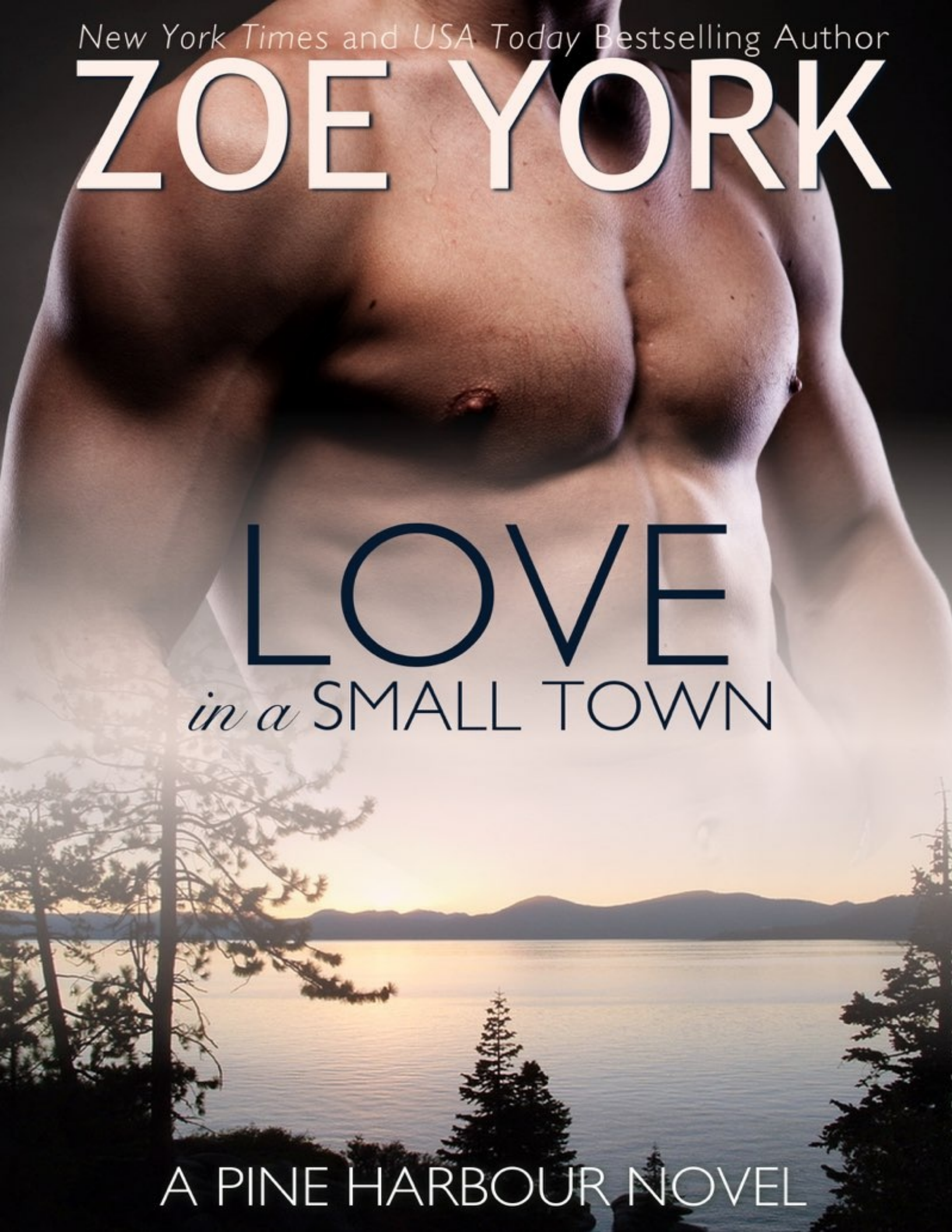
New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author
ZOE YORK
LOVE
in a SMALL TOWN
A PINE HARBOUR NOVEL

LOVE IN A SMALL TOWN

A PINE HARBOUR NOVEL

ZOE YORK

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

They should be over each other.

