinking of him. I’m thinking of all three of us.” *Like I should have been all along.*

I looked at her for a moment, her lips pressed together, that haughty look on her face she wore so well. “Mom, Hudson is Lia’s son, and I won’t have you undermining her role in his life. I think you did

that even while she was here, trying her best, and I should have seen it. I should have seen what was happening and I didn't. I was blind to everything except my own pain, and Lia suffered because of it. Probably more than I've even come to realize."

"Don't you think I was in pain, too?" Her voice rose in sound and in octave.

"Yes. We were all in pain, and we all made mistakes—some bigger than others. But it was my responsibility to protect my family, and I fell down on the job."

"You didn't fall down on the job. You saved the farm. What was more important than that?"

Lia. Hudson. They should have been more important than that. I sighed. "All I'm asking is that you try to find some forgiveness and understanding for the reasons Lia left, and maybe even consider that you held some responsibility in making her feel unwelcome here."

"What was I supposed to do? I hardly had the strength to put up objections to her moving in. She showed up here pregnant during the worst time of my whole life—"

"Who do you think got her pregnant?"

"Don't be crass. And for all you know, she got pregnant on purpose to get out of that tiny apartment you told me she lived in in town."

Crass? "Jesus, Mom. She didn't get pregnant on purpose. I needed her here so I could focus on the farm."

"And how was I supposed to say no to that?"

I paused as the picture became clear. I'd told my mother I needed Lia here if I was going to put the time in on the farm that was necessary to try to save it and in doing so, I'd helped *myself*, but condemned Annalia to living as an unwelcome guest. "This is what you did to her, isn't it? All those months you made her feel like she'd forced herself on us purposefully. You made sure she knew she was unwanted?" *Dirty.* Just like she'd felt that day at school when Alicia Bardua had called her disgusting when she'd seen bedbugs on her.

My mom looked away but not before I'd seen the truth in her eyes. *Oh, Christ.* And right here, right under my nose. A stab of guilt made me wince. "I love my grandson," she said, kissing the top of Hudson's head. He was playing with the locket she wore around her throat and at her kiss, looked up and

smiled.

“I know you do, Mom. And we can’t change the past—like I said, we *all* made mistakes. I’m going to try my damndest to fix what I can, and I hope you’ll do the same. An apology to Lia wouldn’t be out of line.”

“An apology? She owes *us* an apology.” My mother looked indignant for a moment but then she sighed and put Hudson, who was squirming in her arms, on the floor. He crawled to me and I pulled him onto my lap where he started grabbing for things on the desk.

My building irritation with my mother almost caused me to miss the soft knock on our front door. “There’s your mama,” I said, standing up with Hudson and heading toward the door. “We can talk more later, Mom.” My mom followed behind me, grabbing a sweater off the coat tree in the foyer.

I opened the door and Lia was there, beautiful in a white flowy skirt and a black tank top. Her hair was braided again, and she smiled brightly when she saw Hudson in my arms. “Happy birthday, little man.”

“Hi, Lia,” my mother said as she scooted past me. “I hope you all have a nice day.”

“Mrs. Sawyer,” Lia said, turning to watch her walk down the steps.

“Come on in.” I handed Hudson to her and her smile grew. We walked into the family room and when we got there, he took her face in his chubby hands so she couldn’t look away and jabbered something nonsensical that sounded like, *hasni mabashka*. She laughed out a small sound and her eyes moved to mine, eyebrows raised as a happy but helpless look took over her expression.

I laughed, too. “Your guess is as good as mine on that one.”

I walked over to them. “What are you trying to tell Mama?” Hudson kept his hands on Lia’s cheeks but turned his eyes to me, repeating the same incomprehensible statement. Lia looked at me as well, her eyes shiny with tears, her expression full of what looked like gratitude—I assumed because I’d referred to her as Mama in front of Hudson.

I looked back and forth from one to the other, two pairs of stunning light green eyes focused on me and the sight hit me low in my gut. Those beautiful, expressive eyes that I’d loved all my life were now looking back at me from my son’s face and the power of that suddenly overwhelmed me with a mixture of

possessiveness and wonder. They were mine. This woman *and* this child. *Mine*.

Hudson looked back at Lia and repeated himself one final time, letting go of her face and pointing at his new train table. “Tay,” he said very seriously.

Lia laughed and brought him to his train table and stood him in front of it. I watched as they played trains together for a while, my heart squeezing at the sight of the two of them together. I soaked it in, realizing I’d never really watched them together—I’d left so much of his care to her those first six months because I’d been so obsessed with the farm, and then so exhausted at the end of each day.

But I realized now that the times I had seen her, she’d never had the light in her eyes that she did right now. I’d written it off to the exhaustion of new parenthood. I’d known she was probably as tired as I was, and I’d told myself I would be able to help her more once the farm was doing better. After all, I’d been trying to save the farm for them as well—it wasn’t only my family legacy, it was my livelihood, the way I put food on the table and a roof over all our heads. I was working as hard as I was to care for them. Only Lia had needed more—she had needed emotional care, too, and I hadn’t taken the time to acknowledge that.

I got down on the floor with them after a few minutes, and watched Hudson chatter happily as he moved his train around the tracks. “Hey, Lia, I asked Tracie to come over so you and I could get out for a little bit. Is that okay?”

She looked at me, her eyes moving over my face. She looked slightly troubled. “We could bring Hudson with us.” She pushed his hair back from his forehead as he played.

“He’ll need a nap soon, and I’d like to spend some time with you. I think it’s important.”

Her eyes softened and she nodded. “All right.”

We played with Hudson a little longer and then fed him his lunch together. Tracie arrived just as Lia was cleaning up, and she greeted Tracie just a little warily, the same way she had at Hudson’s party the day before. I saw the remoteness in her eyes. I knew that look. As I thought of all the other instances I’d seen that same look throughout our lives, I realized it was there to hide hurt.

Ah, Lia. I thought I understood you so clearly. I had so much to learn, didn’t I? I still do. I hope you’ll let me.

Tracie took Hudson upstairs, smiling and telling us to have a good time. I turned to Lia. “What do you think about making it like old times and walking over to the creek where we used to cool off?”

I’d been planning to take her into town for lunch, but I suddenly just wanted to be completely alone with her, and something inside told me we needed to start again—from the beginning. I wanted to go back in time and do things over, ask the right questions, demand things I’d never felt comfortable insisting upon. I couldn’t do that in actuality, but in a way we were starting over now, even though we had a baby together and had lived in the same house for nearly a year.

“Is there water in it?”

“I think so. I can’t be sure because I haven’t been there this season, but there should at least be some.”

She shrugged one shoulder, smiling a slight smile. “Okay.”

We stepped outside into the warm spring day and went around the house to the other side of the fence, taking the familiar route to the creek. We walked past the mailboxes at the end of the road where the two alternate routes started, and I took Lia’s hand pulling her toward the one I’d taken on that day Cole and I had raced for her long ago. It somehow seemed apropos.

But Lia pulled back gently on my hand and nodded her head toward the trees in the middle. “Let’s take the shortcut.”

I frowned as we both stopped walking. “Shortcut? It’s all forest in there—it’ll take longer to make our way through it.”

She shook her head. “No, there’s a clear path once you get beyond the first couple of trees. I think it was a logging trail at some point. It’s a straight shot so it takes half the time.”

It felt as if my blood slowed in my veins, my feet glued to the spot where I stood.

Oh my God.

“Do you know if Cole knew about that path?” I asked so quietly I wondered if Lia could even hear me. A buzzing had taken up in my brain.

She tilted her head, looking at me with confusion in her eyes. “Yeah. I showed it to him once—I think you were at the orthodontist with your mom and I’d come by and—”

Oh, fuck me.

A loud burst of laughter escaped my throat, causing Lia to startle as I stumbled backward, letting go of her hand and clutching my stomach as wild laughter, tinged with a helpless anger rose up inside me so suddenly my body reacted physically. “You bastard,” I said softly, incredulously. I stood there for a moment, catching my breath, shaking my head. “You cheating bastard!” I yelled it this time, picking up a rock and hurling it at the sky.

“What are you *doing*?” Lia yelled, jumping back as if I was losing my mind. I raked both hands through my hair, letting the last few bursts of laughter, or anger or whatever it, was fade away. “Are you crazy?”

“No,” I sighed. “No. Just stupid. Fucking stupid.”

“What are you talking about, Preston? God, I’m lost here.”

“Me too, Lia. God, I’ve been lost for so fucking long.” And I missed my brother, even though if he’d been in front of me right that minute, I’d have beaten his ass. He’d tricked me! He’d fucking *cheated*. And for so long, I’d killed myself trying to honor an oath that had been based on a lie. And then I’d felt guilty after I’d followed my heart anyway.

It was partially my fault, though. I’d taken his bet. I hadn’t told him how I felt—chosen instead to leave it to what I thought was a small part chance and a bigger part my own willingness to run my heart out for her. If I’d just been honest with him . . . if he’d known how deeply I felt for Lia . . .

I sighed, the anger draining out of me. “We raced for you.”

Her brows came together, and she shook her head. “You . . . what? I don’t understand.”

I laced my fingers behind my neck and tilted my head back, looking up at the clear blue sky, wondering if Cole could see us now and if he was laughing in that way he always had when he was a kid and he’d gotten caught doing something naughty and self-serving. That laugh, part-charm and part self-deprecation, that had a way of melting even the hardest of hearts. *I should have let you know, you cheating bastard. I wish I had. God, I wish I had.* I released my hands and lowered my head, looking at Lia.

“We both wanted you, Lia. To decide who would ask you out, we raced for you. I didn’t know about

the shortcut. Cole did. I ran with everything I had because I wanted you so badly to be mine. I didn't understand how he won, but now I do." I nodded my head to the trees where the shortcut I hadn't even known about was hidden inside. The shortcut that, ironically, Lia had shown Cole.

Her face paled slightly as she stared at me. "You . . . you raced for me. To decide who would ask me out?" She spoke very slowly as if she was trying to understand something extremely complex. Or maybe just so utterly ridiculous that she was having trouble believing we'd actually done it. The latter I imagined, wincing.

"Yeah."

Two bright red spots appeared on her cheeks, replacing the pallor in her skin that had been there moments before and understanding widened her eyes. "That's why Cole kissed me that day at the fence. That's why you walked away. Because he'd won the race." She gritted out the words, her jaw barely moving.

"I . . . yeah." I winced again. I'd watched them from the hall window on the second floor, misery and jealousy lashing at me from the inside. I'd hoped so damn hard that she'd reject him, turn him away, but she hadn't, and it had hurt so much I'd hardly been able to breathe through it. *But I'd done that. Me.*

I'd done it to myself. And I'd done it to her.

For a frozen second we just stared at each other, before she spun on her heel and started walking away from me, her fists clenched at her sides.

I sighed, watching her leave, wondering if I should have told her the truth. But a lie had started that whole mess. And I wanted her to understand what had happened all those years ago, why I hadn't pursued her. *Why it hadn't been me.*

I stepped forward, intending to run after her, when she whirled around and began stalking back to me. I froze, surprised and confused.

She didn't slow down as she approached and my eyes widened as I saw the fiery anger in hers. Her lips were pressed together, and I'd never once seen that particular expression on her face.

For a second I just wanted to freeze time and marvel at it—at the way it made her look like an avenging angel, at the way it filled her with fire and made me simultaneously want to move away and pull

her closer. I was both wary and fascinated.

She stepped right up to me, her fist striking out and connecting with my gut. I let out a surprised *ooph* and stumbled back a step. “I’m not running away from you, Preston Sawyer.”

“Okay,” I said on a small choke, straightening my body. Her fist connected with my stomach once again, surprisingly delivering a small amount of power. “Dammit, Lia, how many times are you going to hit me?”

“The first one was for you, and the second one was for Cole. Since he’s not here to take it, you get them both.” She stood there breathing quickly, her chest rising and falling with each inhale and exhale. She shook her head. “I can’t believe you didn’t *ask* me who I wanted to go out with. I would have chosen you, you idiot. It wouldn’t have even been a question.” She choked on one of her exhales and it came out as a sort of wheeze.

My heart squeezed with guilt and remorse. I’d known the night we made love—made Hudson—that she’d wanted me physically for a long time as much as I’d wanted her, but I hadn’t known it went back that far. *Jesus*. “I’m sorry. We were only seventeen, and it was a bad choice.”

“A bad choice?” she seethed. “A bad *choice*? You . . . you denied me *you* with that race. And I . . . I missed you for years because of it. For years, Preston.” The last words were whispered as more despair became etched into her expression.

“I’m sorry. I did the same thing to myself, Lia. I—”

She whirled on her heel again and took two steps away and then stopped, first exclaiming raggedly, “¡Decidieron por me!” *They decided for me!* Apparently, because of her high emotions, for a moment she’d reverted to her mother tongue. “Cabrones,” she muttered. *Bastards*.

Lia in a temper. Well I’ll be damned.

I blinked, and then my eyebrows rose as her shoulders went back and she murmured to herself something about a fuss before she whirled back around. It was as if her first instinct was to run, and she was forcing herself not to, maybe even counseling herself about it. I stood in shocked intrigue, watching to see what she’d do next.

She walked up to me again and there were tears in her eyes now. My surprised interest faded to

remorse, and my stomach clenched at the stark, agonizing pain on her face. “And you,” she took a sharp, sudden inhale, her shoulders rising and falling as she jabbed at my chest, “you all but ignored me for a year. I was pregnant with *your* baby. I was scared. I was so lonely, and I know you were grieving, I *know* you were trying to save the farm, but if you had just turned to me, even once. Just *once*,” she cried. “And you didn’t even sleep in the same room as me. I needed to be held by you. If you had given me nothing else but that, I could have held on.”

Tears coursed down her cheeks, and I felt an anguish so intense, it seemed as if I might be feeling it for the both of us. Or maybe I’d held my emotions at bay for so long, they were finally breaking free and surging powerfully to the forefront in the same way my passion for Annalia always seemed to express itself—suddenly and with little control.

I turned away from her and took several deep breaths before turning back. “I didn’t know how to turn to you, Lia. And you never came to me either. You put your things in the guest room the day you moved in, and I thought you wanted it that way. I thought you must hate me for the situation I’d put you in. You held yourself away just like you always did growing up, and I had no fucking idea what it meant.” And I hadn’t tried hard enough to figure it out. I’d let my grief and the farm keep me at an emotional distance—understandable at first, maybe, but in my heart of hearts I knew that I’d justified it with those reasons for longer than I should have.

“What it *meant*? It meant that I was trying not to add to what you were already struggling with. I didn’t want to be a burden.” She took a huge gulp of air, and I wanted to step forward, to go to her, but I held myself back, sensing that to do so would make her stop talking. Part of me didn’t want to hear what she was saying, but the other part knew I needed to. And even more so, *she* needed to say it. “And I stayed away from you growing up for the same reason.”

“You were never a burden, not to me and not to Cole.”

“Because I didn’t let myself be!”

I raked my hands through my hair again and then gripped it, letting out a frustrated breath. I dropped my arms and stared at her. “I’m sorry, Annalia. I . . .” I looked off behind her, unseeing, trying to gather my thoughts. “All my life my instinct was to protect you, and the one person I never protected you from was

me. I . . . God, I've fucked this up so badly. I hurt you, and I hurt me and—" Another small grunt of frustration came up my throat, and I looked at her helplessly before turning and glancing behind me at the grove of trees where the shortcut was hidden.

