

Never Let You Fall

by

Kate Smith

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For Colleen & Trevor

For stepping up...

CHAPTER 1

Alexis

THE FAINT FAINT LIGHT OF DAWN crept through the curtains as the baby's cries echoed down the hallway. Moments later, silence fell.

Kellan never cried for long, no matter what hour of the day or night he awoke. Aiden and Emily both doted on their baby boy and picked him up the moment he so much as uttered an unhappy sound. Such a lucky boy, his daddy loved him and showed his devotion to his wife and children every single day. Aiden vowed he'd never leave his family.

My own husband, Joel, had made that same vow once upon a time. Silly me for believing him. Our son, Daniel, now slept in our friends' house, rather than our own.

We'd received a warm welcome here when everything collapsed, and I'd become fed up with Joel's intolerable behavior. But then, Aiden had been my friend first. I'd

introduced Aiden and Joel when we'd summered here as teenagers. They would have met anyway at school that fall, but I liked to believe I'd brought them together and helped cement their friendship.

Soft footsteps sounded in the hallway outside my room followed by the creak of the stairs. I'd grown accustomed to the constant late night and early morning wanderings in the house as the occupants of this happy home included both a newborn infant and Aiden's teenage daughter, Savannah.

Now wide-awake, I crawled from between the cozy sheets and tiptoed down the hall to peek in at my son. Daniel's deep and even breathing was broken only by the occasional slurp as he sucked the thumb he'd crammed into his mouth. Resting a hand over my aching heart, I peered at his precious face. Tears sprang to my eyes as I brushed my fingers over his soft brown hair. He reminded me of his daddy with his hazel eyes and long thick lashes.

Daniel's sweet face caused a flurry of conflicting emotions. I both loved and hated my husband at this moment. I hoped things would get better and Joel would return to us, but I feared the worst.

"Alex," Aiden whispered from behind me. "Everything okay?"

I brushed at my eyes before facing him. "It's fine."

Aiden frowned. "Give me a minute to deliver this"—he held up a glass of water—"and we can go for a walk. Daniel should sleep for a couple more hours. We'll be back long before he's up."

I nodded. "I'll get dressed."

He disappeared into the master bedroom, and I retraced my steps to the guest room.

After splashing cold water on my face, I ran a brush through my tangled hair and scooped it into a ponytail. Puffy red-rimmed eyes reflected back at me, the dark circles beneath them vivid reminders of too many sleepless nights. I tapped the skin with my fingertips but soon abandoned the futile attempt to appear rested.

As I trudged down the stairs, the fragrant smell of fresh coffee rose to my nostrils. I rounded the corner and leaned against the kitchen counter, fixated by the wisps of steam rising from the two travel mugs. “I could drink a gallon of that.”

“Then you’re in luck.” Aiden added a touch of cream and sugar to each and handed one to me.

I gulped a mouthful. “Ouch!” Grimacing, I pressed a fingertip to my lips.

“Careful.” He rubbed my arm. “It’s hot.”

“Yeah, you’d think I’d have figured that out.”

We ambled down the beach in the opposite direction from our house. My house? I wasn’t sure anymore. Not about anything.

“Emily doesn’t mind me stealing you away?”

“No, she’s feeding Kellan, and there’s nothing I can do to help. I’d planned to lounge on the deck with my morning coffee, but this is better. It’ll give us a chance to talk without interruptions.”

“You read me like a book.”

“We’ve known each other forever.” He gave me a knowing look. “You can talk to me about anything.”

I sucked in a breath and concentrated on the cool sand squishing between my bare toes. As we walked, Aiden permitted the silence to linger, providing the time I required to organize my thoughts.

This man knew me, understood me, and I was grateful. Everyone assumed Tiffany and Jenna were my best friends, but they were wrong. I considered Aiden my dearest friend, akin to being my brother. People never appreciated how much time we'd spent together as kids, or how much we'd shared.

When a guy became your best friend, you could expect less of the drama women seemed to love. Though, none remained unscathed by the Tiffany debacle. She'd made so many mistakes, and it pained me to admit I'd let people convince me it had been Aiden in the wrong.

I'd betrayed my best friend by placing undue pressure on him to reconcile with Tiffany. Yet he remained my closest and most trusted confidant in the entire world. He'd helped me pick up the pieces of my shattered life, allowing me to lean on him. Like a true friend, he'd welcomed my little family into his home, even as he and his wife juggled the demands of a newborn baby.

"Having trouble sleeping? Or is Kellan keeping you up?"

"I can't shut down. How can I stop thinking... about us, and how our marriage is crumbling?" Shuffling a few paces closer to the water, I allowed it to lick at my toes. I loved this beach, but this morning even the soothing rush of waves and dawn calls of the gulls did nothing to relieve the all-consuming ache in my heart.

"I understand." He emitted a heavy sigh. "This should've been one of those amazing summers. Our group is together again, and I'd hoped we'd start new traditions and put the past behind us. But here we are, me sidelined and you in limbo."

"Limbo." For a moment, I considered his comment. "Yeah, that feels about right. Whenever I want to talk to

Joel, he clams up or disappears out the door. It makes me furious, and at times I can't stand to even look at him. And what he did to you! How will you ever forgive him?" Meeting his dark eyes, I sniffled. "He almost took you from us, and I'm not sure I can forgive him for that, either."

"I wish I had answers." Aiden swept a hand through his dark hair before reaching for mine. "He put the three of us in serious danger that day. The past few weeks he's been a ghost, and barely acknowledges my existence. There's only one thing I'm sure of—he needs help. But, he has to want it, and right now, he doesn't."

"You're a doctor. Is there any way we can force him?"

"Only if he becomes a danger to himself or other people."

"His stupidity nearly cost you your life, he was dangerous to you! No one wants to acknowledge it out loud, but we all know it. Emily watches you like you might fade away. Isn't what he did to you enough?"

"No, it's not. He's not purposely inflicting damage on other people, or himself." Silence fell for several steps. "At least, I hope he didn't do it on purpose. It was a careless, stupid, drunken move."

There it was, the thing I'd feared asking. Aiden doubted Joel's motives. "Yes, Joel's carelessness and idiotic behavior almost killed you. He knows better, and Vanna said you warned him to sit still and touch nothing because you knew he was tanked."

"Yeah, I did know." Aiden stopped to pick up a rock, sending it skipping across the waves. "He rambled on about some things earlier. I should never have turned my back. That's my mistake."

Clamping my teeth on my lower lip, I fought to control the cascade of tears trickling down my cheeks. "I couldn't bear

losing you. You're my brother, the one who I can always talk to, the one who's always been there. Every breakup, every crappy date, and even when my mom died. You were there. Until I married Joel, and we drifted, but... I finally have you back, and I almost lost you. Forever."

"But you didn't." Aiden rested a hand on my arm before he pulled me into a hug. "I'm here, Lex. Don't worry, you'll get through this." He wiped away my tears and placed a gentle kiss on my forehead.

All the words stuck in my throat as a shiver ran down my spine. Every time I thought about Aiden struggling for survival in that freezing water, at the agony and hopelessness he must have felt, at how he'd almost been lost to us...

"Cold?"

Biting back the questions I didn't have the heart to ask, I nodded. "A little."

Aiden peeled off his sweatshirt and tugged the soft fabric over my head.

I tucked my arms into the long sleeves. It held the heat from his body, and his familiar scent, and it comforted me. "Thanks."