For two years, Olivia has served her ex-husband coffee at the diner where she works, and waited for her heart to catch up to her brain. Because they were divorced now, and for good reasons. He wasn't ever going to change. He'd always be a cop first, a soldier second, and a husband third, when there was time.

Rafe didn't believe in love at first sight until he met Olivia, and then he was a goner. They'd been too young, too reckless, but that hadn't stopped him from bringing her home to Pine Harbour, where there was nothing for her to do while he saved the world.

Then it all fell apart. And now…

He never stopped loving his wife, but he let her go when it became clear he wasn't what she needed.

She deserves more than a part-time lover who once broke her heart.

Rafe wants a second chance to prove he can be the man she wanted when they fell in love.

And Olivia still wants Rafe despite all the excellent reasons why she shouldn't.

They should be over each other…but they aren't.

WELCOME TO PINE HARBOUR

Tucked into a hollow half-way up the Bruce Peninsula, on the eastern shores of Lake Huron, **Pine Harbour** is where cottage country meets northern living. For generations, the Foster family has been a rock in the community. All the Foster men serve in the local Army reserve unit and the youngest adult generation is no exception.

Meet the Foster boys: **Dean**, **Jake**, **Matt** and **Sean**. A cop, a contractor, a paramedic and an adventure racer. All soldiers. None of them looking for love, but it's coming!

Their best friends are the Minellis: **Zander**, **Rafe**, **Tom** and **Dani**. A full-time soldier, a cop, a park ranger and a paramedic. Dani's the only girl in the entire bunch and she's not sure how she feels about that. When Rafe got married, she was thrilled to have a sister–and even though he and Olivia have split up, Dani's not giving up that bond. (And neither is Rafe, for that matter).

The Books of Pine Harbour

Love in a Small Town

Rafe and Olivia

Six years. Two break-ups. One divorce. They should be over each other…

Love in a Snow Storm

Jake and Dani
Never fall in love with your best friend's little sister…

Love on a Spring Morning*
Ryan and Holly
Duplicity. Desire. Denial. They were doomed from the start.

Love on a Summer Night
Zander and Faith
Sometimes saying goodbye is just the beginning.

Love on the Run
Dean and Liana
She needs a bodyguard. He needs a job. But there's nothing strictly professional about their attraction.

Love in a Sandstorm
Sean and Jenna
It was supposed to be a fling. Two weeks in the south of Spain before they returned to war. They weren't supposed to fall in love…

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* Ryan Howard's brother, Finn, lives in a town a few hours south of Pine Harbour. If you like this series, you'll probably love Wardham, too! Finn's book is #4 in that series, Beyond Love and Hate.

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ZOE YORK

Believe in second chances

For my sister—look, Pan, I wrote a romance novel set in Bruce County!

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WHAT'S A TOONIE, EH?

CANADIAN GLOSSARY

I use some culturally specific terms in this book. Phrases and words that are regional and national, and probably more than the three I've included here. Sometimes I forget that you guys didn't all go to stag and does growing up. I sure did! I had to wait until I was nineteen to enjoy the toonie bar properly, though.

Stag and doe: fundraising party held for an engaged couple, common in rural Ontario
Legion: veterans hall, often used as a community centre in small towns
Toonie: two dollar Canadian coin (see, Loonie: one dollar Canadian coin)

I hope you enjoy Rafe and Olivia's story, and I look forward to sharing more Pine Harbour books with you!

Zoe

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS bad enough that after going through a very public divorce from the man Olivia still loved, she had to serve him breakfast four times a week. That she looked forward to those mornings…well, that wasn't great either. But Rafe worked two jobs and lived in a tiny one-room apartment. And the other option for eggs and bacon was his mother's café.

Liv shuddered at the thought of spending even one morning a week with her ex-mother-in-law. So she couldn't fault Rafe for keeping his regular stool at the diner she worked at, even if it didn't help the official party line held by all six hundred people in their small town of Pine Harbour—that their split had been her fault and Rafe was completely innocent.