Cole had been dishonest in both his winning and in the brother oath he'd sworn to. Yet, I'd been dishonest, too, by not telling Cole about my love for Lia. By keeping my word, but not honoring what was in my heart. By hiding my feelings and stuffing my emotions away inside myself. *Would it have changed anything?* Would Cole have stepped aside if he'd known? I didn't know. He wasn't here and I couldn't ask him, and that pain would live inside me forever. But I also wanted to learn from it. I wanted to become a better man—for Lia, for our son, and for my brother, too, who was never going to have a chance to grow up and learn his own lessons.

I turned back to Lia and for a moment we stood staring at each other, the gulf of more than a dozen years stretching between us, all the silence, all our mistakes, all the circumstances that had always seemed to be stacked against us, when really it was just *us* hurting each other again and again. And still, despite all that, the burning *love* that time or distance or a hundred missteps wouldn't extinguish. The stillness deep inside that whispered her name, sending it out like sound waves through my soul.

The mural from the restaurant where she worked flashed in my mind, the look on the man's face that I had identified with not because I'd *felt* that way about Annalia, but because I still *did*.

I still did.

And God help me, I always would.

A bird cried out above, the trees rustled in the breeze, a leaf picked up by the wind danced past us, and there was only this moment, and I needed to make it matter.

"I love you," I breathed, putting every ounce of my heart into the words. "I always have."

Her eyes widened, then she blinked, once, twice and seemed to still, her fists unclenching where she'd held them by her sides.

"I loved you the day I ran that stupid race. I loved you the night we made Hudson, and I loved you this last year and a half, too, even when you left and I didn't want to love you anymore. I did anyway. There's never been a choice. And I know it must be hard for you to believe in my love after everything

I've done that's hurt you, but it's true. God, it's true. And if you'll give me another chance to prove it to you, I'll do anything. *Anything.*" My words broke off in a strangled whisper as emotion clawed at my throat.

Lia's lips parted as if in speechless surprise, her eyes soft and still shiny from the tears she'd cried. I stepped forward until I was right in front of her and wiped the wetness from her cheeks. She closed her eyes briefly and let out a small snuffle. I moved a stray piece of hair behind her ear that had fallen loose from her braid, my finger lingering on the petal softness of her skin.

At the closeness of our bodies, the feel of her skin and the sweet, subtle smell of her, my body reacted, blood rushing south. I let out a small, strangled laugh, exercising my control. No one would ever affect me like this woman. Not even close.

"You . . . love me?" she whispered.

"All my life. I always have, and I always will." I knew that now, and it scared me, but there was also peace in the acceptance. And it gave me all the more reason to fight for this, for *us*. "Didn't you know?"

"How could I know? You never told me."

I let out a breath. "I'm not always good with words." I gave her a half smile. "You may have noticed."

Her lip quirked minutely, too. "I may have." The words were said tenderly, though, softly.

I smoothed another piece of hair away from her face. "Let me prove it, Annalia," I repeated. "Let me try. Please."

"Oh, Preston," she started, her voice soft and still slightly soggy-sounding. "I love you, too. It's . . . it's the first thing I can truly remember."

I let my breath out slowly, my heart pounding in my chest with love and relief.

"But . . ." she started, and I tensed slightly, "do you ever wonder if we really *know* each other?" At the earnest expression on her face and the way she hadn't moved away from me, I relaxed, thinking about her question.

"I remember having that thought about you once actually. I noticed everything about you, and yet

knew very little about what was inside your heart, what your life was really like.” I tilted my head. “Do you think . . . ah hell, do you think maybe we need to start again as if it’s the beginning? Because Lia, maybe it is. Or rather, maybe it needs to be.”

“Is that even possible? We have a baby together.”

“Maybe that’s exactly why we need to make it possible. We need to try. For us, but also for him.”

Lia’s eyes moved over my face for a moment and then she sighed, taking the end of her braid in her fingers and moving it back and forth as her eyes moved to the side and she bit her lip. “Start at the beginning . . .” she murmured. She took a deep breath and seemed to square her shoulders slightly as she let her braid drop and looked back up into my eyes. “All right. Let’s . . . let’s go back to the beginning.”

I smiled, feeling a sudden burst of love and gratitude. “All right,” I said through my smile. I took her hands in mine and she smiled back. Looking into her beautiful eyes, I saw my past and my future. I saw the young girl who had spat a half-eaten strawberry into my brother’s hand. I saw an amazing, strong woman, who had the courage to come back to me. I saw my love, my heart, my home.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Annalia

The dinner crowd was just letting up as I made my way back to the kitchen of Abuelo's and dropped off a pile of dishes to the dishwasher. "Thanks, Manuel," I said as he took the dishes with a large smile before going back to singing loudly to the song that was in his headphones, something about *duele el amor. Love hurts.*

Indeed.

But.

Ah, *but.*

I love you. I always have.

As I cashed out the bills for two tables on the computer, I thought about the day before—the anger and the wonderment. *Maybe we need to start again as if it's the beginning*, he'd said. I wasn't a hundred percent sure what he meant by that, but what I thought he was saying was, let's try to let go of the resentment and hostility. Let's start with a clean slate and attempt to do things the right way, no secrets, no holding back. I wanted that. I'd told him the truth when I'd told him so. But I'd never been forthcoming with my feelings, and I wasn't sure it was going to be easy. For that matter, he could be the poster boy for the strong, silent type. His thoughts had always been very much his own. I wondered how successful we were going to be.

Still . . .

I love you. I always have.

I smiled, the memory of his words bringing hope and a deep, heart-pounding happiness. *And fear.* If we messed this up again, I didn't know if my heart could survive it.

And though I'd pledged to try again, anger simmered inside me when I thought about how Preston

and Cole had raced for me all those years ago. What fools. What stupid, selfish fools—especially Cole who had cheated. No, especially Preston who had stood aside because he hadn't won. How could he? How could he say he loved me yet stepped back because of the results—won fairly or not—of a stupid contest? It made me crazy to think about it, to remember how hurt I'd been when I'd learned that Preston didn't want me. Or so I'd thought.

I'd almost walked away from him, out of hurt and anger and a rising tide of resentment, but I'd forced myself to turn back, to confront him and tell him exactly how I felt. And although it was difficult, I'd done it, and I'd felt better. So though it wasn't easy, I was going to try to continue on that route.

Make a fuss, mi amor. Make a fuss.

I brought the checks out to my last two customers and as I was cashing them out, María came up to the computer. “Are those your last tables?”

I moved aside so she could step forward to the computer screen. “Yeah.”

“Do you want to come with us to deliver food? We go to the migrant farmworkers' camp every Monday. We didn't go last week because we were held up with that annual food department inspection, so they'll be looking forward to it.”

I furrowed my brow in confusion. “Migrant farmworkers' camp?”

“Yes. There's one a couple of miles outside of town. It's mostly men, but there are a few families. We save the leftover food from the week—especially fruits and vegetables because they're too poor to afford them—and deliver it.” She shrugged. “If they have other needs, we see what we can do.”

I knew about the camp outside of town because some of the men and women my mama had worked with at Sawyer Farm so many years before had lived there, though I'd never driven by it personally. My mama had lived in one similar when she'd first settled in California—a camp that was now closed.

It had actually been a small matter of pride that my mama and I had been able to rent the outbuilding on the property next to the Sawyers', rather than having to live in the migrant camp off the highway, even though the outbuilding had been an underequipped shack. I had hated it, but it was *ours*, and we didn't have to share it with five other strangers. I tilted my head. “You do?”

“Yeah, Alejandro and Raul both drive so there's space in Alejandro's truck or Raul's car if you want

to join us. It's an eye-opener. And it really does bring a sense of satisfaction to help in such a personal way."

I wasn't sure I needed my eyes opened to poverty greater than what I'd experienced myself, but then again, maybe I did. And I knew I could use something to bring some personal satisfaction. "Sure . . . I'd like to go."

"Great," she said, stepping away from the computer and heading out to the restaurant floor. "Meet us up front in half an hour."

I did my side work as quickly as possible and cashed out for the night and then pulled on my light jacket, heading toward the front. Rosa was coming out of her office. "Oh, Lia, María said you're coming with us."

"Hi, Rosa. Yes, if that's okay."

"It's wonderful. The more hands the better."

I helped them load up Alejandro's pickup truck at the back door to the kitchen with boxes of food and then climbed into Raul's car with him and María and we were off.

We turned off the highway onto a bumpy dirt road and drove past a sign that read, "Milkweed Labor Camp." The camp was at the dead end of the road and we parked next to a truck so old and beat up it looked as if it had been ready for the impound yard long before I was born. I knew it was at least one of the trucks the people who lived here drove to the farms, because I'd seen ones just like it over the years with men and women packed into the back wearing baseball caps draped with bandanas on their way to work where they'd spend the day picking fruits and vegetables under the unforgiving Californian sun. Men and women who worked longer and harder and with deep pride, so grateful to have the work.

My aunt had described the living conditions in many parts of Mexico—the poverty, the despair, the children and disabled begging in the streets. In so many places, she'd told me, there were no jobs, little food or medicine, and even more meager hope.

Aunt Florencia had described the homes made from used tires and cardboard, no running water, no heat. Who wouldn't risk everything to give their children a better life than that?

I hopped out with Raul and María just as Alejandro and Rosa were pulling up next to Raul's car. We

all took a box from the back of Alejandro's truck, and I followed them to one of the run-down buildings where we deposited the boxes of food onto tables in the middle of the room.

Alejandro talked to a woman who seemed to be running the place in some capacity, and she went with us to the truck as we carried in the last of the boxes. "She's the camp manager," Rosa said as she set the final box down next to the one I'd carried in. "Her name is Becca Jones. She's a wonderful advocate for the people who live here. So many are unemployed right now because of the drought and the crops farmers weren't able to plant last year. And even some who have work have trouble feeding their families on what they make."

I nodded, looking over my shoulder to see a line forming at the door and watching as Becca started unpacking the boxes. She gestured to the first people at the door to come forward and they did, taking what she offered to them.

Yes, I knew about the trouble these people faced firsthand. And looking at the line, some had more than one or two mouths to feed.

There was a man near the back with his hand on the shoulder of a woman holding what looked like a newborn baby in a fabric carrier on her chest. The small lump let out a tiny squall and the woman reached down and adjusted her shirt in a way that let me know she was nursing the baby hidden by the material of the sling. She smiled softly and crooned to the baby who quieted again.

Sadness and a feeling of loss slid through me, and I looked away. I had been so overwhelmed and lonely during the time I had tried nursing Hudson those first several months. They'd faded into a fog of depression and self-condemnation and I'd never get them back. And then I'd left and missed the second half of his first year.

My throat felt tight and I busied my hands by unpacking boxes and organizing food with the others, who were putting the vegetables in one location, the fruit in another, and the dry goods in yet another. I would not sink into self-pity when so many right in front of me were in greater need.

I glanced over at Rosa, and she was looking at me thoughtfully. I blushed, feeling ashamed as if she could read my thoughts, as if she knew I was feeling sorry for myself rather than focusing my mind on the work I'd come to share in.

The line grew outside and the busyness of the job took my mind away from my own melancholy. A man holding a little girl, who appeared to be about three or four, moved up to the table and took the bag I gave him with a head nod and a shy thank you. I handed a shiny, red apple to the little girl in his arms and her eyes grew round with delight as she brought the fruit to her mouth and bit into it. I laughed. “¿Dulce?” *Sweet?* She nodded happily and they moved along.

An hour later all the food had been doled out and the people had gone back to their homes—small wooden structures in three rows of a dozen or so. The camp almost looked like a very run-down, very small town, which effectively it was.

Outside, the few children I’d seen in line kicked a ball together. The women sat on benches nearby, including the woman with the tiny baby still strapped to her chest. I watched her, noticing how the other women fawned over the baby, leaning in to peer into the opening the carrier provided. The young mother laughed and patted the baby’s bottom.

Rosa joined me as I watched the children play and the mothers interact. “Alejandro, Raul, and María are going to help make a couple of repairs. I’m useless when it comes to tools that aren’t of the kitchen variety.” She laughed softly. “They shouldn’t take longer than half an hour or so. Is that okay, or do you need to get back? Is someone waiting for you?”

At her question, my heart squeezed. “No, that’s fine. No one’s waiting for me.” If I had still lived with Preston, he would be waiting for me, but right now he was at home and as far as he knew, I was either still at work or headed home. He might call me but I had my cell phone with me so I’d know if he did. As for my mama, she’d never waited for me. Even when I’d been a very young girl, I’d come and gone as I’d pleased.

Rosa smiled gently. “Sit with me?”

“Sure.” We went to a wooden bench near the front door of the community center and sat in silence for a moment, watching the people and glancing at the sun setting over the mountains.

“Becca’s family came here from Oklahoma in the thirties. They were Dust Bowl migrants.”

I looked over at Rosa, tilting my head, the quote rolling off my tongue, “They were hungry, and they were fierce. And they had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred.”

Rosa laughed in surprise as she looked back at me. “You’re a reader. Steinbeck, yes. The words apply to these migrants, too, yes?”

I nodded, looking back to where the women sat, watching as a few weary-looking men walked from the community center back to the cabins they occupied. *Hoping for a home and so often finding only hatred.*

You can’t always understand some cultures.

One of those Mexicans.

Surely you understand why I don’t invite you in.

“Yes.”

“It’s easier with community, though. Conditions are not ideal, but at least they have each other.”

I nodded. “Sometimes I wonder if my mother would have been happier if we’d lived in a place like this . . . or just somewhere where she could speak to people other than me. Speaking so little English, she must have been so lonely not being able to converse with women her own age.”

Rosa studied me for a moment. “Ah, yes. That’s very difficult. For both of you, I imagine. My own parents didn’t speak English either, but they came here with lots of family. And they had all of us kids to interpret for them. After a while, they learned enough to move easily through society, to start a business, to make a good life.” She paused before asking, “Your mother, she is . . . undocumented?”

Heat rose in my face at the direct question and the familiar shame engulfed me. My mother had never wanted me, so why did it hurt me so deeply to know she was unwanted, too? That if people knew, they would call her names and cut her down? I knew Rosa wouldn’t do that, but the honesty still didn’t come easily. “Yes,” I said very softly.

She nodded. “It’s very difficult to find happiness when you don’t feel as if you belong anywhere.”

I sighed. I supposed that might be a big part of it. But, not the entirety of my mother’s joyless existence. “I don’t think my mother will ever find happiness,” I murmured. Sometimes I wondered if she even wanted to. I suspected she didn’t.

Rosa tilted her head. “Happiness. Hmm.” She appeared to think for a moment. “Perhaps the word I should have used was purpose. Happiness is nice, but it’s also . . . fleeting and based on what you have,

or don't have, in any given moment. Happiness . . . well, it has to be continually fed. It doesn't give your life purpose. It doesn't give meaning to your existence." She looped her arm in mine and shook it gently and I laughed. "*Real* joy, the kind that permeates your life and brings contentment to your soul comes from *service*. So no, happiness is not the word. Purpose. Contentment. Joy. To find those things, don't seek happiness. Search instead for those who need your gift and give it away. Perhaps your mother would like to join us here next week. Perhaps you should encourage her—gently."

I squeezed her arm and laughed softly again, thinking what a wise, wonderfully kind person she was and how grateful I was to know her. I'd only known her for such a short time, yet my life felt enriched by her presence. "Maybe I'll try."