We continued along the beach, finally arriving at our favorite log. The tree had toppled during a summer storm years ago, and many times we'd sat in this very spot and aired our troubles.

"Anything I can do to help?" He slid an arm around me, and I leaned against his firm chest. "I hate to see you two at odds."

"You've let me cry on your shoulder, and you've been amazing with Daniel at a time he's missing his daddy. You and Tom have both stepped up, and I appreciate it more

than words can express.” I half-shrugged. “I should’ve bet on a different horse.”

“Well, everyone knows men are animals.” He squeezed my shoulder. “And Joel has been an enormous horse’s ass lately.”

“Ha-ha.” I forced a smile. “You’ve got that right.”

The sun appeared on the horizon, creating a bright path across the ocean. The water glistened and sparkled as the first golden rays warmed my face. I lifted my chin and closed my eyes, inhaling the fresh salty air. A multitude of vivid memories surfaced in my mind. We’d spent many summers here both as teenagers and as adults, and most of them had been amazing. This year nothing felt right.

I gathered the courage to voice the question. “What’s up with you and Tiffany?”

“Ahhh, I wondered when you’d ask.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “She asked to see Vanna.”

“What? After all this time?” I tilted my head. “How do you feel about that?”

“Not great, but I talked to Vanna and placed the decision in her hands. Tiffany’s her mother, and at one time Savannah wanted nothing more than to know her. Tiffany called the other night.”

“Hmm, I figured. You get that look when it’s her, like you’d rather be anywhere else.” I rubbed his arm. “She’s put you in a tough spot. There are days when I wish we could transport back in time and fix it all. Rewind that spring and summer we turned fifteen.”

Aiden stared at the water with a thoughtful look on his face. “This may seem strange, but I’m not sure I’d make different choices. If someone appeared right now and gave me the option?” He shook his head. “I’d never wish

Savannah out of existence. Despite everything we've gone through, I've learned and experienced so much, and I have my daughter, here and now."

His heartfelt words made me reconsider my wish. What would I do if I were given the opportunity to rewrite my past? I couldn't imagine my life without Daniel. And even though Tiffany had broken Aiden's heart, his precious daughter had become his saving grace. "Change even the smallest thing and the effects ripple out," I whispered.

Aiden nodded. "I've accepted that all the pain and turmoil in my life led me to this moment. It's meant to be this way."

"What did Savannah choose?"

"She said no." Aiden bowed his head and shuffled his feet in the sand. "Telling Tiffany was awful. She melted down."

"As in she—"

"Sobbed and ranted and screamed at me. But you know what's strange? Even after everything Tiffany's said and done, I felt sorry for her. She may never know our daughter." He dragged in a long breath and turned his head away. "She blames me for Vanna's refusal to see her. What if she's right?"

"She's not. You gave her the chance, and she refused it," I said. "But I am sorry. This summer will go down as one of the worst in history."

My heart ached for him. Aiden's life had never been easy, and now he struggled with even more heartbreak. His continuous support amazed me. He'd ensured my survival during my latest tragedy, even as he battled his own demons. I took his hand between mine and wished I could ease the incessant pain—for both of us.

“It’ll all work out.” The words sounded hollow, and I wasn’t sure if I meant them for Aiden, or myself.

“You’re right, it will.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “We should head home. Emily might need help with the baby.”

We remained silent for the walk back. Aiden seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, and I let him be.

“There you are.” Emily smiled as we entered the kitchen, swaying on her feet to keep the baby nestled against her soothed. She tipped up her chin to accept Aiden’s kiss. “We planned to go into town today, Alex. Care to join us?”

They seemed perfect together, and so damn happy, I wanted to cry. Had Joel and I ever looked this content after Daniel had been born? I shook my head. “Thanks, but I think I’ll stay here.”

“How about we take Daniel with us, and you get some sleep?” Emily raised her brows.

“No...”

She kept her gaze trained on me, one eyebrow rising higher as she studied me. “It wouldn’t be a problem.”

I glanced at Aiden, who gave the briefest of nods. “Okay, thank you. I’ll get him ready.”

“I’ve got him.” Vanna appeared in the doorway with a fully dressed Daniel on her hip. “I’ll feed him some breakfast.”

A lump formed in my throat, and after giving my son a good morning kiss, I returned to my room. I hated to admit it, but I craved the break. I loved my son, but my Daniel had become an untiring live-wire from the moment he’d learned to keep his balance. Over the summer he’d graduated from halting wobbly steps to an all-out run. Without Joel’s assistance, every day was a marathon.

CHAPTER 2

Joel

WHERE WAS I? MY HEAD pounded to its own beat, and the energy to pry open my sleep-filled eyes eluded me. After some time, I cracked open one eye to squint at the dim room. A vague remembrance of stumbling through the house and collapsing into bed crept through my mind.

I'd protested when Alex had hung the blackout curtains, but now I appreciated them more than words could express. The mere thought of the bright rays of sun invading my space caused a wave of nausea, and I clenched my eyes shut and dug my nails into my sweaty, shaking palms.

Alex hadn't come home last night, and the empty space in our bed taunted me. My wife had holed up at Aiden's house. Again. Curls of anger twisted my gut. She'd twitched

her little finger, and the man rescued her like he always had, and always would.

Most people underestimated the strength of their connection, but I'd never forgotten my conversation with Alex an eternity ago.

"You spend way too much time with my best friend." I'd allowed my irritation to show after we'd scrapped, and she'd run to Aiden.

"He's my friend too. In fact, he was mine first. I introduced you to him. Remember? Aiden's my best friend in the entire world." She'd leveled those amazing but serious blue eyes in my direction.

"You can't have a bestie who's a guy! It never works unless they're gay, and Aiden's far too interested in chasing skirts."

My loving wife—well, girlfriend at that time—had smirked and agreed on at least one part of my statement. Aiden Hamilton loved women. Particularly a certain leggy blue-eyed blonde named Tiffany Baxter. But Alex still asserted a man and woman could be friends without the complications of a romantic entanglement.

She thought of Aiden as her brother, she said. A trusted confidant. Given over ninety-five percent of women panted after the guy, it seemed impossible. Hell, even I had to admit he was damn good-looking with an enviable physique most men would kill for.

I'd taken to calling him chick magnet. Put him and our friend, Ryan, together shirtless on a beach and they'd draw a crowd of ladies. Not that Tom and I were so bad. We were far from it, but I always felt inadequate beside Aiden. Add Ryan and it became intolerable.

When she'd introduced us as teens, I'd assumed Alex nurtured a secret crush for Aiden, as they'd seemed inseparable. He even had a pet name for her. But I re-evaluated my assumptions when Tiffany had entered the scene that fall at school. Alex noticed their mutual attraction and had invited Tiffany to join in our escapades, orchestrating them being together without any sign of jealousy.

After that, it became my sole mission to win Alex's heart. It took a couple of years, but I persisted, and then thanked my lucky stars a woman like her would choose me over him.

Despite my initial envy over Alex, Aiden and I had become great friends over the years. Well, we were close, until I sent him overboard. I rolled and buried my head in my pillow to shut out the hazy images that haunted me. Some nights, Savannah's screams rang in my ears, and I'd awaken bathed in a cold sweat. Images of her with tears cascading down her cheeks as she fought to manage the sailboat had imprinted in my mind. Even now I remembered how the boat had lurched and dipped through the rough seas, my stomach rolling along with it. How his daughter had pounded her fists against my chest and screeched at me until reality cut through my drunken stupor. That day had become my worst nightmare, an endless heart-pounding terror had gripped me until we'd dragged him on board.