The former point was true. The latter was not. Parsing the difference with the town busy-bodies was a futile effort though, so she let the whispers slide. They just added to the steaming pile of crap that was her life.

But the absolute worst was that today, Rafe had brought a date to breakfast.

And she'd serve him eggs and paste on a smile, but then she was calling a real estate agent. Whatever cosmic joke had made her fall in love with Rafe Minelli had delivered its final punch line.

He wasn't in uniform today—either of them—but he still looked achingly good. Faded blue jeans that she recognized from the irregular rip on one of his solid thighs. Old enough that she'd washed them many times. The denim would be soft, and when he turned around, his wallet would be clearly imprinted in his back right pocket. And even though she wanted to grab a butter knife and gouge

his heart out, first she wanted one more look at his magnificent ass.

Because she was a glutton for punishment, and Rafe delivered in bucket loads. Tall, dark, and handsome didn't do him justice. Olivia grabbed a washcloth and wiped down the counter as she watched him guide his date to a booth under the window.

No! She wanted to shout. *You sit at the counter and ask me if it's been busy. I bug you that you need a haircut and we both remember that time I gave you a trim in the bathroom. How you slid your hands under my shirt and teased my nipples while I squealed for you to hold still.* The walk down memory lane cut sharper than usual because it wasn't shared. Even though she knew she needed to move on, let go of Rafe and start dating again, she wasn't prepared to see *him* do just that. And the pretty blonde woman sitting across from him twisting the shit out of a sugar packet was wearing one of his plaid shirts, so Olivia couldn't even pretend it was a breakfast meeting—not that Rafe would ever have business that needed to be discussed in a diner.

He was a full-time police officer and a part-time soldier. Had been a full-time son and a part-time husband, too. No room for a wife, definitely no room for a side job. No, this was definitely a morning-after-a-sleep-over breakfast and Olivia had to serve him fucking coffee. She wrenched the carafe from the warmer, grabbed two menus from under the counter, and pasted on her sweetest eat-shit-and-die smile before squaring her shoulders and approaching the couple.

"Coffee?"

They both nodded and Olivia silently lifted each of their white ceramic mugs and poured. For someone who just got laid, Rafe didn't look happy. His eyebrows were pulled together, hooding his gaze, and he had faint dark circles under his eyes. Maybe he was realizing just how awful a human being he was to bring…

"Do you need to see a menu, Natalie?" His voice sounded strained too. He dumped two creamers in his cup and stirred roughly.

Natalie, huh? Olivia swung her gaze to the other woman. She looked nervous. Had he told her that he used to be married to their waitress? Used to wake her up with his tongue and his hands and his love, but not as often as he

didn’t—he’d have to be home for that—and now they pretended to be friends a few times a week?

“I’ll just have some toast, please,” she said quietly.

Rafe sighed. “Don’t be silly.” He looked up at Olivia, his dark brown eyes unreadable. “Two breakfast specials please, one with bacon, one with—” He broke off and turned back to Natalie. “Sausage? Ham?”

“Sausage, I guess. Look, I can just wait for my friend outside, we don’t need to have breakfast.”

“It’s fine.” He reached across the table and squeezed her hand before looking back at Olivia again. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“We’re swamped,” she said breezily, waving at the mostly empty diner. “I’ve got ketchup bottles to refill and napkins to stack, so—”

“One minute, Liv.” He pushed out of the booth and towered over her. “In private.”

He didn’t wait for her to respond, stalking to the small office behind the washrooms like he owned the place. Well, he could wait. She had a job to do, even if it wasn’t exciting or overly important.

“Natalie, is it? How did you want your eggs?” Rafe wanted his over-easy. At some point in the future, she’d forget all the stupid little things she knew about him. She hoped. Hadn’t happened yet.

“Scrambled. And rye toast if you have it.”

“Sure thing. Be right back.” She went straight to the pass-through window, dinged the bell and tacked the order up on the carousel. Frank gave her a knowing look from his perch at the grill. “Shut up,” she told her boss without malice. “I need five minutes.”

“I’ll holler if anyone comes in, I guess.”