"That's all any of us can do, mija."

Mija. *Daughter*.

And for the second time in a week I felt the comforting joy of being mothered.

As we were pulling back into Abuelo's parking lot, my phone dinged with a text message, and I pulled it from my pocket.

Preston: Are you off work yet?

Me: Yes. Just about to leave.

Preston: Give me ten minutes. I'm on my way.

I smiled as I texted back.

Me: Okay.

I said goodnight to everyone and then went to my car, letting myself in and waiting as the radio played softly.

A few minutes later, I spotted Preston's truck pulling into the lot and I felt pure joy. A week ago, I'd been terrified of being near him, fearful of his hatred and distrust. Now . . .

Preston stepped out of his truck and my heart started beating more quickly as he walked toward me, his hands in his pockets, that serious look on his face that was so *him*.

“What are you doing here?” I asked on a smile. After yesterday, we’d parted with hopes and promises for our relationship, but hadn’t made any precise plans other than he’d call me.

We’d talked about starting from the beginning, and it really felt as if we were—I was experiencing those fluttery butterfly wings in my tummy that Preston had always elicited, and it surprised me yet it didn’t.

“I had something in mind, and I was hoping you were up for it.” He must have recently taken a shower, as his hair was damp, and I could smell the subtle scent of the soap he used. As usual, Preston wasn’t much for fancy grooming. He wore casual clothes—jeans and T-shirts—and his hair usually looked as if he’d run his hands through it several times to tame it. I loved that about him actually. *My farm boy*.

I tilted my head. “All right. Who’s watching Hudson?”

“I put him to bed. My mom’s home.”

I nodded, looking down at my uniform and pulling my sweater around myself. “I’m not exactly dressed for a social outing.”

He smiled as he took my hand and led me to his truck. “It’ll just be you and me.” After holding the door for me, he walked around and climbed in his side.

“Oh, really?” I asked.

He glanced over at me, his lips quirked up in a lopsided smile and my heart twisted. God, he really was ridiculously handsome. He turned back to the road and as we drove, I allowed myself the simple pleasure of admiring his good looks, smiling to myself.

A few minutes later we drove into town and Preston pulled into a spot on the curb in front of the Laundromat. I looked at him in confusion, but he only grinned and got out of his truck.

Once he’d opened my door and helped me down, I followed as he led me straight into the warm, fragrant interior of the Laundromat I’d once enjoyed spending time at. “We’re in the Laundromat.”

He let go of my hand and stuck his in his pockets again and tilted his head. His hair was fully dry

now. A lock of it fell over his forehead and, despite wanting to push it back, I didn't. I glanced around. I hadn't been here in over five years—we had a washer and dryer in the basement of our apartment building—but everything looked the same. A sense of nostalgia gripped me, bringing with it a strange sense of loneliness.

“Do you ever think about that night, Lia? The night we danced?”

I looked back to where Preston was standing, tilting my head. *That night* . . . I knew exactly which night he was referring to. I'd thought about that night so many times over the years, relived the way it had felt to be held by him. “I . . . yes. Or . . . I used to. I used to think about it all the time.”

He nodded slowly and took his full bottom lip into his mouth, his upper teeth scraping along it before he let it go. A tremor of heat moved through me at the unknowingly seductive gesture. He took a few steps back to the door and turned the sign over so it said, “Closed,” to those on the other side and then flipped the lock.

I laughed shortly. “I don't think you're allowed to do that.”

“I am because I rented this place for a couple of hours.” He took my hand and led me to the middle of the space, the exact spot where I'd once stood folding clothes, and turned to find him standing in the doorway of the Laundromat. Oh, how I'd loved him that night. How I'd wanted him and been so confused and unsure.

“You rented the Laundromat?”

“I didn't want anyone to disturb us.” He gave me a crooked smile. “You might not know this, but there are a surprising number of hoops you have to jump through to acquire this space for a date.”

I laughed. “I didn't know that. I haven't exactly been on a whole lot of dates.”

His face paled, and he closed his eyes for a second. “Oh, Lia, I'm so damn sorry about that.”

I shook my head. “I didn't mean it like that.”

He studied me for a second, his eyes moving over my features as he pulled his teeth over his full bottom lip again.

He leaned in and kissed me quickly and then turned and went over to the laundry soap dispenser and reached for something on top. Was that a remote control? Returning to me, he clicked a button and music

suddenly filled the room.

I let out a startled laugh and Preston's lips turned up. He moved toward me and I grasped the counter behind my back, tipping my head up to look at him. His smile melted and his eyes moved to my mouth and then back to my eyes. I swallowed. "That night, I wanted so badly to kiss you. I was vibrating with it."

"You were?" My voice came out so softly I wondered if he had even heard me. But he nodded and moved in even closer.

"Yeah. I wanted to kiss you, and I wanted to do more than that."

"What more?" I wanted him to keep talking. I was desperate to hear not only all the thoughts that were in his head *now*, but the thoughts that had been in his head all those years I'd pined for him. *Especially that night. The night he was supposed to be at his senior prom and instead had been with me. I'd been so hungry for him for so very, very long.*

His smile was sudden and slightly bashful and made my heart flip yet again. "I think I exhibited *what more* on my kitchen table."

I let out a small chuckle on a breath. "Oh, that more . . ."

His face became serious again. "Yeah, but that more can wait. I want to take things slowly and do all the things we should have done before."

"What sort of things?" I felt slightly breathless. I wasn't mystified. I just wanted to hear *him* say the words.

He leaned in closer and my breath caught as his lips brushed the corner of mine. "Slow things . . ." He kissed my neck lightly, and I couldn't hide the shiver that moved through my body. "Gentle things."

"O-okay. And we're starting here?"

"Yes. We're starting here. I should have done things differently the first time and if we're starting over, this is where I'd like to begin. I'd like to show you what I should have done—what I wish I'd done the first time we were in this Laundromat."

Preston glanced up to where the music was playing and smiled. I became aware of what song was beginning and smiled back. "It's your favorite song."

He chuckled softly and the sound, so rare and so long since I'd heard it, was so sweet I nearly cried.

“Sure is. Will you dance with me?”

I stepped into his arms and felt the wild pounding of my heart as his heat enveloped me. I felt suddenly shy and out of sorts. Was it strange that I’d known Preston almost all of my life, was intimately acquainted with his body, had given birth to his child, and yet in his gentle embrace, I still trembled with the newness of love?

In some ways we’d lived out an entire relationship—the beginning, the middle, *and* the end—and in some ways we’d never had a relationship at all. I understood completely now why he’d suggested beginning anew. We needed that. *I* needed that. And yet at the same time, we also had to contend with reality because emotions were going to come up based on things we’d already experienced.

And this time, we couldn’t pretend they *didn’t* exist or risk lapsing into the silence that had almost been the death of us. Almost. But not quite. There was still life in us, a small spark that had never gone out despite the cold that had engulfed us. The hope of that spark filled my chest so full so suddenly that I sucked in a breath and looked up at Preston.

He smiled softly and turned me quickly, causing me to laugh just the way he had the first time he’d done that. “Promise me you won’t stop dancing with me, Preston. No matter what. If we just have this, I think . . . I think we can make it through anything. Just being held by you . . .”

“I should have. I’m sorry. Know what else I should have done?”

“No, what?”

“I should have pulled you out of that guest room and asked you to share my bed with me. Even if I was asleep by eight and up at four that whole damn year. We could have shared each other’s warmth for those hours, and it would have helped us both.”

“I would have said yes in a heartbeat.”

Preston stopped moving and brought his hands to the sides of my head, weaving his fingers into my hair. “I know that now.” The words made my heart melt, but the picture of us tangled together in his bed—especially with his body so close to mine as it was in that moment—also made my body heat. My breasts were full and achy, and I felt the stirrings of desire between my legs. My young body had experienced the same things on that night in this Laundromat, and the feelings had made me confused and uncertain. I

hadn't known enough to realize that Preston's body was reacting to me in the same way.

I looked up at his darkened eyes and felt the hard ridge of his erection at my lower belly and smiled softly. *I knew now.* "I wanted you to kiss me that night, too," I admitted.

"You did?" His voice was deep and slightly throaty, and when I pressed myself against him, he hissed in a sharp breath.

"Oh, yes."

His hands tightened on my scalp and I tipped my head backward so he had full access to my mouth. "Like this?" His head lowered, his lips met mine, and we both moaned. He slid his tongue into my mouth and I felt my brain go hazy at the taste of him.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and into the hair at the base of his skull, and he moaned again, a sexy sound of masculine pleasure that shot straight to my core and made my underwear feel wet and far too tight. *Yes, like this. God yes, just like this.*

"You make me weak in the knees," he whispered between kisses before pulling me even closer, his tongue slipping into my mouth once again. Our kiss went wild as our hands moved over each other and small gasps and moans filled the room. Neither one of us attempted to be quiet. We had the place to ourselves and were mostly hidden from view of the street by the rows of washers in front of us and the tinted glass of the front window.

Preston walked me backward two steps and my back hit the folding counter and I let out a small cry of surprise that turned into a moan of bliss when his hands moved to my breasts and he circled my nipples over my uniform as he continued to kiss me. "Oh God, yes, Preston, I—"

His lips broke from mine with a tortured sounding groan, and he set me away from him. I felt foggy and flushed and tingly with need, and I shook my head slightly, attempting to get my bearings, to drag my mind out of the lust-fog it had been in.

Preston was staring at me with a pained expression, his chest heaving as if his heart was beating so rapidly it had stolen his breath. "We're taking things slowly this time if it kills me," he murmured. "And it just fucking might."

I couldn't help laughing softly at his grimace, but I was in pain, too, and so my laughter was short-

lived. “We don’t have to take things too slowly.”

He let out a shuddery breath. “Yes, we do. I want to do things the way I should have done them the first time. And when we make love it’s going to be in a bed, and I’m going to take my time.”

“Tell me more.”

I saw him visibly swallow, watched the movement of his tanned, slightly stubbly masculine throat and for a moment became enthralled with that small part of him. I’d never had a chance to explore him. There must be so many unexpected places on his male body that were sexy and sensitive. I wanted—*needed*—to know them all, to find the small spots that affected him most.

“I,” he started, and I forced myself to tear my eyes from his neck to his eyes, “I want to touch every inch of you. I want to drive you crazy with my mouth and my tongue until you don’t think you can take another minute of it. I want to slide into you and feel you clenching and shuddering around me. I want to make love to you in every way possible, and find a few new ways, too.”

Lust surged through me, and my breath picked up. “How many ways are there?”

Preston chuckled, but it ended on a short groan. “A few. Or so I’ve heard.”

I laughed, too, but it was laced with a small thread of jealousy. I wanted to know how many he’d tried—but I didn’t dare ask because I didn’t *really* want to know.

I sighed, but nodded. I was turned on and frustrated, but I wanted to start over, too, and so if he meant to take things at a leisurely pace, I guess that had to be in all areas or it wouldn’t work in quite the same way.

Our heartbeats slowed and after a minute, he pulled me back into his arms and moved me to the next song on the still-familiar playlist. I laughed. “I can’t believe the owner hasn’t changed the playlist in this place.”

“Of course he hasn’t. The eighties never end here.”

I leaned back to look in his face, raising my eyebrows in surprise. “You remembered.”

“Ah, Annalia, I remember everything when it comes to you.”

Feeling happy and hopeful, I smiled, resting my head against Preston’s chest as he pulled me closer and George Michael ruminated on all the harm one careless whisper could do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Preston

It was harvest time for several of the crops and therefore necessary that I work from dawn until dusk. Annalia had two days off mid-week, and I asked if she wanted to come over to watch Hudson while I worked. Tracie might enjoy the days off. Annalia's agreement was slightly breathless as if she was surprised, but I heard a hesitant edge to her voice and wondered why. But I supposed it was normal that she was a little nervous—the last time she'd spent an entire day caring for him, he'd been an infant. It would take some time for her to become used to all the ways he'd changed—and all the ways caring for him was different now than it had been.

The timing was especially good because my mom would be out of the house, working at one of the charities she volunteered for in town for the next few days, so Lia would have the house to herself and plenty of bonding time with Hudson.

As I worked outside that day, I thought about Lia and how good it had felt to hold her in my arms in the Laundromat, how kissing her had brought the same torrent of heat to my veins it always had, and how the taste of her still caused me to lose at least a little control. But I was bound and determined to keep a grasp on it this time, not just for her, but for myself as well. I wanted to ease us both back into a physical relationship. I wanted to explore slowly, to learn intimately, and to experience the steady—probably somewhat painful—buildup that we'd denied ourselves for so many years.

We couldn't go back—not really—but we damn sure could recreate at least a few experiences. My body throbbed hotly with the thought, and I took a deep breath, focusing on the work beneath my hands. The physical labor of farm work was hard enough without being in an uncomfortable state of arousal, too.

Most of the crops we grew on our farm, like the lettuce I was helping pick today, had to be harvested gently—completely by hand—and I still couldn't afford the labor force I really needed. Next year we'd

be fully back in business, God willing. But I figured every farmer should know the back-breaking labor of working his own land—and what the realistic expectations should be—if he was going to be the kind of boss his employees were loyal to. My father had taught us that work ethic. Experience had hit it home. *Hard.*

“Farming is not for the faint of heart,” my father used to say as we stood on the edge of the farmland, looking out over it. He’d squeeze my shoulder, though, and when I looked up at him, the look on his face held such profound pride, it would cause my heart to swell in my chest.

I glanced toward the house where I knew Lia was probably feeding Hudson his breakfast. She was there now, but she’d leave tonight and go back to the apartment she shared with her mother. I didn’t like it. But I was also hesitant to ask her to move back in with us. I’d done that once—wanted her close, wanted to know she was safe. As I examined my motives, I wasn’t impressed. Had it been for mostly selfish reasons? Had I felt satisfaction that she was *okay* by her physical presence alone? Maybe it had simply made it easier for me to ignore her emotional needs completely. Wrong. Very wrong.

There was also the matter of my mother. I was more aware now of the ways in which she’d undermined Lia and made her feel unwelcome while I’d been emotionally checked out and physically absent. I wouldn’t let that happen again without stepping in. But it was also a problem that my mother’s mere presence would interrupt the alone time Lia and I needed . . . and that I *craved*. And that made me feel just a little bit guilty because whether she loved it or not—and I didn’t think she ever really *had*—that farmhouse was my mother’s home.

I stood, taking a moment to stretch my back, listening to one of the workers make a joke in Spanish about the size of the heads of lettuce in reference to his wife’s anatomy and laughed as I shook my head. One thing about working in the fields for almost two years now: I was practically bilingual. At the very least, I knew how to tell a joke in Spanish—some dirty, some just laugh-out-loud funny.

Chuckling, I turned and looked in the direction of the newly formed lake. There was a wide-open area nearby, next to where the strawberry crops began. I stood for a moment simply staring at that space, picturing a smaller version of the old farmhouse, two bedrooms, maybe three, with a porch that faced the mountains. Even considering such a thing probably wasn’t the wisest thing to do, financially at least. I’d

have to take out a loan—but the house we lived in now was paid off and, hell, most people had mortgages. It could be done.

A buzz of excitement moved through me, but so did a prickle of doubt. I couldn't help picturing the way Lia's room had looked the morning she'd left—the bed still made and the closet empty—and anxiety filled my chest at the memory alone. God, I loved her. I wanted her. I just had to learn to trust her again.