That our friend had survived the dunk in the frigid waters was a miracle. If it had been me in the drink that afternoon, I'd be drifting around the bottom of the ocean, nothing but food for the fishes.

The buzzing of my phone sank into my consciousness. By the double vibration pattern and the chime, I knew who dared text me at this forsaken hour—of the afternoon. Was it really past noon?

How are you doing this morning? Or is it afternoon already?

I imagined her accompanying snicker as I replied to her message.

Fabulous.

Awake. A good sign. Is she home??

Nope. Still holed up down the beach.

Guess you haven't talked to her then. Meet for brunch??

Yup. One, usual spot.

Taking that as my cue to haul my ass out of bed, I dragged myself into the bathroom, avoiding even the briefest glance in the mirror. No point in examining the mess I'd become. Instead, I cranked the water on full blast and tipped back my head, allowing the heat to sink into my weary soul. I chased my steamy shower with two extra-strength pain tablets and a reheated cup of coffee.

At five minutes before one, I sidled into the café. Crystal occupied our usual booth by the window.

"About time." She tapped on the table top with her manicured nails before waving down the waitress to fill my cup.

"It's not one yet. Anyway, I had to shower. I was only half alive." I swallowed a mouthful of coffee. "Ah, better."

"I bet. How'd you even get home last night?"

"Uh, cab. I didn't have my car."

"Oh. It's a good thing, though I suppose you would've passed out before you managed to leave the parking lot."

She stared out the window, still drumming her fingers against the wooden tabletop.

“Expecting someone?”

“Gwen’s joining us.” She beamed.

“Why’d you invite her?” I muttered.

“There she is.” Crystal waved at her friend and threw me a warning look. “Be nice.”

Before I could protest further, Gwen slid into the booth, sandwiching me between them.

“Joel Nichols. Didn’t know you were joining us... Again.” She scanned me up and down. “You’ve looked better.”

“Felt better too.” I opened the menu, throwing a why-did-you-have-to-invite-her look at Crystal. Stabbing pain lanced through my temple as Gwen relayed last night’s adventure in her cheerful but grating high-pitched voice.

The waitress interrupted with an offer of more coffee, and we placed our orders. I managed to tune out the nattering until our meals arrived, and then picked at my food as I half-listened to Gwen drone on about nonsensical crap. I hated the inane small talk, but I couldn’t say much of substance in front of Gwen. The woman was a notorious rumormonger.

“Look.” Gwen tugged at my arm. “Isn’t that Tiffany? And who’s she with?”

I did a double take before sinking lower in my seat. Damn!

Emily rocked and patted her son’s back as he snuggled against her chest in the baby sling. The slim young woman beside her tossed unmistakable honey blonde waves over her shoulder and pointed to something on the menu board.

I understood why they assumed she was Tiffany. Hell, the first day I met Savannah, it struck me that she looked

exactly like her mother, except for those deep brown eyes of hers. Those were Aiden all the way. It hadn't taken more than a second for me to add up the pieces and figure out why Aiden had welcomed the orphaned teenage girl into his life.

Gwen slid from the booth and sashayed across the floor before I could open my mouth to protest. I covered my eyes, peering through my fingers as she rested her manicured claw on Savannah's shoulder.

"Tiffany?" Her shrill tone carried through the air.

Both Savannah and Emily turned, the older woman studying Gwen with serious green eyes.

"Sorry, you have the wrong person." Emily slipped an arm around Savannah's shoulders.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Gwen stepped back. "You remind me of a friend of mine." She threw a glance at us.

I hunched down, wishing to disappear, but Emily's gaze followed Gwen's. Her eyes narrowed. Pinned in place, I hung my head, not daring to meet her inquisitive stare.

Gwen crossed the floor and sat beside me. "Wow, that girl is—"

Aiden picked that moment to stroll through the door with Daniel in his arms. My son clung to my friend's neck with his head resting on Aiden's shoulder. The ache spread as Aiden rubbed Daniel's back, and then Emily lifted her chin to accept a kiss. Savannah leaned in and whispered in his ear, causing Aiden to turn and stare in our direction.

Crystal dug her elbow into my side. "Is that her? His wife?" she muttered. "Wow."

Wow was an understatement in my opinion. The dark-haired woman cuddled against Aiden was beautiful and sexy. Her sweet nature and genuine smile made her even

more attractive, and only weeks after giving birth, she looked amazing. Her full figure and post-baby curves suited her, her hair shone, and she glowed with happiness.

“She’s not so great.” Gwen smirked. “Look at that ass! She’s rather fat.”

“She had a baby, Gwen. Don’t even pretend she’s anything but stunning.” Crystal rolled her eyes at the other woman. “You’re envious because she married Aiden.”

“I’m not jealous!” Gwen waved her hand. “Who’s the girl?” She ogled the group. “Until she turned, I could have sworn it was Tiffany. There’s something different about her, though familiar at the same time.”

The fear that Alex would appear kept me riveted on the group as they waited to be seated. If my wife found me there with Gwen and Crystal, I was done for. Not that the Hamilton clan discovering our brunch meeting was much better, but none of them would cause a scene. To my relief, the group settled in a booth on the opposite side of the restaurant.

I tuned out Gwen as she picked Emily apart, and stared out the window. “Ouch! What was that for?” The sharp jab into my ribs from Crystal’s elbow brought my attention back to the present and the silence that loomed over us. I forced my gaze upward.

“Aiden,” Gwen purred as she played with her hair and batted her hazel eyes.

“Hi... Gwen. Crystal.” He focused on me. “I don’t mean to break up the party, but someone wants to see you.” Aiden angled his body so Daniel faced me.

My son regarded me with sleepy eyes. I wasn’t at all convinced that Daniel wanted me. He looked content resting against Aiden’s chest, but I yearned to hold him. I’d

been afraid to call or visit Aiden's house to see him, but I couldn't resist this opportunity.

"Let me out." I propelled Gwen out of my way and rose from the booth. Aiden transferred my son into my outstretched arms, and I rocked Daniel against me. Dropping a kiss on his hair, I closed my eyes, inhaling that sweet little boy smell I'd missed.

"Do you want to sit with us, or should I have his meal sent over?"

I glanced up. "You'll let me have him?"

"For a couple hours, but I'll take him home with us."

"Can I take him for the afternoon?"

"I don't know." He tilted his head. "Do you plan to stay sober and spend quality time with him? Or pawn him off?"

"You don't trust me with my own son?"

"Should I?" He pulled me aside and lowered his voice. "You look like crap, Joel. You're hung-over, and you've been drinking excessively. Your judgment is questionable. I want you to see Daniel, but if you put his life in jeopardy because you're letting Crystal lead you around by the balls, or if he gets hurt... You know what'll be coming your way."

"He won't. Let me have him this afternoon, and I'll bring him home safe and sound. I'll take him to the park." I'd hit a new low in begging for the right to take my own child.

"Look me in the eye and swear you'll stay sober, give him your undivided attention, and have him home no later than five. And stop hanging around the likes of Crystal and Gwen. You're married, Joel." He paused, studying me. "I hope you're keeping it in your pants, or you are so done."

Forcing myself to look at him, I shook my head. "I'm not sleeping with Crystal, I swear." As hard as this was, as

much as I wanted to shout fuck off, none of your business, I couldn't lie to Aiden or evade the question.

His searching look burned into me, but I refused to blink or avoid it, and he finally nodded. "Keep it that way. It's bad enough you spend all of your time with her instead of Alex."