If anyone came in, they’d pour themselves a cup of coffee and wait. She wasn’t worried. It wouldn’t be the first time Pine Harbour had heard Rafe and Olivia Minelli have a knock-down, drag-out fight. Probably wouldn’t be the last. Another reason she needed to leave. This couldn’t be her future—petty jealousy and tension-filled terse conversations with her ex. She took a deep breath and shoved the office door open.

— —

SHE WAS PISSED, and he deserved it, but he didn't have time to deal with that right now. He held up his hand, cutting off whatever smart remark was about to slide out of her beautiful mouth. "It's not what you think."

"I think she's wearing your shirt." She dropped her head, like she didn't want to look at him, and her long brown ponytail fell over her shoulder. One of the sad side effects of not living with Olivia anymore—never seeing her hair down. He liked the ponytail because it was so her, practical and cute and sporty, but he loved the dark curtain of free-falling hair that he'd only seen in private. Now reserved for his fantasies, that image of Liv completely undone, tousled and sexy, was a favourite memory. Eyes blazing, the Olivia right in front of him would light him up if she knew what he was thinking about. "I think you know better than to bring her here, but you're more scared of your mother than you are of me, and fair enough. Your mom is frightening as all get out. And I know I have no right to care about what you do and who you do it with. I get that. So I will bite my tongue. But you don't get to summon me back here for a chat while your new girlfriend sits out there waiting for you. That's awful, Rafe. That's not *you*."

Wow, she went in a different direction than he'd expected. "Okay, hold up." He let out a sigh as his phone vibrated in his pocket. He yanked it out and swore under his breath at the call display screen. "Listen, I have to take this, but we're not done here."

She laughed, short and sharp and completely without humour. "Oh, we're definitely done here." She spun and jerked the door open, pausing in the doorway. "Your girlfriend takes her eggs scrambled, by the way."

She's not my anything, he wanted to yell, but that wasn't completely true. Natalie had been his distraction of the month the night before. He'd bought her a

few drinks and let her sit on his lap. Played with the bare skin at her waist and enjoyed the way she smelled. They'd kissed, and more than once. But he walked her to her car at the end of the night of pool and pints at The Green Hedgehog in Lion's Head—Pine Harbour not being big enough for a pub of its own—only to discover that it wouldn't start. And her friend, who'd left with Matt Foster, wasn't answering the phone. Rafe knew he should call her a tow truck, but it was a long tow to Owen Sound, the small city the girls lived in, and that left the problem of how her girlfriend would get home the next day.

So he'd offered her his bed. Without him in it. Something Natalie had tried to persuade him to change his mind on, a totally fair move on her part. But he hadn't slept with anyone since Liv. Wasn't sure when and if he'd be able to. Unlike his wife, he'd meant his wedding vows when he'd sworn to love her forever. Liv leaving him didn't change that.

But just because he couldn't get over her didn't mean he shouldn't try. He *should* try, and once a month he let his buddies drag him to Lion's Head or Sauble Beach to get back in the game. This was the first time one of those pitiful attempts at a social life had played out in front of Liv, though. And he couldn't worry about that because Dean was blowing up his phone.

"What?"

"Good morning to you, too, sunshine. We got a problem."

"It's my day off, man."

"Operation Paper Cut has been bumped up. Inspector Wagner wants all available officers called in."

A major bust. There was only one answer. "Sleep first?"

"Yeah. Report at four this afternoon."

He hung up without saying goodbye. He'd be there. But first he needed to eat, then he had two women to sort out.

When he stepped back into the main space of the diner, Liv was quietly buttering toast at the counter and resolutely not looking in his direction. Natalie stared out the window. It wasn't her fault he was hung up on someone else, or that Pine Harbour was so small this was their only option for breakfast that didn't involve his mother.

Anne Minelli was only Italian by marriage, but she'd adopted her husband's culture completely, right down to happily becoming a caricature of an over-protective mother—and a nightmare of a mother-in-law to the only other woman who'd had the misfortune to marry into the Minelli clan.