But for now, the fear was still there—the terror that things would get hard and she'd leave again, and it would fucking wreck me like it had the first time. Only this time it'd be a hundred times worse because I didn't think I'd be able to muster the anger I'd once used like a shield against the pain, the loss.

Time. That was just going to take time. That was the point of taking things slowly. No doubt her uncertainties about *me* lingered as well. How could they not?

A few hours later, just as I was getting ready to head inside for lunch, I looked up and saw Lia come out the back door with Hudson on her hip. She held up her hand and waved and my heart lurched to see them standing there. *My family*. The doubts I'd had earlier melted away, and I made my way toward them, walking through the dirt of one of the now-empty lettuce rows.

I squinted as I approached them, and Lia's smile filled my heart. Hudson babbled something and reached his arms toward me. "Oh no," Lia said, pulling him back. "Daddy's as covered in soil as an earthworm. He has to wash up first." She tickled Hudson's tummy to distract him as I passed by and headed into the house, the sound of Hudson's squeal of laughter following behind me.

Inside, Lia had made me a sandwich, and it was sitting on the table with a large glass of iced tea. I washed up quickly and sat down, practically devouring the sandwich in two bites.

Lia put Hudson in his high chair and smiled over at me. "I made a few if you're still hungry after that one."

I finished chewing and took a drink of iced tea. "Oh, thank God."

She laughed, grabbing another sandwich wrapped in tin foil out of the refrigerator and set it in front of the plate that now only held a few bites of sandwich. "I'll give you one to take back out with you, too. I remember how hungry you get when you're working outside all day."

I paused, looking at her, really seeing her. "Thank you," I said, my voice sounding raspy. I couldn't

help it.

She tilted her head as she studied me. “For what?”

“For everything you did for me while I was breaking my back to save this farm. I never thanked you and so . . . thank you. Thank you so much, Annalia.”

The truth was, though I wouldn't wish to relive the experience of her leaving for anything in the world, being left to father Hudson all by myself for a time had impressed upon me what hard work it was caring for a child. Lia had done it virtually alone for the first six months of his life while also caring for me in a hundred small ways I'd never even acknowledged.

Lia's eyes softened as she stared at me and then her lips turned up and she nodded, the movement so small I would have missed it if I'd blinked. “You're welcome.”

I returned to my lunch as Lia put some peas and carrots, small bits of cheese, and some macaroni onto Hudson's tray, and he started picking it up and shoving it into his mouth with gusto. Lia watched him with amusement for a moment before looking over at me.

“How's it been going with him today?”

She looked pensive for a moment. “Good.” She looked back at Hudson and smiled again. “We've been practicing walking. He's got it if I hold on to him with one hand but as soon as I let go, he goes down. Tomorrow, though. He's going to be walking by tomorrow.”

I grinned. “Don't encourage it too much. I hear it's a whole new ballgame once they're mobile.”

She laughed softly. “You're probably right.” She leaned toward him. “Then you're going to get in all sorts of trouble, aren't you?” He stopped eating just long enough to give her a messy grin before going back to his food.

“Preston . . .” she started.

I paused, mid chew. “What?”

She picked up a napkin and wiped her hands on it, turning slightly toward me. “I was talking to my boss, Rosa, yesterday and, well, it's an annual tradition that Abuelo's makes three hundred tamales for the A Taste of Linmoor event on Sunday, but the kitchen is going to be closed this weekend because they're upgrading several large appliances. Saturday is the day they usually prepare the food.”

“Okay?”

“Well, they’d make the tamales in Rosa’s kitchen, but it’s so tiny. I’ve been there. Three people can barely fit comfortably in it. And the other staff live in small houses or apartments, too.”

“You want to offer them the use of this kitchen?”

She let out a breath. “I don’t want to impose, and I know your mother would have to approve of it, too, but—”

“It’s fine, Lia. My mom’s gone this weekend anyway. She’s going away with a couple of friends to San Francisco. I don’t know what time she’s leaving on Saturday, but I assume she’ll be gone early. She’s not back until Monday.”

“Oh . . . and you’re sure you wouldn’t mind? Will you be working?”

“Off and on. But no, I won’t mind.”

“Thank you,” she said, so sweetly that my heart jumped. Her eyes were cast down but her cheeks were flushed, and she looked so pleased. That was a look I hadn’t seen on her before. And then it hit me. It was the first time she’d ever asked me for *anything*. In our whole lives, in all the time I’d known her, in all the years, she’d never once asked me for a single thing. The realization shocked me slightly.

“You’re welcome. Lia . . . I . . . well, you don’t have to work at Abuelo’s. I’m still paying for your mom’s apartment, and I’m happy to keep it up.” Even if she wasn’t living with me right now, and even if we were moving slowly with our own relationship, I wasn’t sure how I felt about the mother of my child waitressing tables. It seemed . . . wrong somehow.

She shook her head. “No, I like it.” She looked away and then back at me. “And I’m going to pay you back, for what you did for my mama, and for me.”

I stared at her. “Pay me back? I don’t want that.”

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. “Well, it . . . it means something to me and so I’m going to anyway. It’s . . . right.”

I released an impatient breath. This wasn’t something I was willing to argue about. I’d take any money she gave me and put it in Hudson’s college account, the one I hadn’t contributed enough to over the past year since every cent I’d had went back into the farm.

I started on the second sandwich, watching Lia as she watched Hudson, a small smile on her face.

“Do you want more?” I asked.

“More what?”

“Kids.”

Her eyes flew to mine and her face seemed to pale slightly. “I . . . no. I think one is enough.”

I couldn't help the disappointment I felt. “Really? You wouldn't want to give him a brother or sister someday?”

A line formed between her brows, and I hated that she looked so troubled. “I don't . . . I mean, would you really want to go through all that again?”

I took a sip of tea, watching her, the muscles of my stomach clenched. I didn't want to take this personally, but I couldn't help it. She didn't want to have any more babies with me. I remembered her telling me she hadn't thought she was a good mother, but like I'd told her at the time, she'd been wrong. I hadn't been around a whole lot, but I knew she was devoted, saw the motherly adoration in her eyes when she looked at Hudson. It had just been the circumstances that had made those first six months of his life so difficult for her. “I know it was hard, and the timing wasn't great, but it wouldn't be the same again, Lia,” I said quietly. “It would be completely different. I'd make sure of it.” *I'd be here with you. Emotionally and physically. Fuck, how I'd let her down.*

She looked back at Hudson and remained quiet for a minute. Finally, her shoulders seemed to relax slightly and she offered me a smile. “I know. Let's just . . . play things by ear, okay? We still *have* a baby. Who knows what the future holds. And we are starting over, right? That seems like jumping ahead quite a bit.”

I returned her smile, deciding she was probably right. “Okay. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

She nodded and the mood lightened. Yes, we'd cross that bridge when we came to it.

As I finished up for the day, the sun was going down, the mountains on fire with reds and oranges, the sky itself colored a deep indigo blue. I felt tired, but satisfied as I stood at the edge of the farmland looking out over it as I'd done so many times with my dad.

Today, we'd accomplished a lot, not just the first half of the harvesting, but the lettuce had been wrapped in plastic and packed in boxes right in the field. Right now it was being cooled and in a couple of days it would be shipped to supermarkets and restaurants from California to Maine.

Next week, a head of lettuce I'd picked with my own hand would be looked over by some woman in a grocery store in Bangor. She wouldn't think of the nameless somebody who'd grown and harvested it—she'd be thinking of the salad she'd be making later, or perhaps the guests she'd be serving, maybe the kid who liked lettuce on his ham sandwich—but the idea brought me pride regardless of the fact that farming could be a thankless job. So many are, I supposed.

Tomorrow would be another long day, but I felt good going into it, knowing we weren't behind.

I walked into the kitchen and washed my hands, scrubbing beneath my nails and then grabbing a paper towel as I heard Lia coming down the stairs.

“Hey,” I greeted her.

She smiled a tired smile. “Hey. How'd it go?”

“Good. Really good. How'd today go with you?”

She nodded. “He's a little handful.” But she looked happy. “He never stops, does he?”

I chuckled. “Not often.”

“I gave him a bath and put him to bed. He made me read that Thomas book three times. He's like a little dictator.”

I laughed. “I'm tired, too. What do you say we rent a movie and just relax?”

“Oh, I can't. I'm going to the farmworkers' camp right outside town with Rosa and Alejandro.”

I frowned. “What? Why?”

“They go every Monday to deliver food. I went with them, and they started some repairs but didn't have enough time to finish. They're going back tonight, and I'm going with them.”

Anger gripped me and I pulled back from where I'd been standing in front of her. "You went to a migrant camp?"

Her brows moved together, and she crossed her arms. "Yes. Why?"

"A. Migrant. Camp?"

"Yes," she said slowly, warily, a tilt to her chin.

I threw my arms up. "Goddamn it, Lia. Do you know how unsafe those places can be? You can't just be traipsing around the world as if you have no responsibilities. As if you don't have a son who's waiting at home for you."

Shit. The hurt filling her eyes was almost a tangible thing. Why the hell had I said that? But even in my regret at hurting her, I couldn't seem to let go of the picture that filled my head of her walking down the run-down pathways of a migrant camp as some man pulled her into a cabin, clamping a hand over her mouth.

She whirled on her heel and rushed out of the kitchen, grabbing her jacket and flinging the front door open.

I made an angry grunt and ran after her. God, why was I so irrationally furious? I wanted to stop this fight, I wanted to rewind and come in the house again and be prepared for this conversation, handle it differently, let go of the irate fear that was still racing through my veins, but I couldn't seem to let it go. I followed her out through the front door and onto the porch.

Lia was already in the front yard, but suddenly, she whirled around and raced back toward me. I came up short so I wouldn't collide with her. "I'm not traipsing all over the world, Preston. I know I have responsibilities. I went to the camp to take food to the people who live there because they're hungry. I was with a group, and I was never in danger. And moreover, they're not dangerous. They're just *people*. People who are poor and hungry and who've risked everything, risked hardship, and loneliness, and even death for the only reason anyone risks those things: for *love*. For the hope of providing their children with the basic human needs so many take for granted. They don't ask for much—just a place to belong. And yet they *don't* belong here, and they don't belong in their own country anymore. Maybe they don't belong anywhere, or at least that's how it feels!"

She was shaking and her words took my breath, making me feel confused and suddenly uncertain. She turned away and then turned back, and I saw tears in her eyes. “The drought has affected them, too, and they have nothing to fall back on. *Nothing*. They pick food nine hours a day and yet they can barely feed themselves let alone their children. Can you even imagine the fear of that? Have you ever even thought about it?”

“I—”

“If they don’t work the fields, who will?”

I let out a breath, running my hand through my gritty-feeling hair. “Lia, I know—”

“Who will? Is anyone else applying for those jobs?”

“No, no one else applies for those jobs.” Every once in a while someone from town would take a job picking fruits or vegetables on our farm, but they generally didn’t last long. It was hot, hard, dirty, and dangerous work, and it was true—Americans preferred to make minimum wage working fast food than picking lettuce. “Goddammit, Lia, I appreciate every man and woman who works on my farm.” I was confused and didn’t know how the conversation had turned in this direction.

“You appreciate them, but they’re dangerous?”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I just meant people in general can be dangerous, and a migrant camp doesn’t provide any safety.”

“I walked every back road and farm row in this area growing up, Preston Sawyer, and no one ever harmed me. So don’t lecture me about danger. The migrant workers I’ve met have only been kind and helpful.”

“For fuck’s sake! You’re purposefully misrepresenting me and making me sound like some kind of bad guy here. You know me better than that.”

She let out a sound of anger and turned again, calling from the door of her car, “I think I should go now before this goes any further.” Then she got in and drove away, leaving me feeling stunned and bewildered.

I was still standing there when my mother drove up, getting out of her car and looking at me strangely. “Was that Annalia I just passed? She’s not driving out of town again, is she? She didn’t even

look at me as she passed and the expression on her face was—”

Stark terror raced up my spine, and I made a strangled sound of fear as I raced to my truck. “Hudson’s in bed. Will you listen for him until I get home?” I didn’t wait for my mother’s answer before I jumped inside my truck and pulled out of the driveway.

I barely even remembered the drive to Lia’s apartment. When I got there, her car was in the parking lot. Was she inside packing a bag? Would she get in her car and drive out of town leaving me with no idea where she’d gone? I took the stairs two at a time and used my fist to pound at her apartment door. It felt like my heart was coming out of my chest as I waited for an answer. Finally, the door was pulled open and Lia stared at me in shocked silence.

My eyes focused on the room behind her, scanning the space for any sign that she was leaving—an open suitcase, clothes on the bed—but I didn’t see anything. My gaze met hers again and I attempted to catch my breath, my chest rising and falling rapidly as we stared at each other from across the doorway.

“Preston—”

God, what the fuck was wrong with me? She wasn’t leaving. She’d told me she loved me. We’d danced in the Laundromat. She’d spent the day with Hudson and looked happy and satisfied. We were starting over and— “I’m sorry,” I choked. “For what I said. I’m sorry.” *Don’t leave.* It was too much. My emotions were overwhelming me, and I just needed to get my bearings. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Preston?” she called, confusion in her voice, but I walked to my truck, got inside, and drove home. My hands shook on the steering wheel the entire way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Annalia

Once again I drove down the dirt road toward Sawyer Farm and slowed to accommodate the bumps, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. The look on Preston's face when he'd shown up at my door. It was . . . panicked terror. My stomach knotted with guilt and sadness. He'd looked over my shoulder, his eyes searching wildly, and I'd known he'd been looking for signs that I was leaving. *He believed I was capable of disappearing again.* Every ounce of anger from our argument had drained from my body leaving me weak with regret and heartache.

Oh, Preston.

Was that how he'd looked when he'd shown up at my mama's apartment door the day after I really *had* left? Somehow I knew it was, and the knowledge was a sharp blade to my heart.

That year . . . that *terrible* year—punctuated only with the joy of the first time we laid eyes on our beautiful baby boy. I'd thought Preston hadn't *seen* me, but I hadn't seen him either. I hadn't tried. I'd allowed myself to fade into the background and in doing so, had denied us both the affection, the closeness, the comfort we might have shared. I had squandered every opportunity by my unwillingness to make a fuss. I thought it was fair to forgive that, given the exhaustion of having a newborn, but if I had really loved Preston the right way, I should have tried to look past his defensive walls. *I hadn't made a fuss. I never made a fuss.*

No more.

He'd left and I'd stood in the doorway for several long minutes, shocked by the desperation I'd seen on his face. We'd fought and because of it, he thought I might leave. His trust in me was still shaky, so easily fractured, and I honestly couldn't blame him for that.

I wanted to take him in my arms and hold him. Needed to. Not tomorrow. Not the next day. Right that

minute. And so this time, *I* would run after *him*. *Run to him*.

I pulled into his driveway and relief swept through me to see his truck parked there, too. Twilight had fallen, but the light from the porch illuminated the path as I jumped out of my car and walked swiftly to the door, knocking twice.

A minute later, Mrs. Sawyer pulled the door open, her face showing surprise, though none of the same displeasure she'd shown the first time I'd knocked two weeks ago. Was it *only* two weeks ago? It felt like a lifetime.

"Hi, Mrs. Sawyer. I'm here to see Preston." My breathing was still slightly erratic and I fought to control it, to appear as normal as possible.