"I won't hurt Daniel, and I won't drink. I need to see my son."

"Yeah, and you should visit your wife, get down on your knees, and beg her to forgive you. If you let her go, you'll regret it. You'd better make the effort soon, or your marriage will be over. Is that what you want?" He kept his voice low, but his evident anger simmered only inches below the surface. "Is it?"

"No. It's not. I love her, but I don't know how."

"That's crap. It's easy. Stop hanging out with Crystal McKenzie and her sidekick while they shit-talk about women they don't even know. Quit drinking, get your ass home and keep it there. Pay attention to your wife." Aiden moderated his tone, but the undercurrent and warning carried loud and clear. "Be back by five or I will hunt you down. Do you have a car seat for Daniel?"

"We have one in each car." I nodded. "I promise he'll be safe. Does Alex know I'm taking him?"

"I'll tell her." Aiden ruffled Daniel's hair. "See you at five. Bye, Daniel. You be good for Daddy." He narrowed his eyes toward our table before he gave me one of his give me a break eye rolls. No question the two women had been straining to hear our conversation and Aiden noticed.

Gwen's gaze followed Aiden's every step as he returned to his table, her eyes bright with interest. "Damn. Did he hear us talking about his wife?" Her cheeks flushed.

I sat and bounced Daniel on my knee. “Oh yeah, he heard you.”

Crystal emitted a heavy sigh. “So, now you have your kid all afternoon? Kind of puts a damper on the plans.”

“I haven’t had much time with him lately, so I’ll feed him and then I should take off. I promised Aiden I’d have him back by five.”

“What business does Aiden have telling you what to do?” Crystal smirked at me. “You’re a total pussy, letting the guy boss you around with your own kid.”

“Uncle Aiden cares about Daniel.” I smiled as the waitress placed a kid’s meal in front of me. “I need to do this. I won’t be there tonight.”

“Fine.” She huffed, but then gave me a look. “So. If I didn’t see Aiden with my own eyes, I’d never have believed he’d gone through with the whole marriage deal. I thought he was terminally single.”

“How married is he?” Gwen winked. “You could invite him out with us one night.”

I snorted, and Daniel jerked his head up, his eyes wide and shiny like he might cry. As I brushed a soothing hand over his hair and resumed the bouncing, I fought back the laughter. “You know why you never got a second date with him, don’t you?”

Gwen shrugged. “He fell for Tiffany.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” I smirked. “Anyway, he’s as married as it gets. Does it look like he’s about to shop around? Look at them together.”

We all turned our heads on cue. Aiden held Kellan in one arm with Emily snuggled against him. The adoring looks being exchanged between them said it all. The pure

unadulterated love they shared emanated all the way across the room.

“Besides, I didn’t realize there were various levels of married.”

Crystal snickered. “Well, there are. You’re on your own level at the moment, or hadn’t you noticed?”

“Ha, well...” I scooped a spoonful of mashed potato into Daniel’s mouth.

Gwen’s eyes lit up. “You’re at the why the hell did I marry that woman level!”

I narrowed my eyes. “How would you know?”

Crystal busied herself stirring her coffee and avoided my gaze.

What had she told her friend? I shifted my focus from Crystal to Gwen. “Right! Your husband dumped your ass.”

Gwen’s lip curled, and she clenched her fingers around her cup.

Damned if I’d explain or justify anything, especially to Gwen. Alex and I had hit a rough spot, but I didn’t appreciate this mere acquaintance making assumptions when she knew squat about my relationship with my wife.

Maybe there were levels, such as unofficially separated or my wife is too pissed to talk to me married. Or possibly even I can’t visit her because I can barely look Aiden in the eye type of married, but it didn’t give Gwen the right to comment.

A smirk crept onto my face. I’d take advantage of the fact that Aiden—one of Gwen’s all-time favorite subjects—sat across the room. “Aiden’s son is two months old. The teenager’s name is Savannah, and she’s Aiden’s daughter.”

“What? How can he... How old is she?” Gwen’s eyes widened.

I sipped my coffee, sneaking a glance out of the corner of my eye. “Sixteen.”

“He would have been fifteen? Wasn’t he dating...?” Gwen squinted.

“Holy crap!” Crystal stared at me. “That girl is Tiffany and Aiden’s sixteen-year-old daughter?”

“Best kept secret in town, but it’s one hundred percent true. Look at her. She’s Tiffany junior. You even thought she was Tiffany.”

Daniel grabbed my hand, and I fed him another bite.

Gwen and Crystal both examined Savannah for a long moment.

“Don’t stare! You’re being obvious.” I paused, keeping an eye on Gwen. “Savannah lives with Aiden in Boston, and Mama Bear has been denied visitation rights. Aiden told her to bugger off.” A part of me enjoyed the reaction and their ever-changing expressions as they added it up. Not that it was much of a secret, but a part of me felt like an ass laying out my friend’s private business to the exes, even if it took the heat off of me.

“Humph. Well, they look like a disgustingly happy little family. I wonder how long it’ll last.” Gwen glowered across the restaurant.

Savannah lifted her chin and squinted as she caught Gwen gawking at them.

“Quit staring,” I muttered.

Crystal rolled her eyes. “I don’t get how Aiden and Tiffany never told anyone they’d had a kid. Secretive.” She dropped some cash on the table. “Time to bail and leave you to your rug rat.” She curled her lip as she spoke, giving Daniel a sideways glance. “Bye. Call if you change your mind about tonight.”

CHAPTER 3

Alexis

AFTER A FITFUL SLEEP I wandered through the master bedroom and onto the massive private deck that overlooked the ocean. I loved this house. It brought back happy memories and curling up on the over-sized wicker chair comforted me. I tipped up my face, soaking in the rays of sun before opening the latest novel Emily had left on the seat.

The words swam before my eyes, and after several pages, I couldn't recall a single detail. Snapping the cover closed, I tossed it onto the table and stalked downstairs, stopping to stare out through the wall of glass. The golden expanse of beach and sunshine enticed me through the French door onto the hot sand. I savored it as it squished between my bare toes, the fresh sea breeze swept my hair, and the afternoon sun beat down. Breathing deeply to clear

my head, I strolled to the water's edge and let the surf wash across my feet.

My phone vibrated and chimed. "Everything okay?"

"Everyone's good." Aiden's deep, warm voice carried down the line.

"I hear a but in there."

"Good catch. We ran into Joel at the café." Silence hung for a moment. "He took Daniel for the afternoon."

"What?" I frowned, running a hand through my hair. "You gave him Daniel?"

"Oh... I can get him back if you'd rather he didn't—"

"No, no. It's fine. I'm... surprised? Amazed? Joel hasn't shown the slightest interest in weeks, and he's taking Daniel all afternoon?"

"He'll bring him home around five."

"You're a miracle worker. Daniel's been missing his daddy. You and Tom have been incredible, but—"

"Neither of us is his dad," Aiden said. "Don't worry. We all know he needs Joel. I'm happy to do what I can, but at the end of the day, the man needs to step up, and I told him so."

I sighed as I drew a circle in the sand with my toe. I loved how Aiden protected me, but Joel was a grown-ass man. That his friends needed to clue him in disappointed me. "Thank you. You get back to your own family, and I'll see you later. Don't rush home, I'll be at the house by five."

"You'll be alright?"

"Yeah, I will. Maybe I'll text Joel and have him meet me at our house. It's time I get out of your way and deal with my errant husband."