Rafe wasn't the oldest son. That privilege fell to his older brother Zander, who'd gotten the hell out of Dodge at eighteen. Where Rafe and his younger brother Tom had enlisted in the local army reserve unit after high school, Zander had gone reg force and was currently stationed in Wainwright, Alberta. The only member of their family not in the military was the baby, his sister Dani, and that wasn't for lack of trying.

Speak of the devil. The door chimed and in she walked. Dressed in her navy paramedic uniform, she was so focused on Liv and the coffee pot that she didn't see him. Trailing behind her was his friend Ryan Howard, another EMS worker, who gave him a distracted nod as he checked something on his phone.

"Hey, sister-of-mine, can we get two coffees to go?" They even looked like sisters, Dani taller and lankier, Liv shorter and curvy in all the right places. Her endearment for his ex-wife was a punch in the gut reminder that even after the divorce Dani and Liv had remained close. Familiar bitterness set his jaw on edge and he turned away from watching them.

But he couldn't stop listening.

"Sure thing, baby girl. What's up, Ryan?"

The other man grunted something about a weekend road trip for his brother Finn's wedding. Rafe had heard a bit about it the week before at poker night. A four-hour drive south to a tiny town called Wardham.

Rafe hadn't asked too much about the trip because after his divorce, poker, hockey and work were the only safe subjects between him and Ryan. The Howards had been the only real couple friends he and Liv had, and while he and Ryan were still friendly, Lynn had taken Liv's side in the divorce in a big way. Which he didn't care about—most of the time, *he* was on Liv's side in this whole mess. She'd deserved more than he'd given her. But she hadn't given him a chance to make it right.

If you could have. Maybe not. But he'd deserved a fucking chance.

At the end of the day, that's why he'd filed for divorce. If she didn't want him, he wasn't going to beg. He'd held on to the last scraps of his dignity and moved out. He hadn't gone far—obviously—but he'd given her what she wanted.

Even though it killed him. Not for the first time, he wondered if he'd made a mistake asking her if she wanted a divorce—offering her that out he hadn't wanted her to take. He never expected her to say yes. That had gutted him.

He slid into the booth with a sigh.

"I'm sorry about all of this," Natalie said nervously. "Maybe you should have taken me to your friend's place last night instead."

And interrupt whatever fun Matt was having with her friend? Rafe wasn't going to force his own celibacy on others. "It's fine."

"Clearly." She toyed with her spoon, flipping it back and forth on the table. He wanted to take it away from her. Wanted her to drink her coffee and wait for her food and not stare at him like he'd hurt her feelings and she was hoping he'd suddenly see that and make it all better.

He had no clue how to do that. Not for his wife, not for this stranger wearing his shirt. Definitely not for his mother, who hadn't really spoken to him in two years. "Listen, Natalie, if I lead you on…"

"You kissed me and invited me back to your place."

"Because you were stranded. It's not you, it's me. You're gorgeous. I'm just not available."

"Are you gay?"

He thought about saying yes, but Liv chose that moment to deliver their plates and he didn't want her to hear any of their conversation. *Genius move, coming here*. Instead of answering, he busied himself with salt and pepper and ketchup. By the time he looked up she was eating. *Just as well*.

Matt finally texted and confirmed he could drive the girls to their car and wait for a tow truck with them—and even better news, they were en route. Without a word, Rafe slid his phone across the Formica tabletop so Natalie could read it. Relief flitted across her face. He didn't wait for Liv to bring them a bill. Their breakfast would be exactly twice his usual. He left three times as much on

the table and escorted his sort-of-but-not-really date out to the parking lot just as Matt roared up in his bright blue F-150.

Natalie hesitated when her friend opened the passenger door and gestured for her to get in. “About your shirt…”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Maybe if they have another date, I can send it back with her.”

Matt Foster rarely hooked up with the same woman more than once. He preferred to leave them with a happy smile after the first—and only—go round, before any attachment could form. The man managed to stay on this side of having a player reputation, and no doubt the next time he saw Natalie’s friend, she’d squeal and give him a big sloppy kiss on the cheek. But that would be it for them. “Yeah. Maybe.”