Her face registered confusion as she studied me, but then she glanced over my shoulder to the driveway where his truck was parked as if she hadn't even known he was home. Perhaps he hadn't gone inside the house. He couldn't have been more than five or ten minutes ahead of me.

"Did you have a fight?"

I blinked. I wasn't sure why she was asking, and I wasn't sure I should be honest with her, if she might find enjoyment in the knowledge that we'd quarreled. "Yes," I said warily.

She nodded as if she'd expected as much, crossing her arms under her breasts. She bit at her lip for a moment. "If he's as much his father's son as I think, he's probably in the barn pacing. Why don't you go to him? I never went to his father and look where that got me."

Surprised, I opened my mouth and then closed it again, finally managing a soft, "Thank you." She gave me a small nod and closed the door gently.

Her kindness rushed over me like an unexpected summer breeze, and I headed toward the barn, hoping to see the man I loved. The door was cracked and a light shone from inside. Breathing a sigh of relief, I pulled it open and saw him there, not pacing, but sitting on a storage box with his head bent.

Two memories flashed before me: the time we'd sat in this same barn together the day of his father's funeral and the night of the barn party. The first time there had been so many things unsaid between us, and the second time we hadn't said any of the *right* things. This time was going to be different.

He looked up when he heard my footsteps and looked mildly surprised, but mostly just weary. I

stopped in front of him.

“I thought you were going to the camp to help out tonight,” he said softly.

“I called Rosa and told her I couldn’t make it.”

“Not because of me—”

“Yes, because of you, but not because you told me not to. Because we have business to attend to that can’t wait.” I took a deep breath. “So . . . we’re going to talk about this. You’re going to talk, and then I’m going to respond. Or if you want me to talk first, I can do that, and then you’ll respond to me.”

His lip quirked slightly, but his eyes still looked sad. “That sounds really rational and mature. Think we can handle it?”

I bit at my lip, considering for a moment. “I don’t know. Maybe we should find out.”

He chuckled softly and rubbed the back of his neck. I took a seat next to him on one of the storage boxes.

“You thought I might leave after we fought.”

He paused for so long I thought I’d have to ask him again, but finally he said quietly, “Yeah. I . . . was scared you might.”

I put my hand on his knee, just wanting the physical contact. “I’m sorry, Preston. I’m so sorry I left instead of trying to talk to you. After that night in the rain . . . I didn’t think there was any hope that you’d feel more for me than a guilt-ridden lust, and it hurt so badly, I ran from it. From you. And that was wrong. I won’t run again. I’m learning how to confront things that hurt me rather than running away. At the time, though . . . it was the only answer I could think of. I didn’t know what else to do. I just knew I couldn’t live that way anymore. I thought . . . I thought everyone would be happier without me—maybe even Hudson—and I felt like I was dying inside.”

He put his hand on top of mine. It was warm and rough, and it made me feel safe.

“Tell me about that night, Lia. What happened?” His eyes were pools of despair and guilt hit me in the gut again when I realized what I’d done to him.

I took a deep breath, allowing my mind to travel there again. “I think . . . I think I was depressed. I think that year, trying to be there for you, but not feeling like I was helping anything, being in the house all

day with your mom who made it clear I wasn't wanted, but only when you weren't around, and then the stresses of being a new mother myself . . ." I frowned. "I don't know exactly, but I do know there was something not right with me. I know that because I don't feel that way anymore."

A cool breeze wafted into the barn, causing the door to creak, and bringing with it the smells of the farm—grass and earth.

"We had gone so long not touching each other, and I was so desperate for that and then . . . we had sex, and I felt insecure about my body, and then what you said . . ."

He frowned, tilting his head. "What I said?"

"About thinking I had the devil in me."

His eyes washed over my features for a second, a look of confusion in his expression, as if he barely remembered saying it. "I . . . I must have been trying to lighten the moment. I knew taking you up against the wall wasn't very romantic, and I was probably trying to tease you a little. I wanted to take you up to bed. I asked and you said no."

"I know. I thought that would only make the pain worse. But also . . ." I blew out another breath, gathering my strength, "what you should know is that all my life, my mother has claimed I have the devil in me. I'm . . . I'm the product of a brutal rape, and she's never let me forget it."

"Christ, Lia. I'm . . . God, I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "You didn't know. It's just . . . those words, in that moment, gutted me. And especially from you. I felt so hollow."

"God, I had no idea."

I gave him a gentle smile. "You couldn't have because I never told you. I never told another soul. I kept it hidden." I'd kept *myself* hidden—inside parameters of my own making. I tilted my head. "I found out a little bit about my mother while I was with her sister. They had another younger sister named Luciana who became very, very ill and their family couldn't afford medical care for her—there was no work and no way to get her the help she needed. My mother was a newlywed—only eighteen—and there was no work for her husband, either, and so they risked crossing the border so they could send money back to help both their families, and especially Luciana. My mother's husband was murdered by the man

who then raped her—my father.” Despair settled in my stomach at the word, the word that had no meaning to me other than to explain how I’d come to exist.

Preston hissed out a breath that sounded both angry and helpless. “I wish I could find him and kill him.”

I made a humming sound of agreement.

“What happened to Luciana?”

“She died.”

Preston shook his head. “That’s awful.”

“I know.”

I bit at my lip for a moment. “It’s part of the reason I moved in with you when you asked. The way my mother looked at me,” I shook my head at the memory of the pain in her eyes, as if she could hardly bear it, “to see me pregnant and miserable, it—”

“It reminded her of herself.”

I nodded. “It must have.”

Sadness filled his expression. “I’m so sorry you were left to choose between two places where you felt unwanted—and even more sorry I was part of that. And I understand why you never shared more of your life with me, with us,” Preston said. “But I wish you had.”

“I didn’t know how to. Growing up, I always had this sense that I was . . . less. The feeling of not belonging anywhere has followed me so relentlessly. It’s why I kept myself away from you and Cole, and everyone else who ever tried to befriend me. It’s like I wanted it desperately, but I resisted it stridently. It’s why I defended those people who live in the camp like some avenger.” I laughed softly and he smiled. “I meant what I said, but I didn’t mean to make you the villain. You’re not. You’re kind and fair and honorable, and I’m sorry I suggested anything differently. I went a little off the rails there.”

His smile widened and he chuckled softly. “I might have even liked it if it wasn’t directed at me. You’re pretty sexy when you’re fired up.”

I tilted my head and smiled at him, the mood lighter, the weight lifted from my shoulders. “In all honesty, Preston, I want to help out at the camp. I won’t put myself in danger, and it gives me a feeling of .

. . purpose. Maybe you'd even like to come along sometime."

"Maybe I will," he said on a small smile.

I grasped his hand in mine. "I love you. And I promise you I won't leave again—no matter what. Please, please believe that."

"I love you, too."

I squeezed his hand and then looked around the old barn, remembering what his mom had said. "Your mom said your dad used to come out here and pace."

He looked surprised at my words, or maybe that I'd heard them from his mother. "Yeah. He did. After they fought, he'd come out here and smoke. It was the only time he did, and I learned to associate that smell with this helpless kind of resentment. Even now, if I pass by someone smoking and . . ." He shook his head, staring off into the distance. "I hated it—I hated being around them when they were together. They didn't have a happy marriage."

That surprised me. I'd always thought Preston's family was so perfect. Of course once I'd come to know his mother, I realized that she, at least, was far from easy to live with. But I had taken it personally. Apparently the three men in her life found it at least a little bit difficult to live with her, too.

I remembered what Cole had told me about her buying the motorcycle for their father. It had sounded like she bought it in an effort to make him into something he might not have been. How tragic that her son had died on the motorcycle she'd purchased with misguided intentions. She and I weren't close enough to discuss things like that, but I had to wonder if she thought about that and suffered inside because of it.

"What about Cole? Did he have a good relationship with her?"

Preston shrugged. "Cole had a good relationship with everyone. Or maybe he just didn't let anything get under his skin enough for it to be any other way." He paused for a moment and I let him choose his words, almost holding my breath to hear him voicing his feelings about his brother. "When we were young and got in trouble, Cole always talked our way out of things. If he couldn't, I'd take the blame and serve the time. It was just . . . the roles we naturally fell into. In high school, and even a few times in college, Cole wasn't prepared for some test or another, so I'd go to the class and pretend to be him and take it so he didn't fail." He laughed softly, but it didn't hold a lot of humor. "I think he would have been better off

if I'd *let* him fall on his face a couple of times. I just couldn't seem to do it. And I think I would have been better off if I'd learned not to let him be my mouthpiece. But we were twins, and it felt natural to pick up where the other one left off—two pieces of a whole.” An expression of pain altered his features for a moment before he sighed. “Cole did some things that hurt me, and some things that were wrong and dishonest, but I miss him. He wasn't only my brother. He was my twin—the other half of me—and I'll miss him forever.”

“I know. I will, too.” Tears filled my eyes, but they didn't fall. “I don't think Cole meant to hurt you. He just never took anything very seriously. I used to think that the two of you were such opposites. Cole never took anything seriously *enough* and you took things *too* seriously. He didn't have *enough* honor, and you would kill yourself to keep your word.” I gave him a smile that felt sad when his eyes met mine.

“He cared about you, though, Lia. You might have been the only girl he ever really did care about.”

I tilted my head, considering that. “Yes, he did care about me, but like a sister. I think he would have come to realize that, too. Most of the time we spent together, we'd end up talking. He was protective *of* me, but not passionate *for* me. It was never like that with us. He wanted to protect my virtue, but he never really staked a claim of his own.” Cole had turned into a gentleman when he kissed me, and Preston had turned into a marauder. There was nothing wrong with a gentleman, but I didn't think it was necessarily Cole's true nature that brought out that reaction, but rather his lack of passion for me. Frankly, though it had hurt me on occasion, I wanted the fiery lust that Preston exhibited when we touched.

“He was attracted to you,” Preston said quietly. I watched as his hands clenched and unclenched slowly on his thighs and then he frowned as if saying the words bothered him and he felt guilty for that.

I put my hand on one of his, lacing our fingers. “You can think someone's attractive and still not feel any real passion for them.”

His eyes moved to mine and he stared at me for a moment before he let out a breath. “Yeah. Yeah, that's true.”

His expression made me think his mind was in the past for a few moments before he made a small humming sound and returned my same sad smile, squeezing my hand in his.

We sat in companionable silence for a few moments. My eyes caught on the benches that had been

pulled forward for that barn party, the one that had resulted in an unplanned pregnancy and plenty of despair. “It seems so surreal that the party where we made love for the first time was almost two years ago,” I mused. “In some ways it seems like a lifetime.”

“Hudson will always be the marker of how long ago that party was.”

I smiled on a breath. “Yes.”

“I loved you so fiercely that night, Annalia. I want you to know that. I know the way things happened after that was mostly awful. But we created that little boy in love. When I look at him, with your eyes and my face, that’s what I think. He’s the beauty that came from the ashes.”

“I feel the same way,” I said softly.

We sat in the barn for a while longer, musing about life and love and our little boy. When I left, though the sky was dark, it only made it easier to see the stars.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Preston

The next day dawned clear and bright, the spring sky a bowl of startling blue. After a year of rising before the sun, I was now working a more regular schedule, and waking with the light outside my window was a pleasure I'd missed and vowed never to take for granted.

My heart felt lighter and the day went by quickly. The conversation Lia and I had had was long overdue and inside, I knew it had opened a doorway in our relationship. We were learning to trust each other, learning to communicate—*honestly*—and realizing how good it felt to have another person to open up to. Or at least, that's how it felt for me. And by the peaceful expression on Lia's face when I'd kissed her goodbye the night before, I believed she felt the same way.

I thought it had been a good choice to begin slowly and hold off sexually because so many parts of our relationship had never developed naturally and now we were allowing them to. How much deeper and more satisfying was sex going to be once we knew each other—and loved each other—on an even deeper level? A shiver ran down my back and I hardened slightly at the consideration alone.

Still, I wouldn't keep my hands off her entirely, whether we were taking things slowly or not. Oh God, she made me weak in the knees.

My father had warned me not to love a woman just because she made me weak in the knees. But that *wasn't* the only reason I loved Annalia. She was precious to me because she was tender and kind and so deeply sensitive it gripped my heart. She was smart and funny and she kept secrets, not because she was secretive, but because she didn't think anyone would hold safe the private musings of her heart.

The *pain* had come, not from the fact that Annalia made me weak in the knees, but from the belief that she didn't love me back the same way I loved her.

But she did. She *did*. And I vowed to do things *right* this time. I vowed to prove to her that her

secrets—the tender places inside her—*were* safe with me. And I promised myself I’d trust her with my tender places, too.

As I worked, I thought more about our conversation and how it had also brought some understanding where Cole was concerned. It was a deep, open wound inside me that we’d never gotten a chance to hash things out regarding Annalia—never had a true, honest conversation. And yet talking to her had allowed me to see the situation in a clearer light.

He cared about you, though, Lia.

Yes, he did care about me, but like a sister.

I remembered the way he’d been so enraged about me possibly disrespecting her—the way he’d tried to protect her virtue, but yet had had no interest in staying true to her. He’d had the opportunity to spend more time with her than he had, but he never took it. If *I* had been the one who won that race, and found out she wanted me, I’d have staked my claim the very next day. *He* hadn’t. Perhaps he’d thought the deep protectiveness he felt for her and no one else meant he loved her. And it did, but if Lia was right and there was no passion there, then her belief that he loved her as a sister felt like the truth.

It didn’t heal the loss I’d always carry inside. But it shed some light—some healing—where none had been before, and for that I was grateful. I spent a quiet hour talking to my brother in my head as I worked and somehow felt certain he heard me. It felt as though there was forgiveness between us. A restoration of sorts.

I went in around noon, and Lia and I spent a laughter-filled hour watching Hudson walk from one of us to the other, clapping for himself and squealing over his new accomplishment. By the time we went into the kitchen to eat, the kid was a pro. When he took to something, he really took to it.

Over lunch, as Lia fed Hudson, I asked, “Are you free tonight?”

“What do you have in mind?” Lia brought her hair over her shoulder as she began braiding it quickly. My eyes were glued to the feminine movements, the way her slim, delicate fingers moved deftly through her hair, and the way she arched her neck to accomplish the task. How was it women just seemed to naturally know how to do those types of things? And did they realize how much watching it affected a man? My mouth felt suddenly dry. I took a sip of iced tea as I tried to remember what she’d asked me.

What do you have in mind?

“Dinner,” I said distractedly. “At Dairy Queen. And then maybe we could drive to the top of Heron’s Park.”

She raised one brow, studying me. “Isn’t that where teens go to make out?”

“Yeah,” I said, and my voice sounded slightly lazy, even in my own ears.

She laughed. “Is this all part of going back to the beginning?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right.” She looked at Hudson. “Your mom and dad are going to pretend they’re teenagers tonight. What do you think about that, little walker?” Hudson laughed, smooshing a handful of blueberries into his cheek. “That’s what I think, too,” Lia said, but the smile on her face was bright and happy.

The park was dark and slightly foggy as my truck crept slowly up the mild incline of the road that wound through the trees and dead-ended at the top of a low cliff overlooking the town of Linmoor.