"Call if you need me. Don't be scared to come back to the house. I meant it, Lex, stay as long as you like."

“Thanks, honey.” I dropped to my knees in the sand and stared at the glittering ocean. It made zero sense that my husband took orders from Aiden, but my every effort and request went ignored. My opinions and feelings no longer mattered. Tears flooded my eyes as sobs wracked my body.

My world had caved in, and there was nothing I could do about it. I’d been so happy, and now I couldn’t recall the last time I’d genuinely laughed or smiled. I couldn’t truly let loose, especially with Joel in the room. I’d pretended for my friends and managed to contain my feelings. I’d pasted on a brave face and tucked my sadness around me while I’d donned my armor. What was left? Was love enough anymore?

I’d bet anything he’d been at that café with Crystal. He had time for her, but never for me. It burned deep down inside, and the flames licked at the roots of my soul. I needed to bring it under control and decide what I wanted before seeing Joel. I tapped a message into my phone.

Heard you have Daniel. I’ll be at our house, drop him there at 5.

I sifted sand through my fingers, watching it fan out in the wind as I waited for his reply.

I’ll be there. We’re having fun at the beach. Glad you’re not mad I took him.

I sighed and wondered why he assumed I’d be angry that he’d bothered to see his son. Maybe Crystal had planted ideas in his head.

Course not mad. He’s your son.

Can we talk tonight?

The surge of anger rolled through me as I stared at my phone, the furious flow of thoughts like a never-ending

tsunami. The first onslaught hit me. Now he's willing to talk?

"Asshole," I muttered and brushed a strand of hair from my face. Bouncing to my feet, I paced up and down the sand as the next wave hit with a vengeance. He wants to make nice after abandoning me to take care of our son by myself? After hanging around with his notoriously loose ex-girlfriend?

As I stomped back and forth, an enormous weight descended onto my chest, crushing me and leaving me breathless. My hopes, dreams, and aspirations were but floating driftwood on their way out to sea, along with the slowly receding, murky runoff of our formerly wedded bliss.

I clutched my hair in tight fists, screaming out my vexation. If I had anything to throw, to break, to destroy, at that moment it would have been in shards around me. I'd have ripped it to shreds like Joel had decimated our lives, our marriage, and our future.

Slumping to my knees, I shrieked in anguish as despair tore through me. I huddled on the sand and wrapped my arms around myself, rocking as the river of salty drops merged into one, flowing from me to join the ocean of sorrow. Soon nothing remained except a shaking, sobbing, wasteland of devastation.

My eyes stung, my cheeks felt raw from the wind whipping across my tear-dampened skin, and exhaustion stealthily crept over me. Despite the bright sun, I shivered as a deep chill seeped into my pores.

An endless string of colorful curse words flew from my lips before I regained a modicum of control. With shaking fingers, I typed out a reply to his last message.

Yes. We need to talk.

Jabbing at the send button, I stumbled along the beach with no particular destination in mind.

My feet propelled me to Aiden's house, in through the French doors, and across the cool tiled floor. A reflection of my windswept bird's nest of hair, bloodshot glassy eyes, puffy eyelids and red and blotchy face greeted me. The dark circles under those red-rimmed orbs gave away the lack of consistent and restful sleep. My entire body trembled as realization flowed through me—Joel had laid me low with his careless treatment of my heart.

I'd become a walking disaster. Someone I no longer recognized. A thought niggled at the corner of my mind. I needed to get it together before I had to meet Joel at the house. Letting him see me like this wasn't an option. I refused to give him the power of knowing how he'd razed me to the ground.

I dragged myself up the stairs, my legs leaden, and my feet almost too heavy to lift. My eyelids drooped shut the moment I collapsed onto the bed. Now that I'd let it all out, I could only curl into a ball and allow the darkness to descend.



“Alex.” The voice echoed down that long, dark tunnel and dug into my subconscious. “Wake up.”

Gentle hands shook me, but I loathed leaving the comfort and warmth of sleep. I clutched at the fuzzy, cozy blanket enveloping me, attempting to burrow deeper into the mattress.

More shaking. “Alex?”

I pried my eyes open to find Aiden sitting on the edge of the bed gazing at me with visible concern. The furrow in his brow smoothed as I sat.

“What?” I rubbed at my sleep-filled eyes.

“It’s after six, and Joel’s at your house. He’s been texting like crazy, worried you hadn’t shown up.”

“Oh no.” I swept trembling fingers through the knotted, wild mess of my hair.

“Relax.” His warm fingers grasped mine, calming me. “I told him you were sleeping and to chill out. He’ll make Daniel dinner and get him bathed and ready for bed. They had a busy afternoon.” He rubbed my arm. “Why don’t you have a hot bath or a shower? I’ll make you coffee and something to eat. You were really out of it.”

Everything seemed to be blurred around the edges and taking its sweet time to come into focus. I combed my fingers through my hair, hoping to smooth the strands into some semblance of order. I must be quite the sight. Aiden could tell I’d turned into a complete basket case.

“I couldn’t keep my eyes open. Having the afternoon to myself was great.” I forced a cheerful note into my words.

It wasn’t a total lie. I hadn’t been so completely and entirely alone in forever. Sure, our friends had done what they could to give me breaks, but it never seemed to be enough. Every time I tried to sleep, I’d fume over my absent husband, and the continuous stress had left me drained. And then Daniel would need my attention, or I had housework to do, or the million other things involved in life consumed me.

“I’m glad you were able to rest.” The look he gave me combined with the tone of his voice told me I hadn’t convinced him. “Sorry for waking you, I should’ve let you

sleep longer.” He appraised me, perhaps assessing my state of mind. “I told Joel I’d bring Daniel back here. He can spend the night with us so you and Joel can deal with this.”

“He told you?”

“That he wants to talk? Yes. It’s a good thing, but I doubt it’ll be a simple conversation.” He placed his hands on my shoulders as that tell-tale furrow reappeared in his brow. “Daniel shouldn’t be there.”

How well Aiden knew us both. The storm had been brewing, he’d sensed the build-up, and seen the swirling dark clouds rolling in. It would be a heated discussion.

No. Why lie, even to myself? The volcano inside would erupt, and when it did, an eternity might pass before the ashes settled. Today on the beach had been a much-needed outlet, but the worst was yet to come.

“I don’t want him hearing it.” My head bobbed. “He’s a baby, and... you’re right. Maybe you should leave the light on for me.”

“I’ll keep my phone nearby in case you need me.”

I sniffled and peeked up at him. I didn’t have to explain it further, not to him. “I’ll shower now.”

“It’ll be okay.” He pulled me in for a hug. “Whatever happens, I’m here, Alex. You’re not alone.”

I leaned into him, taking comfort from his embrace, but dreading what would come next. “I know. Thank you, for everything.”



I stood on the beach and stared at the house as my heart pounded against my ribs, sending tremors through my

entire body. Whatever happened, it wouldn't be pretty, and knowing Aiden had taken my son out of the line of fire was a relief.

After several long breaths, I gathered the courage to march in the door. "Joel?"

"Hey." He appeared before me with his hands shoved deep into his pockets and his head hung low. "How are you?"

"Fine, I guess." I crossed my arms. "You?"

"Okay. Well. You know." He shrugged and peered at me. "Daniel and I had fun at the beach today."

I pondered his statement, wishing that I'd enjoyed my day at the beach. My afternoon had been spent crying, swearing, and lamenting what remained of my relationship with my jackass husband while he played in the sand like a small child. At least he'd spent time with our son. I bit back the scathing words dying to escape my mouth. "Good."