— —

RAFE SCUFFED his boot in the hard pack dirt at the bottom of the diner steps. He’d paid. His guest was gone. He had no reason not to get in his own truck and head home for some much needed sleep.

He definitely had no explanation for jogging up the steps and stepping inside. Liv hadn’t cleared his dishes yet, even though the place was now empty. Instead, she was tidying every other part of the space. Squaring off chairs around the tables in the middle of the room. Refilling napkins.

She reached over the counter for her damp rag, and he let himself have his fill of staring at her nipped-in waist and the flare of her hips. The memory of cupping her bottom as she slowly rode him in the middle of the night was bittersweet—one he never wanted to forget, and had desperately needed to get over.

His dick had other thoughts. Like closing the gap between them and pressing up against her, his front to her back. Hugging and kissing and making it all right.

But there was no magical cure for mismatched love. And anything less than that would just be a variation on disrespecting her. It was all that had held him back from suggesting something casual over the last twenty-four months. She deserved more than a furtive roll in the hay with her ex.

So instead of groping her or begging for sexual scraps, he forced himself to saunter to his table, grab his mug, and head for the coffee pot.

She knew he was there. She'd glanced at him in the mirrored panels over the pass-through. "Your girlfriend get off okay?"

He poured the hot, black liquid into his cup, grateful for the furious sloshing noise it provided. "I told you," he drawled slowly. "It's not what it looks like."

"It's none of my business."

"I'm always your business." In his chest, his heart thumped a little harder at the way her spine straightened when he said that. "I was Matt's wingman last night and her car wouldn't start at the end of the night. It was just easier to let her stay at my place."

"Let me put this another way," she said coldly, her back still to him. "I don't want to know."

"I slept on the couch." The words grated out of him, and he knew it probably sounded like he resented having to explain himself. Except he didn't. He'd come back inside to make sure she knew what had really happened. If he was gruff, that was more due to not knowing how the explanation would land. Doubt that it would be received as he hoped.

She whirled on him, eyes blazing and cheeks pink. "Do you think that makes you some sort of hero, Rafe? We're divorced. You're supposed to move on and date other people."

"I'm not supposed to do it in front of you."

She laughed, a sad, empty sound. "Hard to avoid that in a town of six hundred people."

"We were in Lion's Head, actually."

She held up her hand. "Still don't want to know."

He took a sip of coffee. All the things he wanted to say froze in his throat. *Give me a second chance. You look tired and gorgeous at the same time. Are you*

dating anyone?

"I'm glad you're moving on," she said, her voice softening. "It's been…like time has frozen for us. And we're too young for that. I just don't want to see it."

He took a final swig of coffee and glared at her across the diner. Then he rinsed his cup in the sink and placed it in the dirty dishes bin before prowling around the counter and getting close enough to see the whites of her eyes as she lifted her brow in surprise.

"I'm not moving on." He matched her slow, quiet tone. They'd done enough yelling, him and Liv. He reached out and put his hands on her hips. She felt different, like maybe she'd lost some weight there. "Are you eating enough?"

"What?" She pushed hard against his chest, but he wasn't going to be moved. "Rafe, give me some space."

"Give me a minute, then I'll back off. Give me a minute to show you just how much I haven't *moved on*, Liv."

Her breath caught in her throat and a tear started to form in the corner of her eye. *Damn*.

"No, baby, please don't cry." His voice cracked and he didn't care. He hauled her tight against him and buried his face in her hair. Still the same shampoo.

"We have to stop doing this," she said into his shirt with a hiccup.

I'm never going to stop. I'm never going to let you go. "I can't, baby. I lo—"

"No." She struggled again and he eased his grip to give her some space. "No. You can't say that." She wiped her eyes and sniffed, then waved her hands between their bodies. "You need to stop coming in here. Alone. With people. Mac's is now off-limits to you."

CHAPTER TWO

HIS JAW CLENCHED and his eyes narrowed. “You don’t want me here?”

Oh, hell. Why did he have to ask that exact question? She didn’t want to lie. “I don’t think it’s healthy for you to come in here multiple times a week. You should buy some groceries.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, baby.”