I’d never been up here when I was a teenager—but Cole had and from what I knew, kids still used it as a place to park and make out. But when we crested the hill, there weren’t any other cars parked anywhere. We had the entire place to ourselves, whether that was because it wasn’t as popular a place to hang out as it once had been, or because it was a Thursday night, I didn’t know. *Didn’t care, either.*

I pulled into a spot right at the guardrail and turned off the ignition, looking out at the lights of Linmoor. From up here it looked like such a dinky town, dwarfed by the acres and acres of the sprawling farmland that surrounded it, farmland that was now merely dark emptiness from where we sat.

“We’re not very high, but the town looks so small from here,” Lia said, voicing the thought I’d just had.

I looked over at her, barely able to make out her profile in the darkness where the moonlight shining into my truck was the only illumination. “Do you still wish you’d left?” I asked softly. It was a fear inside

me—not that she’d leave again without telling me, I was determined to let go of that fear after our talk—but that someday she might regret staying in this small town all her life after she’d once dreamed of leaving forever.

She looked over at me and seemed to study me a moment though she couldn’t have seen much more than I could in the low light. “It’s not really that I wanted to leave. That was just a game Cole and I would play. It engaged my imagination.” She looked back out the front window. “I just wanted out of the . . . the *smallness* of my life, I guess. I wanted to break free of the parameters I thought had boxed me in so tightly. That smallness was *inside* of me, too, though. And *I’m* the one who created so many of the painful parameters, and I’m coming to see that. I’m coming to see that sometimes the most damaging borders are *inside* us. I’ve always tried to, I don’t know, diminish myself, fade into the background, keep quiet, and not make a fuss.” I knew exactly what she meant. I had built my own walls, too.

She suddenly smiled over at me, and it startled me momentarily at how beautiful she was even though I couldn’t make out the details of her features. It was her words, my own deep understanding of exactly what had kept us divided—separate—for so long; it was the *feel* of the moment, as if we’d suddenly come full circle and it was *important*. It was the sudden stillness I felt inside. The *rightness*.

“I love you,” I whispered, because I did and I felt it so strongly right then that I could hardly breathe. I scooted closer to her on the seat and she moved toward me, and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her right up against my body.

“I love you, too.”

“When Cole and I left for college, it was the first time either of us had been on a plane. We’d gone on family vacations but we’d always driven, so that was a first for us. I didn’t like it.”

She laughed so softly it was just the bare whoosh of breath and the tipping up of her lips. She moved a lock of hair off my forehead. “No, farm boy?”

I chuckled. “No. Cole loved it, and I hated it. Go figure. To me it felt . . . wrong to be up in the sky like that. I especially hated being in the middle of the clouds where it was bumpy and I couldn’t see anything. I lost all perspective of where I was.” I paused, remembering back to that moment, the way I’d clenched my fists on my thighs, just needing to grab on to something solid, wanting to fall to my knees and

find the sturdy ground beneath me, to breathe in the clean smell of the earth—that anchoring richness. “But then, suddenly, we broke through the clouds into the blueness of that summer sky, and I suddenly had my bearings again. I wasn’t *where* I wanted to be, but I could *see* it, and I knew I’d be there again.” I brushed my lips over hers, just a whisper of touch before I pulled away. “Seeing you smile just now, that’s how I felt. Like breaking through the clouds.”

“Preston,” she whispered, her voice whispery and full of tenderness. I bent my head and kissed her and when I pulled away, she smiled at me, tilting her head teasingly. “I suppose all that sweet talk helped you score with the girls you brought up here?”

I laughed. “You’re the first, and I’d like to score, but we’re taking this slowly so don’t try anything funny with me.”

She laughed. “Kiss me, Preston Sawyer.”

I brought my mouth to hers and our tongues met and tangled, already a familiar dance. I moaned at the sweetness of her and hardened immediately at her taste, the way she sucked at my tongue, the breathy sounds she made, and the softness of her body in my arms. It was a delicious sensory overload and I felt almost drunk with it. *Annalia*. I pressed forward, and she lay back on the seat. We both laughed when her head softly hit the passenger side door. “Are you okay?” I asked, pulling her back slightly so her head lay on the seat.

“Yeah.”

I leaned over her and took a moment to find spots for my knees so I could support my weight but still have access to her. In this position, especially, I felt so much bigger and stronger than she was, and I thought vaguely about how much trust a woman must have to give to a man to let him come over her smaller, more delicate body in such a way.

“This is what the kids do, huh?” she whispered.

I chuckled. “So I hear.” I leaned in and kissed her again, tilting my head so I had better access to her mouth. She moaned and clutched at my back and my blood pulsed fiercely in that familiar way only she elicited.

I put my hand under her loose top and stroked her skin. She was so silky, so smooth and soft, and her

femininity, all the ways she was so different from me, made me feel crazy with need.

I unsnapped the front of her bra and she pressed upward, offering her breasts to me as I used one thumb to circle a nipple slowly and then moved to the other. She broke her mouth from mine, crying out softly. “Tell me what you want,” I said, needing to make sure she liked and wanted everything I was doing. I didn’t ever want to leave her unsatisfied again. *I’d always . . . taken.* I didn’t ever want to see distance in her expression and disappointment in her eyes after we’d been intimate. And for that, I needed her to voice her desires. We weren’t going to have sex, not yet—I was intent on that—but we were going to go further than the hot kisses we’d shared. I needed desperately to know she wanted it as much as I did.

“I . . . I want you to keep touching my breasts. I want you to put your mouth on them.”

I hissed out a breath, the words uttered in her sweet, breathy voice turning me on even more.

“Unbutton your shirt.” I felt shaky with lust, and I didn’t want to end up damaging her shirt the way I’d done the first time.

She reached up and unbuttoned her shirt slowly and I lowered my mouth to one nipple, licking it gently as she arched and moaned, threading her fingers through my hair and gripping my head. “Yes,” she panted. *Oh, Jesus.* I pressed my erection into the soft place between her legs and shuddered with the pleasure. It felt so fucking wonderful and utterly torturous.

My body broke out in a sweat and my heart pounded in my ears, the whooshing sound increasing the intimacy of the small space we were in. It was only her and me and no one else in the entire world. My face was pressed against her skin, her scent filling my nostrils, her taste sweet on my tongue, my throbbing shaft cradled between her open legs and the pleasure was so overwhelming—

Three sharp raps snapped me out of the sexual fog. *Shit.* We both froze, my wide eyes staring into hers in the dim light of the truck cab. I looked over my shoulder and a bright light suddenly came on, causing me to squint and turn, bringing my arm up in front of my eyes.

Behind me, I heard Annalia moving, the rustling of clothing and her harsh breathing.

Oh fuck, it was the police. Good Lord.

I glanced back at Annalia and saw she was decent. I offered her a regretful look as she sat up and then I opened the door to the cab. The light was still in my face, but it quickly lowered.

“Will you step out of the vehicle, sir?” came a female voice.

For fuck’s sake. I was still hard.

I took one long, deep breath, willing my body to relax and then stepped out of the truck. I recognized the female officer, had seen her around Linmoor. The police force was small and mostly everyone knew the cops who worked there.

“Officer Lief.”

She squinted at me. “Preston Sawyer, is that you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She had the flashlight pointing upward so it wasn’t in my eyes but cast light over the two of us. She leaned around me and peered into the truck and then leaned back. “Well now, from what I recall, you have a big farmhouse out on that property of yours.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s not overly big—”

“There a bedroom in that house?”

“Yes, ma’am. Several.”

“Uh-huh. I suggest you use one of them. Public indecency is a misdemeanor, punishable by jail time and a fine. You wouldn’t want to get arrested for that, now would you?”

“No, ma’am.” I tried to look repentant, but I swore she was trying not to laugh. Her lip kept tipping upward and shaking slightly as if she was forcing it back down with effort.

She looked around me again. “That your girlfriend?”

“Yes. And the mother of my son. And, uh, I hope my wife. Someday very soon.”

She nodded. “Uh-huh. Sounds like you did things a bit backwards.” *Understatement of the year.*

“Umm, yes, ma’am.”

“Well, you go on home now. And don’t let me catch you up here again, unless all your clothes are on.” I grimaced and noticed another small quirk of her lip before her face became stern again.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She turned and went back to the police cruiser parked a little ways away—the one I hadn’t even heard arrive—and got inside. I climbed back into the truck and started the ignition, staring ahead for a

moment before glancing at Lia. She was looking straight ahead too, biting her lip, and obviously trying not to laugh.

A small chuckle escaped my throat, and she looked at me and we both cracked up. I leaned my head back on the seat, getting control of my hilarity and pulling my seatbelt on.

Lia did the same, and as we drove down the hill and out of the park, she turned to me, a smile on her lips. “Your girlfriend?”

I grabbed her hand. “Yes. Is that . . . I mean, will you?”

“Go steady with you?” She grinned.

“Yeah.”

She leaned her head back on the seat, too, looking so pretty, all I wanted to do was stare at her, but I was driving so I forced my eyes back on the road. “Yes, Preston. I’ll go steady with you.” She grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I laughed. I’d loved starting over, but maybe we needed to speed things up just a little bit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Annalia

“It smells incredible in here already.”

“Oh, thank you, mi amor. Will you grab me another large spoon?” Rosa asked, shooting me a sweet smile.

The Sawyer kitchen was bustling with activity, the savory smell of grilled chicken and pork combined with the spicy richness of red chili sauce filling the air, even though the windows were wide open to provide a cooling breeze to the room.

Corn husks soaked in water in the two farmhouse sinks and several Dutch ovens with steamer baskets were on stove burners, awaiting the assembled tamales.

Rosa was at the helm, watching over the cooking meat and stirring the sauce, while her parents, Juan (Abuelo himself) and Lupe, sat in chairs near the window. They’d all arrived only an hour before and set up operation.

My mother had come with me, too, even though I’d had to practically drag her out by force. But I had taken Rosa’s advice to heart—my mother needed community. I couldn’t force it forever, but I could lead her to it and hope it would feel good enough, that she’d seek it out herself at some point. *She wasn’t even forty years old.*

My mother and I had never been close, but I didn’t want to see her withering away in depression. I’d experienced some of that myself and knew the hopeless misery of it. She sat alone at the far end of the table, but I watched her eyes move from one person to another as they spoke Spanish, and I thought I’d even seen a small smile twitch her lips once or twice.

How isolating it must be, not understanding the language spoken around you for years and years. Like being in your own lonely bubble. I’d always tried to bridge the gap, but it hadn’t been enough, and I had

been ashamed of that. But I thought now that it had been too big a job for one person—one small girl—and one who felt unloved at that.

In a sense my mama was right. It *had* been a devil who had placed me in her womb. Such horrific trauma to experience a husband's death and then to be raped—an unthinkable violation first of the soul and then of the body. She had been so alone, so bereft, so isolated. In her mind, I *was* the eyes, hands, and product of the devil. Maybe she had needed something to hold on to—*anything*, even enmity—in order to stay sane. Finally, it had come to define her. But it no longer defined me. Standing there in the middle of a bustling, fragrant kitchen, I realized that I, too, had experienced a tiny semblance of that vulnerable, aching loneliness and desperation and, though she had hurt me, I could forgive her. It may never bring reconciliation between us, but my heart could know peace.

Preston came downstairs and was introduced to everyone, and they all gave him warm welcomes, fawning over how handsome he was and how much Hudson looked like him in rapidly spoken Spanish that I knew he understood little, if any, of. They switched to English when I told them he didn't speak Spanish, but they spoke just as quickly and with just as much enthusiasm in any language and Preston continued to look slightly unbalanced.

Rosa asked him to taste test a piece of pork to see if the seasoning tasted right and he did so, his eyes glazing over. I laughed at the look of pure pleasure on his face.

Abuela Lupe smiled prettily at him and told him if she was twenty years younger, she'd toss old Juan aside. Juan clicked his tongue and told her he was going to toss something of hers later when they were alone, and she giggled like a schoolgirl, putting her wrinkled hand over her mouth, pretending to hide her amusement as Juan grinned and nodded like a proud peacock.

Preston blushed, looking sort of awestruck and mildly panic-stricken by the loud, boisterous, affectionate crowd, and escaped through the back door to work.

Rosa and Alejandro's boys had come along to help unload all the food and then help load it back up when needed. Now that the cooking was underway, they were in the backyard with water guns, apparently having some kind of war.

I held Hudson on my hip as I stirred the corn husks, and he pointed out the window, shrieking in glee

as one boy nailed another with a stream of water to the face.

“Ay yay yay. Boys.” Rosa sighed. “You couldn’t even give me one girl?” she asked Alejandro, who was reading the paper at a bar stool on the other side of the island.

“We can try for one later,” he said, winking at her. “One more chance—I’m sure I’ll do it right this time.”

She threw a dish towel at him. “You’re as bad as them,” she said, pointing to her parents. But her laugh was full of affection.

Mrs. Sawyer came into the room, looking around narrow-eyed at the group of people who had taken over her kitchen and I stilled, my heart thumping nervously, hoping she wasn’t going to make anyone feel uncomfortable.

She had displayed a moment of kindness the other day when she had told me to go to the barn for Preston, but I was almost certain it wasn’t something I should come to expect on a regular basis, lest I be sorely disappointed.

I introduced her to everyone, and she took a seat at the table near my mother, greeting her, too.

“I thought you were off to San Francisco today, Mrs. Sawyer,” I said.

She sighed. “I am. My friend has been delayed, so we’re leaving a little later than we planned.”

I nodded. “Thank you for allowing us the use of the kitchen.” She hadn’t looked surprised to see us all here, so I knew Preston had mentioned it to her.

She made a noncommittal sound, and I focused my attention on the corn husks again, finally draining the water once I determined they were soft enough. Hudson laughed and clapped as I bopped him on my hip to the soft sound of the Spanish music playing in the background.

Fifteen minutes later, Preston came back in. “Are you already done?” I asked.

“Yeah. Went a lot more smoothly than I thought it would.” I wasn’t sure what “it” had been, but I was glad and poured him a glass of iced tea as he sat down.

I scooted in next to him, putting the corn husks in front of me so I could clean off any strings and start piling them up for Rosa.

I glanced at Mrs. Sawyer who was looking at the array of Mexican food on the table, not just the

ingredients for the tamales, but food that had been brought to feed the chefs and helpers as they worked: crunchy taquitos, tortilla chips, chunky guacamole, and hot salsa.

Hudson reached for a taco and I pulled him back, taking one and breaking it open so I could give him the soft pulled chicken inside rather than the hard shell. Mrs. Sawyer watched us with a look of mild horror on her face. “That will be too spicy for him.”

“It’s not spicy,” I said. “Try one.”

“No, no thank you.” She turned her head to the side and looked out of the window longingly as if she’d rather be anywhere than here.

“She looks like one of those man-eating flowers,” Abuelo Juan observed in Spanish. My eyes widened and shot to Mrs. Sawyer but she didn’t react, didn’t understand a word he’d just said.

“Hmm,” Abuela Lupe answered agreeably. “Nice to look at but if you get too close,” she made a snapping gesture with her hand, “she’ll digest you and spit you out.”

“Mama,” Rosa said softly, shooting her a look, a warning in her tone, along with a small, suppressed laugh.

I pressed my lips together, trying not to laugh myself. I glanced quickly at Preston, and he was studying his iced tea. I swore I saw his lips trembling a little in an effort not to smile, too.

And it healed something inside me to joke about Mrs. Sawyer, for others to notice her coldness and comment on it, because for so long I’d thought it was because of me. I didn’t have any interest in hurting her, but to make light of Mrs. Sawyer’s snobby disdain was . . . not unpleasant.