He shuffled his feet and then motioned to the living room. "Should we sit?"

"I suppose." I preceded him into the beautiful, airy room with its floor to ceiling wall of glass and frosted French doors leading to the flagstone patio. With its magnificent view of the ocean, it remained my favorite room in this entire house. This home we'd received as a wedding gift from my dad, this home we'd welcomed believing our family would spend many happy summers here.

It seemed our dreams had evaporated, our lives were anything but happy.

"So." He scrubbed a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know what to say except I've missed you and Daniel. I want to come home. I want you to come home. To move back in here. With me."

I remained silent, waiting for him to expand on this, to apologize, to... Something!

Rising out of the chair, he sidled across the room to kneel at my feet. “Will you”—he grasped my hands and blinked at me—“come home?”

A confused frown settled on my face. “That’s all you have to say after months of this-this... bullshit? Come on home?” I pushed him backward and jumped to my feet. Fury and contempt rose within me as I paced back and forth, my misery causing my stomach to twist and clench.

“Alex.” He extended his hands toward me. “We’ve both made mistakes, and I want us to fix this.”

“We’ve made mistakes? I wasn’t the one hanging around with my ex. You’ve spent far more time with Crystal than with me or with your son. You have balls to stand there and say we’ve made mistakes! Don’t be such an ass.” My voice rose with each word. “Maybe I haven’t been perfect, but I’ve been here for our son!”

“I want us to be together. Can’t you give us another chance?”

“Did you fuck her?” I threw a glance his way, monitoring his expression.

His eyes widened, shock etched across his smug-assed face.

“Did you screw Crystal, or anyone else while we’ve been apart? Look me in the eye and tell me you haven’t.”

“No!” He shook his head. “Never, Alex! I told Aiden that.”

“You told Aiden? What the hell, Joel! I’m your wife, yet you neglected to tell me anything. And how do I know that’s the truth?”

“I love you, Alex.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure it’s even close to enough. I love you doesn’t answer the question, either.” A shudder shook my body. “How do you propose we fix this? How do we go on when you’ve been off doing who knows what, with... her?”

“I didn’t do anything, Alex, I promise. I didn’t sleep with her, or anyone else. I’ve never cheated on you. Ever.” He scrubbed at his face with open palms. “She’s... easy to talk to. I can confide in her.”

“What?” A cold spot grew in the pit of my stomach. “You confided in her? About us?”

“Yeah?” He shrugged. “So what? You bitch and moan to Jenna and Emily. Not to mention Aiden. You talk to him all the time! I’ve never made a deal about how you run to Aiden every time you get the least bit upset.”

“I don’t sneak around texting him or meeting him without you or Emily knowing! He’s not my ex-boyfriend! He’s a friend. OUR friend, Joel. Not some guy I dated way back and have reconnected with on the sly. Big difference!”

“Why? Because you say so? You still tell him stuff about us!”

“Yes, but not everything! Not by a long shot! How much have you told that woman about us? About our marriage? About our sex life?”

“What sex life?” Joel snorted.

I narrowed my eyes, concentrating on shooting daggers at him.

He dropped his head and fixated on his shoes. “Sorry.”

“Not funny, Joel. You lost interest a long time ago, so don’t put it off on me. It’s like you don’t find me attractive now I’ve given birth to your child. These last months have been horrible, and you’re making stupid-ass jokes.” The

tears burned my eyes. Crossing my arms over my chest, I blinked rapidly, desperate to stall my impending breakdown.

“I didn’t mean to,” he whispered. “I do find you attractive, but you’re always busy with Daniel. You never have time for me. I needed someone to talk to, and Crystal is so damn easy to be with.”

I smothered a snort at the word ‘easy’. “You have friends for that! Tom, Aiden, and Jenna, and hell, even Emily would listen, or-or... Ryan.” I threw out the last name, although I wasn’t sure he’d give good advice. No matter, Ryan hearing our shit would be loads better than my dumbass husband spilling our marital secrets to Crystal. “Yet you pick her? Why? Why would you go behind my back? That’s the worst kind of betrayal!”

“I can’t talk to them! They’re all on your side.”

“I wasn’t aware they’d picked sides, but maybe they’ve recognized you’re being a stupid asshole and want to tell you so. Can I ask you something?”

“What?” He eyed me like I might turn into a mad woman and stage a brutal attack at any moment.

“Have you even apologized to Aiden for almost killing him?”

He looked away.

“You haven’t. Still? He’s your best friend, and you don’t even give a damn. And you wonder why he’s not your biggest fan? You put Savannah in danger too! She’s a kid and you—” I threw my hands in the air, too choked up to continue.

“You think I don’t know that? How can you believe that I don’t regret my actions every single day? That I wouldn’t change it if I could? Savannah kept it together and saved

him. She never stopped looking until she found him.” Joel turned away and covered his face. “I can’t even look him in the eye.”

“Like you’re avoiding looking at me?”

“Don’t you get it?”

“No, I don’t. How will you prove you want to be here? How will you show me you want to be in this marriage, to be part of this family? Can you commit to counseling? Get help for your drinking? Get your shit together and make amends with your friends?”

He lifted his gaze to meet mine and nodded. “I will do all of that. I promise. I love you. I didn’t cheat on you. I didn’t have sex with Crystal, or anyone else. I swear it.”

Oh, how I wanted to believe him.

Joel edged toward me and stretched out his arms. “I love you. I’ll do whatever it takes to get you back.” He advanced another few steps. “I’ve missed you.”

The tears brimmed my eyes, but I remained frozen to the spot. I’d longed to hear these words for so long, to have him hold me and soothe away my fears and pain. So when he reached me and his arms encircled my body, I couldn’t help myself. I leaned in and inhaled his masculine scent, that wonderful mixture of sun and salt with a touch of baby shampoo mixed in—the small reminder he’d spent time with his son.

The warmth of his breath against my hair and tickling my neck weakened my knees and my resolve. This was my Joel, the wonderful, loving man I’d married. I hoped he’d come back for good.

“Alex.” His voice trickled over me like warm honey and touched my heart. “I’ve missed you so much. Say you’ll come home.”

A shiver raced down my spine as his lips caressed my neck, and he tangled his hand into my hair. I longed for the battle to be over, and I craved his presence in my life. I loved him. When our mouths met, our tongues exploring and entwining, it broke loose and the wall I struggled to maintain crumbled under the onslaught of pure, raw emotions.

Joel scooped me into his arms and carried me upstairs as if I weighed no more than a feather. Pushing into our bedroom, he laid me out on the bed.

“I love you,” he whispered as he plied tender kisses to my face.

I pulled back and peered into his eyes, craving the closeness, my will melting under his intense gaze. Drawing him closer, I pressed my mouth to his.

Joel responded without hesitation, the kisses between us escalating and deepening as the heat traveled through me. He ran his hand under my top, working it over my head before fumbling with the button on my shorts. Sliding them down over my hips, he tossed them off of the side of the bed before stripping off his own.

The desire and passion ruled my mind, and I gave myself over to it. Our bodies entwined, and for the first time in forever, it felt like I was where I belonged. I felt loved.

CHAPTER 4

Joel

WAKING UP WITH ALEX IN my arms made this morning an entirely different experience than yesterday. I planted a kiss on her shoulder, her neck, and then traveled to her lips. Her sleepy blue eyes opened, and after a moment of confusion, they cleared and the most wonderful smile teased those luscious lips.

“Morning, beautiful,” I murmured, dropping more kisses across her face.

“Joel?” she whispered, her voice warm, but still fuzzy with sleep.

“Who were you expecting?” I hated the jealousy that streaked through me.

“No one!” She frowned. “It’s your name. What are you implying?”

“Nothing, never mind. You sounded surprised to see me.” I pushed the feelings aside and brushed her hair back from her face. Cupping her cheek in the palm of my hand, I stroked her soft skin with my thumb. “I’m happy you’re here. I’ve missed you, baby.” Sleeping in this massive king sized bed alone had been horrible, and the thought that Alex may leave me forever preyed on my mind.

Her deep blue eyes studied my face, and her fingers glided across my shoulder before she twined them through my hair.

It seemed forever since we’d been so close and intimate. Capturing her lips, I proceeded to make love to her all over again. I lost myself in her soft scent, her warm skin, and the way she wrapped herself around me.



Flopping back onto my pillow, I dragged in a long breath to calm my breathing. If only we could stay in bed all day.

Or could we? Aiden and Emily were aware of our marital issues, so maybe they’d agree to keep our boy for another day. It would take some effort to coerce Alex into making the request on our behalf. Aiden might not answer if I phoned or texted, but he’d never ignore Alex.

Last night when Alex had posed the question, you wonder why he’s not your biggest fan, the universal truth struck me head on and threatened to cut me off at the knees. I’d endured the gut-wrenching knowledge I’d alienated—and almost ended the life of—someone who’d been like a brother to me for over fifteen years.

On the outside, I denied the emotions and guilt eating me alive. Inside, the shame prevented me from looking Aiden in the eye. That short interaction at the diner had taken superhuman effort on my part. Even answering the simplest questions about my wife and my fidelity seemed a hardship.

I'd plummeted in his esteem, and that fact was difficult to digest, much less accept. I owed him more than I could ever repay, yet still, my thoughts nurtured an overflowing pool of resentment.

"What are you thinking about?" Her soft voice drew me from my musings.

"Ahhh, where to start?" I turned my head toward her. "I can't even tell you how much I love and miss you and Daniel." This next part would be harder. "I wish we could have the day, just you and me. We need time to figure things out. Do you think they'd keep Daniel for the day?"

"I'm sure they would." Her brows rose. "Why don't you ask?"

The challenge in her eyes told me she'd accept nothing less than me down on my knees, begging for forgiveness. The requisite groveling would make me feel me like an unfortunate bug meeting a windshield. There'd be a few remains left to scrape up, but not much else. "Maybe you could?" I nuzzled against her neck, hoping to soften her up.

She pulled back. "Joel." Cupping my cheeks, she gazed deep into my eyes. "You can't avoid Aiden forever. What are you planning to do? Summer will end, and we'll be in Boston. Then the three of you will open the doors of Hamilton, Grayson & Nichols." She never missed an opportunity to drive her point home.

“I get it, Alex.” My gut twisted. This woman had occult powers in mind reading.

“Do you?” She propped up on one elbow. “Aiden’s family and you owe him more than we can repay. He’s way out on a limb for you with those partnership guarantees. If you screw him over, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I won’t, okay?” I threw my hands in the air before tossing back the covers. Spending the day in bed didn’t seem like an awesome idea after all. Not if Alex planned to be on my case the entire time. Yes, Aiden had come through with financial assistance for my partner buy-in, but I didn’t need it rubbed in my face.

“See that you don’t.” Her stern voice admonished me.

My soft, sweet Alex had a nasty bite to her this morning. I hated the hard no-nonsense side that had emerged.

Last night should have gone a long way in repairing our rift. You’re delusional. Snagging my jeans from the floor, I stalked into the bathroom and placed my palms flat on the counter. I peered into the mirror. Damn, I craved those sweet tones of oak, followed by the burn as it trickled down my throat... My reflection taunted me. Yeah, that’ll make everything so much better, dumbass. Go drown yourself in a bottle!

The cold water I splashed on my face brought some color to my sallow skin. Who was this man staring back at me? He looks like hell!

Never-ending questions about how I would ever face my friends and redeem myself spun through my mind. I’d banished all thoughts of our impending return to Boston, but now the inevitable and unavoidable truths consumed me. Time to paste a smile on my face, get to work, and earn my keep. Repaying all the money Aiden had

guaranteed for me would take commitment. What if he took it back and left me on the street like a sad, jobless hobo? He had the power to let me go belly up. I'd lose the apartment... No, I'd lose everything...

My rational side laughed at this ridiculous notion. No way would Aiden be responsible for Alex and Daniel being homeless. If she dumped my ass, it would be me begging for change in the subway, never her.

"Get it together, you idiot. You're a talented lawyer, so you'll find something," I muttered under my breath, even while acknowledging that being canned by your former best friends wouldn't amount to much of a recommendation. Double the strikes against you if their last names happened to be Hamilton or Grayson. Tom would favor Aiden if it came down to picking sides.

"Are you planning to hide in there all day?" Alex rapped on the door.

"Nope." I splashed more cold water on my face and took a long last look in the mirror.

She sat cross-legged on the bed, tapping on her phone, and then looked at me with an unreadable expression. "We're good. We can collect Daniel tomorrow morning." Alex muttered something under her breath.

"What?" I hadn't caught what she'd said, but it didn't sound flattering from where I stood.

"You're such a pussy! You can't even say his name, let alone have a civil conversation with him. So, it's done, but don't ask me to carry your weight, ever again. Man up." She wagged a finger at me. "Stop acting like a petulant child."

"Why are you so...?" I swallowed hard as the words stuck in my throat.

“Yeah, you better not say it, asshole.”

That look could turn a man to stone. Lucky for me, I hadn't let my thoughts escape. “What?”

“Who were you talking to in the bathroom?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Nobody?” Fear lanced through me as I wondered if my thoughts had slipped out when I thought I'd been using my inside voice.

She scoffed and then eyed me with a grim expression on her face.

“What's the problem?”

“You need to tone down your shitty attitude. One roll in the hay doesn't make it all better. It's not that easy.” The bravado in her tone evaporated. “This year has been hard,” she whispered as she tugged at a loose thread on the duvet. “Do you even want to be here?”

“Ally.” My heart ached as I lifted her chin, drowning in those shimmery blue pools of sorrow. “Don't cry. Please don't.” Sweeping away her tears with my thumbs, I rested my forehead against hers. “You know I love you.”

“How do I know?” Her whole body trembled as more tears escaped, creating red tracks down her cheeks. “Do you, Joel? Do you love me? You can say it, but they're empty meaningless words. Where were you when I needed you?”

My gut twisted. This wouldn't be as simple as Alex coming home. “I'm sorry. I don't know where to start or how to fix this.”

“Start by being here! You can't run away and leave me to handle everything.” Her eyes blazed. “You need to make amends with our friends, and quit neglecting your child!”

Aiden. She'd circled back around to him. I should have known, but what could I say or do at this point? Nothing, besides give her what she wanted.

"I hear you, and I get it! Can't we have today for us? Then we can move forward"—I cupped her face between my palms—"and I'll make all the amends you'd like."

Her unblinking eyes searched mine, and one of her hands crept up to grasp my fingers.

"They may only be words, but I mean them with all my heart. I love you, Ally, more than I can ever say."

Silence lingered as she bowed her head. It went on forever, my heart pounding as I shifted and finally dropped my hands to my knees.