She sighed loudly, running a hand over the table. “You know this table has been in the Sawyer family for four generations.”

I glanced up at her as she stared at the table as though with fond memories. I had fond memories of the table, too, actually. I swallowed down an embarrassed laugh at my own thought, the memory that flashed in my mind of writhing bodies and moans of bliss. Mrs. Sawyer was obviously trying to make a point about how the generations she spoke of would be rolling over in their graves to see—*gasp*—taquitos and tamale corn husks on their family heirloom while the straining sounds of Alejandro Fernandez played in the background.

“Your father’s family came from Oklahoma, but they were originally from Germany—strong stock, you know. If this table could talk, oh, the stories it would tell. I can imagine all the history it holds, all the pleasure that was had by those that gathered at it, all the things that have soaked into the wood—”

“Mom,” Preston said, his voice sounding strangled and full of barely checked laughter. He cleared his throat. “I think we get the picture.”

She sighed again, and he glanced over at me, and at the hilarity still in his eyes, I snorted, putting my hand over my mouth to hold back the laugh.

He laughed, too, and the rest of the people at the table looked at us curiously, which made me laugh harder. “It’s a good picture,” I said, which made Preston grip his stomach as he leaned forward, his laugh deep and rich. Hudson, who was still sitting in my lap, squealed with laughter, mimicking us.

“I’m not sure what’s so funny,” his mother said. “You have a rich heritage. My own ancestors were Nordic Vikings and seafarers.”

“That’s great, Mom.” If his mother sensed his sarcasm, she didn’t comment on it.

“Ah,” Rosa said, turning and raising her spoon. She came over to Hudson and rubbed her nose against his and he laughed, squeezing her cheeks in his pudgy hands. When she pulled away she was laughing, too. “No wonder you are so fierce, little one. You have the blood of champions inside you—Vikings and great Mayan warriors.” She winked at me and used her finger to tickle Hudson under his chin, which sent him into more peals of laughter.

“Gloria,” Rosa called as she returned to the stove. “Could I beg you for your assistance getting started with the tamales?” She spoke in Spanish and my mama paused momentarily but then stood and went to stand beside Rosa where they began stuffing the tamales and placing them in the steamer. I watched for a long moment as Rosa spoke softly to my mama, causing her to laugh—though shortly—and give her a shy smile.

I stood to take the husks I’d piled up to Rosa, and Mrs. Sawyer held her arms out. “I can take Hudson,” she offered. I handed him over, which was helpful, so I had both hands free to work. I didn’t want to put him down since he was walking like a little pro, and he’d only get underfoot. Thankfully, he seemed happy enough to remain in my arms, probably because of all the new faces in the room. When I

was done with the corn husks, I'd take him outside so he could play. He was obviously entranced by the water guns.

As I was standing at the sink looking out of the back window, I saw Tracie come around the corner of the house. I'd known she was coming by to pick up her two-week check as she'd accidentally left it on the table by the door when she'd left on Monday.

I opened my mouth to tell Preston she was here when Rosa's oldest boy, Joaquin, shot out of the bushes with a bucket of water in his hands and threw it at Tracie, drenching her completely. I gasped at the same time Tracie let out a short scream, and we all froze, although they didn't know I was watching them.

"Oh, shit," Joaquin said. "I mean, oh crap. Damn. Oh . . . shit."

Tracie blinked at him, her mouth in an O shape, her white shirt clinging to her, clearly showing the white bra beneath. Joaquin's eyes looked down and then back up, taking in Tracie's wet frame. His mouth opened, and then he looked her up and down once more. I put my hand to my mouth so as not to giggle, and Preston and Rosa, who had heard me gasp, joined me at the window where they quickly took in the situation, too.

"I thought you were my brother," Joaquin said.

Tracie took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm not your brother."

"No," Joaquin gave her a bashful half smile, "you're most definitely not."

Tracie's eyes widened, and she paused for a second, looking him up and down as if just noticing he was a very cute, very repentant boy who was staring at her in a way that said he'd noticed she was a very pretty girl. I was almost positive we were watching the beginning of a love connection.

"Rosa," I murmured, "how old is Joaquin?"

"He'll be nineteen in June," she said. "He took a year off school, but he starts at an art college in San Francisco in the fall."

"Art college?" Preston asked. "Did he by any chance draw the mural at Abuelo's?"

"He did," Rosa said, sounding surprised.

"He's very, very good." The intensely earnest note in Preston's tone caused me to glance at him.

“Yes, he is. Abuelo Juan says he has an old soul, though I watch him play water guns with his brothers and I wonder about that.”

We all turned as Joaquin led a soaked Tracie into the kitchen, and I ran to get her some towels. When I returned, she began to dry off and the younger boys burst in, laughing and ribbing their brother about his water gun faux pas, obviously taking great pleasure in their brother’s embarrassment.

“Tracie, if you want to go up and use my blow dryer, you’re welcome to,” Mrs. Sawyer said. I looked at her and then frowned.

“Where’s Hudson?”

“Oh,” she said, looking down and turning. “He was just here.”

We all began looking around for him as Preston called his name. “I’ll check the stairs,” he said, his jaw tight. “He’s obsessed with trying to get up and down them by himself.”

Preston walked quickly from the kitchen and that’s when I noticed the cracked back door and my heart plummeted.

In one instant, I was standing near the table and then I was at the open door, looking out into the backyard where my newly walking son was at the edge of the yard, toddling toward the rows of farmland, right into the direct path of a giant piece of equipment that looked as if it was spreading something. Whatever it was, Hudson was heading straight toward it and the machine wasn’t slowing down.

I didn’t remember going down the two outdoor steps, didn’t remember beginning to run, but suddenly the wind was whipping at my face and my chest was burning, and time slowed, as I waved my arms and yelled at the top of my lungs to the driver, who seemed to be looking at something on the floor of where he was sitting high up in the driver’s seat, the piece of equipment far too loud for him to hear anything else except the roar of the engine.

And Hudson was too close to it to hear me screaming either.

Dios Mío, dios Mío, mi hijo. It was going to run over my baby. It was going to hit him. Oh dear God, no, por favor. No, please, no please, dios Mío no.

I wasn’t going to make it. I wouldn’t reach him in time. My only chance was to plow into Hudson and throw him out of the way. It was my only chance, but I was still so far away. With one mighty burst of

adrenalin, I shot onto the soft dirt of the farmland.

It happened in the space of three heartbeats. Hudson suddenly paused and reached his hand out, turned left, still in the path of the machine, but heading away from it now, just enough, just the two inches that gave me a burst of hope. My body slammed into his tiny one as I used my arms to push him with all my might right before I crashed to the ground hard and curled into a ball, rolling to the side as far as I could with the wind knocked from my lungs.

I waited for the crushing pressure of the wheels, but they moved right past me. I felt the heat from the huge machine as the brakes squeaked and shuddered and came to a stop next to where I lay on my side in the dirt.

I was crying and shaking and sucking in huge gulps of air. The driver had finally seen us.

Footsteps pounded the earth and someone was scooping me into his arms. “The baby,” I cried. “The baby.”

“Joaquin’s got him,” Preston said, his voice raspy and panicked. “He’s okay. He’s crying—a nice, strong cry. He sounds mad. Can you hear him?” Yes, I could. The cry that told me he’d been scared but not injured. I knew his every cry. I was his mother. *I was his mother.* “He sounds like the night he was born, doesn’t he? Doesn’t he, Lia? That strong, fierce wail. He’s okay. You saved his life. You saved him, Annalia.”

“Holy shit!” I heard as the driver of the truck rushed to where I lay in the dirt. “Man, I only looked down for a minute. The gas pedal was sticking and I . . . fuck, I didn’t even see them.” He sounded almost as panicked as Preston.

“We’re all right, Tom. Just leave the machine where it is for now, okay? You can finish up tomorrow. It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault.”

He paused for a second. “I’m real sorry, ma’am. God, I’m just . . . Are you sure you’re okay?”

I was still crying but I managed to nod my head and offer him a small smile, before I looked up at Preston. “I would have died for him,” I said, searching his eyes with mine. “I would have gladly died for my baby, Preston. I was ready to. I didn’t hesitate, not even for a second.”

Preston used his thumb to wipe something from my cheek, his brow furrowed and his eyes still

holding the bright sheen of panic. I could feel his big body shaking beneath mine. “I know, Annalia. Did you doubt it?” His hands moved over me as if checking me for injuries. “Does anything hurt?”

I looked back over my shoulder to where Joaquin was holding Hudson, bouncing him on his hip while Tracie checked him over. Rosa and Alejandro were with them, too, Rosa murmuring soft words to Hudson, and Alejandro standing with his hand on Rosa’s shoulder.

I focused back on my own body, in order to answer Preston’s question. I felt a sharp throb in my ankle, but the rest of me seemed to be fine. “Just my ankle,” I said, straightening my leg out from under me. Preston picked me up and took me over to Hudson. Oh, how I needed to see for myself that he was okay.

I ran my hand over his head, leaning in and kissing his soft cheek, inhaling his scent and reassuring myself that he was okay. “Mama,” he said, and I burst into tears.

“Yes, baby. I’m your mama. I’m your mama, sweet boy.”

“Co!” Hudson said exuberantly. I smiled and looked up at Preston in confusion. He shrugged slightly, smiling down at me.

Hudson pointed his chubby finger to the left, in the direction he’d turned at the very last second, the two or three steps that had saved our lives. “Co,” he insisted again.

I tilted my head, a foggy feeling of wonder falling over me. “Are you saying, Cole, baby boy?”

I felt Preston’s arms tense under me, and Hudson grinned. “Co,” he affirmed. And seemingly satisfied, he pointed toward the house.

“Yes,” I murmured shakily. “Yes, I’d like to go home, too.”

“Here you go, mija,” Rosa murmured, smoothing her hand over my hair as she handed me the cup of tea.

I smiled as I took a sip. “Thank you, Rosa.”

“How’s your ankle?”

I glanced at it where it rested, elevated on a pillow. It was red and slightly puffy, but the ice I'd applied had reduced most of the swelling, and the two Tylenol I'd taken had lessened the discomfort. I was almost certain it wasn't broken, although if it got worse in the morning, I'd see a doctor. For now, I just wanted—*needed*—to be in the same house as Hudson. "It's fine."

Rosa sat on the edge of the bed, and we both looked up when my mama stopped in the doorway, standing there twisting her hands and looking as if she wasn't sure she should be there or not. "Come in, Mama," I said softly.

Mrs. Sawyer had left an hour before for San Francisco. She had wanted to cancel the trip after the traumatic events of the day, but Preston had assured her everything was fine and the time away would be good for her. I'd been relieved to have the house to ourselves.

My mama entered the room and sat at the end of the bed, and Rosa smiled at her and then turned her face to me, patting my leg gently. "Preston's putting Hudson to bed. When I passed the nursery, Hudson was demanding another book. It seems he's taking advantage of the extra attention."

I smiled. "Preston's a good dad."

"Yes, he is. And you are a good mom." Rosa glanced at my mama and looked back at me. "I heard what you said after the accident. Did you doubt yourself, *cariño*?" Her wise eyes watched me with so much tenderness that tears burned the backs of my lids.

I let out a breath. "Part of the reason I left was because I thought . . . I . . . I wasn't a good mother."

Rosa took my hand in hers. "Oh Annalia, why did you think that?"

I looked down, biting my lip. "I tried to nurse him, but it didn't work. I couldn't get him to latch on, and he would just cry and cry." I took in a shuddery breath. "I finally gave up and put him on formula, but then . . ." I blinked up at her. God, it was still hard to talk about this, but I needed to say it. I glanced over at my mama and when I began speaking again, I spoke in Spanish so she understood what I was saying. "When Hudson was four months old, I started having these . . . visions of him being hurt." A small shudder moved through me. "I'd see myself dropping him, or I'd put him in his bath and envision him sliding under the water." I shook my head, wanting to blot out the memory, the fear, the horror of the strength of the things I saw in my mind's eye, the pictures that filled me with terror and a clawing panic.

“Oh, Annalia, that’s not unusual,” Rosa said, speaking in Spanish now as well. “Was it like, when you were carrying him down the stairs, you envisioned dropping him over the railing and so you held him more tightly and took the stairs as slow as a turtle?”

I blinked at her, drawing in quick breath. “Yes,” I whispered. “Yes, that’s—”

“It’s normal, *cariño*. I think it’s the hormones running rampant through your system, but it’s really nature’s way of ensuring we protect our young. Those danger signals are particularly strong when we have infants, and they can be scary because the pictures we form in our mind are vivid. But they mean you’re a *good* mother. Oh, *mi amor*, you were so alone, weren’t you?”

I nodded, her words making me sad, but mostly, oh *mostly*, they filled me with relief so intense I gasped out. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, but . . .”

“We all need *community*. It is especially important for a new mother. There are so many questions, so many doubts.”

“Yes,” I said, glancing at my mama.

Rosa looked at my mama, too. “You haven’t had that either, have you, Gloria? Community?”

My mama looked surprised, but acknowledged what Rosa had said by shaking her head, her gaze lingering on me.

Rosa stretched her other hand out and grasped my mama’s hand. “It sounds like you had a very difficult time, too, Gloria. But you had Annalia. You were given an angel who worked hard and made sure you had everything you needed. An angel of a girl. How very, very *blessed* you are.”

My mama’s eyes lingered on Rosa for several moments and when her gaze moved to me, my breath came out in a soft gasping sound. I reached out my hand to my mama and she took it, forming a circle of the three of us. “Sí,” she said softly, a sound of confused wonder in her tone. Her expression was slightly stunned, and she looked at me for several long beats as if she was seeing me for the very first time. And perhaps she was.

“Un angel. Sí.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Annalia

I smiled tenderly at Preston when he entered the bedroom, sitting at my side where Rosa had sat a little while before. They had all packed up the coolers of food and loaded the cars just moments ago. Only a hundred tamales had been completed before the almost-accident with Hudson. It was less than they usually took to the event, but it was enough. Rosa assured me that being there, rather than in a hospital where we all might have been, was a cause for joy and celebration.

“Is he asleep?” I asked quietly.

“Sound asleep. Not a care in the world.”

I took in a deep breath and blew it out. “That was a close call, Preston.”

He ran a hand over my cheek, cupping it in his large, strong hand as I leaned into the comfort, the affection. “I know. I already called a couple of guys—we’re going to start building a fence tomorrow.”

I smiled on a breath, but nodded. “Apparently the little Viking slash Mayan warrior is going to need to be corralled more than we realized.”

He chuckled softly, leaning in and brushing his lips over mine, lingering for a moment.

When he pulled back, I met his eyes. “Preston, the way Hudson said Cole’s name . . . do you think . . . the way he reached out his hand and turned at that last moment? It was almost as if someone had . . . gotten his attention, had *called* him.”

He shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. He’s heard Cole’s name before. He might have just been repeating it for some reason that made sense in his baby mind that we’ll never understand.”

“Yes, maybe.” Somehow though . . . that didn’t feel exactly right. And by the hesitancy in Preston’s tone, I didn’t think that felt completely accurate to him either. I’d been right there . . . I’d sensed . . . *something* that I couldn’t explain, at least not in words.

Preston brushed a piece of hair away from my cheek. “My mother pulled me aside right before she left and told me to thank you. She said it again and again.” He tilted his head, looking thoughtful. “She seemed . . . shaken but so grateful. She lost her own son. And she watched you save her grandson’s life at the risk of your own. I think it shifted something inside of her. I hope it did.” He smiled a little bit wryly. “She said you should call her Camille.”