Pain lanced through me. My Ally—the woman she'd been before everything fell to pieces—would have said those three little words back, without hesitation. This time she hadn't, and maybe she never would. I didn't know what came next.

A sick feeling grew in the pit of my stomach as my buzzing phone broke the silence. That woman had the worst timing. No way would I allow Alex to see her text messages. Crystal tended to be informal with me, and if Alex got wind of the familiar way Crystal talked to me, it wouldn't add any weight to those heartfelt pleas for my wife to come home.

We were on a precipice, and I sensed that the smallest thing would push us over the edge of the cliff.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Her gaze held suspicion.

"Um, yeah." I pushed off of the bed and dug my phone from my jacket, which hung over the chair against the wall.

Hey, you coming for breakfast or what?

I glanced at Alex, who pretended not to be watching my every move. I wasn't fooled for a second.

My fingers trembled as I typed a response.

Nope. Can't.

Alex hadn't moved from her spot on the bed, but even from behind the curtain of dark hair that obscured her face, my wife prepared for the kill. She'd become a bird of prey with its beady eyes focused, its only intent to murder that poor little mouse as it scrambled for safety. Her intended victim scampered in a desperate attempt to find cover.

Is the ole ball n' chain there? Or ya too hung over to get out of bed?

Before I could answer, or even protest, a hand darted out and snatched my phone. "Alex, don't—"

She sucked in a breath. "Wow. You're an asshole. I'm such a horrible burden to you?"

"Those were her words, not mine."

With a glower in my direction, she tapped in a reply. A moment later it buzzed again. Alex scowled before she shoved the phone at me and stomped from the room.

"Alex!" Did I run after her, or see what had been said between the two women on my text? I spun and pounded down the stairs, spotting the open patio door. "Ally!"

She hadn't gone far, but a twinge hit my heart at the sight of her forlorn figure hunched on the sand. She'd collapsed only a few feet down the beach and had her legs pulled against her chest. An endless stream of sobs issued from her, causing her shoulders to quiver.

I dropped to my knees and rubbed her back. "Sweetie."

"Don't touch me!" She jerked away. "Why don't you run to your skanky little girlfriend?"

"She's not—"

“Don’t lie to me, Joel. Did you see what she said?”

I gritted my teeth and peered at my screen.

Stop texting. He’s married, so go find your own man.

Ha! Funny. Get your butt down here. We have some drinking to do. Don’t be a lazy ass. Miss you baby. Hurry up and dump that sad cow and join us!

My vision blurred at the stupid emojis Crystal had used to emphasize her word—the little cartoonish cow combined with a string of familiar yellow sad faces.

My phone buzzed again.

The cow thing was Gwen, by the way, but... why do you stay? She doesn’t appreciate you.

Alex pushed to her feet. “Whatever. Go, if that’s where you’d rather be, but don’t you ever come back!” She stumbled toward the house with her head bowed.

“Wait!” I jogged after her, grasping her shoulder to halt her progress. “I’m not dumping you, and I wouldn’t rather be there! I’m here, Alex, and I’m ready to work on this. On us. Please, please, baby, give us a chance.”

Alex sniffled loudly, raising her puffy eyes toward me. “Prove it!”

I scrubbed a hand through my hair, contemplating her commandment. Call me clueless, but what did she want me to do?

“No more Crystal! No texting, no phoning, no seeing her! Nothing! Phone her right now and tell her to go find her own man.” She glowered at me. “Choose. Me, or her.”

Crystal picked up after the first ring. “What’s going on? You meeting us for breakfast?”

“No.” I peeked out of the corner of my eye at Alex. She’d turned her back to me, but I didn’t miss how her hand rose

and brushed at her face. “You have to stop texting me. I can’t see you anymore.”

“What? That’s crazy! We’re only friends.” She paused, her voice dropping to a low pitch. “Is Alex laying down the law? Or Aiden? I know he demanded you stop seeing me. Either way, those two are handing you your balls.”

If it hadn’t been situation critical, I might have laughed out loud. It struck me as odd that Aiden had said similar words about Crystal. Why did everyone assume I had no will or mind of my own? “Don’t, okay? It’s time I work on my marriage.”

“So…” She snorted down the line. “You’re not allowed friends?”

“Not when they’re ex-girlfriends. I’m serious. I need to spend my time with Alex and my son. I’m sorry, but we have to stop all the texting, meeting, and phoning.”

“You’re a sad whipped little puppy, ain’t ya? Fine, Joel, you know where to find me.”

“Goodbye.” I ended the call. “It’s done. I’m sorry, Alex. I want to make this right.”

She hitched in a breath and started toward the house without so much as a glance at me.

“Great,” I said under my breath as I trailed behind her, unsure of what to do next.



I wished for the rest of the day to be magical, that we’d spend it making love and reconnecting. But it wasn’t to be. The day I dreamed of vanished with the arrival of those devastating text messages. Being in Alex’s presence felt

strange and awkward, but I stayed, refraining from uttering a single word, lest her wrath rain down on me.

“I’m going to shower.” I rested a hand on her shoulder.

Alex shrugged it off and looked away.

I pondered my next move. I loved Alex, but this game of ‘guess what I’m thinking’ would soon wear me down to nothing. I’d done as she asked, but there had to be more she wanted, but clueless Joel had no idea what.

By the time I emerged, dressed and ready for the day, she’d retired to the patio with a large glass of iced tea.

She barely glanced my way as I lowered myself onto the lounge beside hers. Folding my hands, I perched on the edge. “Are we going to talk about this?” I muttered.

“I...” She shook her head, adjusting her sunglasses with one hand. “I have no idea where to start,” she whispered.

With a sigh, I rubbed at the ache in the back of my neck. “I don’t know, Ally.”

Sadness overtook me. This beautiful and amazing woman with whom I’d shared so much sat before me, and I hadn’t a single thing to say.

“Would you be mad if I went to see Aiden?”

She lowered her sunglasses, her red-rimmed eyes narrowing. “Is that really where you plan to go?”

“Yeah. You want me to make amends and apologize, so I’ll go, okay? Then you can get off my case about it.”

“Don’t pretend this is about me.” She straightened. “You’re acting like you don’t give a shit. Do you want your best friend back or not? Are you that clueless?” Crossing her arms, she shook her head. “You know what? Do it or don’t. Whatever.” Throwing her hands in the air, she pushed off the lounge and dashed inside before I could

even form a coherent thought. Moments later, the sound of a slamming door echoed across the patio.

I longed to follow, to scream at her, and to tell her she was the clueless one. How did one make amends for what I had done? I didn't have any idea of what to say, or how to even begin repairing the damage. 'I'm sorry' would sound damn inadequate.

Hey, Aiden, sorry I got tanked and couldn't sit still. I'm sorry I didn't listen and knocked you off your own sailboat. I'm sorry for acting like a complete ass. Sorry for yelling at Savannah, and scaring the living crap out of her. I'm sorry you'll be off work for months and might need surgery.

Aiden couldn't go back to work until he could lift substantial weight. The damage to his shoulder had been severe. So, now I could add fucked up his medical career to my list accomplishments.

You go, Joel. When I messed up someone's life? I did a proper damn job of it, none of that halfway bullshit. So, what had I forgotten on my list? Oh, right. Sorry you almost died, man, really, I'm sorry.

See what I mean? Sorry was such a lame ass word.

Thank You

To the many readers who have given their feedback along the way... Thank you! Readers like you inspire me to continue on the journey of writing.

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