I let out a breath on a quiet laugh. Maybe I had made it into her good graces. I hoped so. I’d never wanted to have a stilted relationship with Mrs. Saw—, Camille.

Preston touched his forehead to mine, and we simply breathed together for a few minutes. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too.” I leaned back so I could look into his eyes. “Make love to me, Preston. I need to feel you.”

His eyes widened. “Are you sure? Have we dated enough—?”

I laughed. “You’re not going to stop dating me after we make love, are you?”

“No. God, no. Never.”

“Then, yes, I’m very sure.”

He brought his hands to my face and held me tenderly as he moved his lips to mine and kissed me, slowly and thoroughly. I pressed myself back against the pillows and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him with me as I broke from his lips and tipped my head so he could move his mouth down my throat.

His lips whispered over my skin, causing me to moan and weave my fingers into his hair.

He brought his mouth to my ear and said quietly, hoarsely, “I burn for you, Annalia.”

“Preston,” I gasped as wetness gathered between my thighs at the feel of his warm breath at my ear and the words he’d uttered. *I burn for you.*

Preston stood and turned down the lamp, pulling the blinds closed though there was only farmland outside the window. I watched as he performed the functions slowly but deliberately, preparing the room for what was about to happen, and excitement lit inside me making me feel hot and slightly breathless. *Oh, I burn for you, too.*

He pulled his T-shirt off, and I took a moment to admire him, the deep, golden glow of his skin, the sleek muscles of a man who worked outside all day. A man who used his body to provide for his family, wiping sweat and dirt from his brow at the end of each long day.

Some primitive part of me found deep satisfaction in that. I wasn't sure I'd share the thought with anyone, supposed it might be an antiquated idea in this day and age. But it wasn't *just* a thought or an idea, it was a feeling residing deep in my bones, a rush of undeniable feminine pride for such uncomplicated masculinity. Other women who had men who used their bodies as well as their minds to put food on their dinner table would understand. *This* was the idyllic dream I'd never imagined possible. *This* wasn't small. *This* was where my heart had always yearned to be.

"Come here, farm boy," I whispered, a husky quality to my voice that spoke of my arousal, the deep abiding love in my heart for this man.

He glanced at my foot as he came toward the bed. "How's your ankle?"

I looked down at it. I'd forgotten all about it. "It's good."

He rejoined me on the bed where we undressed each other slowly, Preston laughing with strain as his hands fumbled at the buttons of my shirt. "You've gotta stop wearing buttons." He took in a big breath, slowing his fingers, apparently determined not to rip them off this time.

When he'd completed the task, I grinned and then sighed as he brought his mouth to the swells of my breasts and dragged his rough jaw over them. I groaned, clutching his hair at the goosebump-inducing sensation of his scratchy skin on my tender flesh.

Our eyes met as Preston reached behind me to unhook my bra and the dark look in his gaze made me shiver. The garment tossed aside, his eyes lingered on my naked breasts for a moment, and then he leaned back and dragged my underwear down my legs until I was completely naked. I stilled slightly, nervous at being completely exposed to him. But if he sensed my sudden reserve, he didn't say anything. He moved slowly back up my body, stopping at my lower belly and using his tongue to trace the marks left by pregnancy.

Oh.

As he kissed that part of me I'd been hesitant for him to see, I felt his penis twitch and grow fuller

where it lay against my thigh, only the thin cotton of his underwear between us. He let out a sound that resembled a low growl and I lifted my head slightly to watch him. “They turn you on?” I asked in wonder.

“God, yes,” he said between kisses, moving upward until he held my face in his hands, his whole heart in his serious blue eyes. “We made a baby in love and you carried him inside your body. Those marks are the proof of that—the physical testament that you’re *mine*—and there’s nothing sexier to me. Nothing.”

I let out a breath of relief and welling emotion. He brought his lips to mine, kissing me deeply for several moments as my blood heated once more, desire blooming inside me.

After a minute, he leaned back and removed his underwear and I watched as his erection sprang free. He came back over me, positioning his knee between my thighs and forcing them apart slightly.

I gripped his shoulders as his face lowered to my breast, sucking one sensitive nipple into the wet warmth of his mouth. *Oh*. I arched my back and reveled in the delicious sensation that made me moan as sparks of electricity shot from my nipple straight between my legs. I writhed on his thigh and he groaned. “Annalia,” he said, sounding so tortured, it made my chest swell with love and a small bit of amusement.

“I want to touch you. Will you show me how?”

His answer was a groan as he brought my hand between his legs, turning over and lying on his back so I had access. So I could learn how he was made. “*Oh*,” I said in wonder as I leaned over him, gripping his solid length. “It’s so soft. Hard but . . . like velvet.” I ran one finger slowly up the underside and watched in fascination as wetness pooled at the tip. I used my thumb to spread the liquid over the purplish head of his erection and then took his heavy testicles in my palm, testing their weight, enjoying the soft feel of them in my hand.

“My goodness, if I’d have seen these things the first time, I’d have *known* to expect a pregnancy. They’re . . . impressive,” I teased, though only partially.

Preston laughed on a groan, throwing one arm over his eyes, his mouth twisted in an expression of both mirth and pain.

I explored for a few minutes longer and then suddenly found myself flipped over onto my back as I let out a startled gasp. Preston came over me, his eyes intense, his jaw rigid. “You’re driving me out of

my mind, Lia,” he rasped. My gaze moved over his expression, the way every muscle in his body seemed to be straining. I knew what he meant as I was so turned on myself. I opened my thighs beneath him, and he let out a shuddery breath, guiding himself to my opening and pressing inside inch by inch, his muscles bunching and straining with the apparent effort of moving so slowly. “I love you.”

His mouth returned to mine, and he pressed completely inside, our bodies meeting. I moaned into his mouth, bringing my legs around his hips as he began to move slowly, so slowly, so deliciously. I could feel his heartbeat against my chest and between my legs where we were joined, and it seemed to fill me until my own heart beat in sync with his and we were as one.

Preston rocked into me, moving in small thrusts, and I moved with him, shivers of pleasure bursting through me each time our pelvises touched. We moved together this way for what seemed like a long while, glorying in the connection, in our mingled gasps of delight, in the way our scents merged and became something deeper and sexier, something that was only us.

The bliss swirled through me, reaching higher, but not quite high enough. I broke from his mouth. “Faster, Preston, I need . . .”

He let out a loud breath. “Yes, Annalia, tell me what you need. Oh God.” I heard the excitement in his voice and it added to my own soaring arousal. He picked up the pace, moaning as he brought his mouth to mine again, the movement of his tongue in my mouth mimicking the thrusting movement of his body into mine.

I ran my hands over the damp skin of his back, the pleasure in my core pulsing and climbing. I met his thrusts, gripping the straining muscles of his biceps, loving the hard feel of his male body above me. Pleasure rushed through me in a starburst of bliss as I arched and cried out his name, barely conscious of his own cry of pleasure—a garbled rush of words—as he buried his face in my neck and shuddered with his climax.

My thighs felt like jelly as they slid down his hips. He pulled out of me and I groaned but he brought his mouth to mine and kissed me leisurely for several minutes, finally rolling to the side and bringing me with him, holding me in the warm grasp of his arms as our breathing slowed. My muscles felt languid and I smiled, stretching like a satisfied cat in his arms.

I felt his smile against the side of my neck as he pulled me closer, spooning me tightly. He whispered words of love and devotion, and I whispered them back. We made plans and I shared all the dreams in my heart, for myself, for us, for Hudson and the other children we might have—babies I was no longer afraid to wish for.

I'd always been a dreamer, but now, *now* I was sharing those dreams with the man I loved, and suddenly the whole world felt so *big*—big and bright and endlessly glorious.

EPILOGUE

Seven Years Later

Preston

I put my arms slowly around my wife, as she tilted her head to the side, exposing the tender side of her neck so I could nuzzle my lips there. The familiar gesture filled my heart, and I breathed in her scent.

Annalia.

I spread my palms over her belly, feeling the small swell of her pregnancy, smiling against her skin with the male pride that moved through me at the proof of my latest efforts.

“This is the last one,” she said.

“That’s what you said last time.”

“I mean it this time, though.”

“Hmm,” I hummed. “We’ll see.”

She laughed a small sound and focused back on the wall of photographs she’d been studying when I came up behind her.

Years ago, she’d written to her aunt and requested any photographs she might be willing to lend so she could have copies made and her aunt had sent back the few she had. Lia had made copies and framed them and now they hung on our gallery wall so our children could see both sides of their heritage represented.

“What do you like so much about looking at this wall?” I asked.

“Hmm, I like to imagine what was in their hearts, what dreams they had,” she said.

I lifted my hand and pointed at one of my grimacing relatives. “This guy here looks like he’s dreaming about racing to a toilet.”

She laughed, slapping lightly at the hand that was still over her belly. “Stop it. Maybe that was just a bad year.”

Ah, a bad year. Yes, we knew about those. But we also knew about seven joy-filled years that could follow one bad one if you were willing to start over, to try harder, to talk more, and to occasionally dance to eighties love songs in the kitchen because you couldn’t come up with any other answers. It turned out that was an answer in itself. Yes, we knew about that, too.

My eyes moved to the small shadowbox on the wall where Lia had glued the two pieces of sea glass together into the original heart shape. I could still see the seam where the crack had been, but it was mended now and the two pieces were together, complete. *A lot like us really.* Together. Mended. Complete.

I nuzzled the sweet warmth of her neck again. “You make me weak in the knees,” I murmured.

She pulled my arms more tightly around her and leaned back into me. “You make me weak in the knees, too, farm boy.”

I smiled. “Sit with me on the porch?”

“Yes, I just want to check on the kids.”

We went together, tiptoeing quietly into each room and covering up little bodies, lifting limbs that had been flung off in sleep back into bed, and removing books from chests.

Hudson, our eight-year-old daredevil with an easy grin and a heart of gold; Matteo, our serious and far too wise for his five-year-old body sweetheart, and three-year-old Luciana, who ruled her brothers—and me—with an iron fist and a heart-melting, one-sided dimple.

Satisfied that they were securely tucked in, we went downstairs and took a seat on the porch swing, Lia sighing with contentment as she leaned against me, and I put an arm around her, using my foot to move the swing slowly.

The late-summer night was noisy with activity: the chirping of crickets, the rustling of night birds in the trees, the hoot of an owl somewhere in the distance, and the very low hum of the central air conditioning unit I’d finally installed a year after Matteo was born.

The summer heat drew out the heady lushness of the farm smells: fresh-cut grass, the sweetness of

the honeysuckle that grew nearby, and even from here, the richness of the soil, and sweet tang of the various plants we grew.

The stars were out, brilliant diamond shards twinkling in the darkness of the night sky. My brother was up there, among them. Sometimes, when I was making a difficult choice, I would feel a gentle nudge inside to go in one direction or another, and I always attributed it to Cole. And it reminded me that stars weren't only beautiful, but that they could also guide your way.

The chains that held the swing creaked softly, and I rested my hand on my wife's belly again, feeling the warm swell of the growing life within her. "Think it will be a girl or a boy?"

"A boy."

I chuckled. "That's just wishful thinking after Luci."

She laughed. "Maybe. I don't know if we can take more than one of her." But her voice was filled with so much love, I smiled. Luciana was . . . a handful, but the most lovable handful God had ever created.

Lia sighed, the sound as soft as an evening breeze. "I love this house," she murmured. I kissed the top of her head. I did, too. Seven years before, I had made the decision to build another house on the property, but when I'd told my mom about it, she'd admitted she was seeing a man in town—the man who owned one of the two banks in Linmoor—and he'd asked her to marry him. She'd moved in with him quickly after that, and Lia had moved back in with me.

On a gorgeous summer day that same year, Lia and I were married under the tree by the fence where she used to wait for Cole and me. It had just been Hudson and the two of us, along with the minister, but we'd felt Cole's presence, too, and I knew somehow he was there that day, and he was smiling.

Afterward, we'd had a reception at Abuelo's with my mom, several of her friends, Lia's mother, and about three hundred of Rosa and Alejandro's closest friends and relatives. We'd laughed and danced and drank far too much tequila, and they'd all been our family, too, ever since, taking not only Lia and me to heart, but her mother as well who now smiled on an almost regular basis.

I'd helped her with the process of becoming a permanent legal resident when Annalia was pregnant with Matteo. We'd thrown a party when it was granted, and her sister, Florencia, had traveled from Texas

to join us. A cheer had gone up when Lia's mother entered the room, and she had smiled shyly and with a pride that squeezed my heart.

We frequently hosted barbecues at the farm that included hot dogs and tamales, apple pie and churros, eighties music, and Spanish ballads when the sun went down. It was crazy and wonderful, and I always felt slightly stunned when it was all over as if I'd just stepped off a Tilt-A-Whirl of love.

Our new extended family had all descended on the hospital with each birth, setting up base camp in the waiting room with food that smelled so delicious, doctors and nurses from every part of the building showed up to partake in the celebration. And, especially with Matteo, Rosa and Lia's mother had been there to assist Lia and me with the adjustment of having a newborn and to help Lia recognize the signs of the depression she'd suffered through alone with Hudson. She wasn't alone anymore, and it'd made all the difference. We'd both missed so much the first time around, and we soaked in every moment of the sweet time with our next babies and navigated the choppy waters *together*.

The farm had thrived and grown, and we now employed twice as many people as my father had. Lia had become heavily involved in helping migrant farmworkers at the camp outside of town and being an advocate on issues that affected them. It wasn't our job to make the laws, but we both helped where we could, in the ways that we could—me as an employer, and Lia as a champion for the rights of those who had no rights.

I wasn't a politician. It was my job to feed people. And Lia did the same, not just with food, but with all the love and courage she'd learned how to set free from the boundaries within herself. She fed people's hope-starved *souls*, and in so doing, she fed mine, and her own, and those of our children.

Sometimes I would see her coming toward me in the fields where I was working, a march in her step, her chin held high, and I'd stop what I was doing to watch her approach, knowing one thing or another had rubbed her the wrong way. I'd smile and say, "You're about to make a fuss, aren't you?" I'd feel my eyes go slightly lazy because she was damn sexy when something got under her skin and caused her to become so impassioned that she was like a tiny ray of light. And she'd put her hands on her hips and give me a look but then she'd smile and tell me what it was she was going to make a fuss *about*.

She had *always* been moved by dreams, not just her own, but those of others as well. It was what

made her so beautiful. As it turned out, it was also what made her fierce.

She was mighty and she was strong, and to watch her in action was a sight to behold. But her gentle spirit never ceased to shine, and sometimes I still saw in her the quiet dreamer with a crown of flowers perched on her head and a thousand secrets in her eyes.

And I was the luckiest man on earth, because now she told them all to me.

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About the Author

Mia Sheridan is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* Bestselling author. Her passion is weaving true love stories about people destined to be together. Mia lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband. They have four children here on earth and one in heaven. In addition to Preston's Honor, Leo, Leo's Chance, Stinger, Archer's Voice, Becoming Calder, Finding Eden, Kyland, Grayson's Vow, Midnight Lily, and Ramsay are also part of the Sign of Love collection.

Mia will be releasing the stand alone romance novel, *Most of All You*, in October 2017, via Grand Central Publishing. It will be available both online and in bookstores.

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