“I’m not your baby.” She hated the waver in her voice. She totally was and always would be. But it hadn’t been enough. “I need to get back to work.”

He looked around and then back at her with a now amused look on his face. “Yeah?” He lifted his voice. “Hey, Frank, can Liv take a break?”

A muffled *yes* sounded from the back of the kitchen and she rolled her eyes. “You don’t get to—”

“Oh, shut up.” He snagged her hand and pulled her outside. She hated how willingly she trotted along behind him.

The diner sat on a large gravel lot on the edge of town, one block in from the county road that ran north up the peninsula. Between the diner and the county road was a country block of nothing but trees and snowmobile trails, and it was into this wooded area that Rafe headed.

A cool wind rustled the leaves overhead—just starting to turn colours—and she shivered. He unzipped his hoodie and handed it over but she shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t be stupid,” he muttered and wrapped it around her. She reluctantly shoved her arms in the sleeves and he glowered at her as he reached for the

zipper. The sweatshirt was way too big—he had a solid foot on her—and as he ducked low enough to grab the lower hem, their cheeks touched.

Damn double damn. Somehow this was totally different than the hug inside the dinner. His breath hot against her ear, the pounding of her heart in her chest. He froze, bent over her like that, and she opened her mouth to tell him to back up but nothing came out.

Ever so slowly, he dropped the zipper parts and slid his hands inside the warm fleece instead. He found her waist and tugged gently at her t-shirt, freeing it from the waistband of her jeans. He breathed her name against her skin, and she froze. *Don't say anything else. Don't stop touching me but let's not talk. Let's pretend for a minute.*

As if he understood, he pressed his mouth against her neck and sucked gently at her pulse point at the same time as he found bare skin under her shirt. With a groan, he lifted her up and pressed her gently against a tree, notching one of his super awesome thighs between her legs and under her butt. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, and tipped her head back, letting him feast on her skin. This was a terrible idea. She was definitely going to regret muddying these waters.

Two years and they hadn't so much as touched hands. Now two embraces in one day. At this rate she was going to let him fuck her in a forest.

But he didn't move his hands higher or lower. He stroked one thumb back and forth across the bottom of her rib cage, but the rest of him was perfectly restrained. Except for the part where she was wrapped around him and his mouth was wet and hot on her neck, this was just a hug.

A completely naughty, nipple-tightening hug.

And then he shifted his pelvis and she felt his erection beneath her, and it was most definitely not just a hug. They were ten seconds away from dry-humping. And she couldn't wait.

"Rafe." She gasped as he ground against her core at the sound of his name. "We can't do this."

"I'm not moving on." He nipped at her ear. "I've tried. I can't do it. You're it for me."

She closed her eyes. She didn't want to think about his attempts to move on. Didn't want to think about the mess they were currently making by opening this can of worms between them, either.

She didn't want to think, full stop. "I need to get back inside. Come over tonight and we can talk."

There wouldn't be any talking. She was going to answer the door naked.

But just as she talked herself into something totally foolish, he saved her from herself. He winced, and she felt the air around them drop five degrees. "I can't come over tonight. I have to work." His voice had a desperate edge to it, one with which she was all too familiar. "I'll come to you as soon as we're done."

Same old promise. She sagged against the tree, letting him go in more ways than one. "No." He held her as she lowered her legs to the ground. She couldn't look at him, didn't want to see the look on his face. "I don't want to re-hash that argument. I'm sorry."

She pushed past him and walked out of the woods. The pulsing pain in her chest wasn't enough to make her turn around and take one last look. What she wanted—truly, deeply wanted—wasn't on the table. Entertaining the lingering attraction between them would just cloud that reality.

— —

RAFE SHOULD HAVE SEEN that coming. Foresight had always been his downfall with Liv. She wanted him to be perfect, and he was so far from that it wasn't funny.

She wasn't wrong about him prioritizing work over their relationship. He just didn't see any other way to be a cop and a soldier. Duty called, all the fucking time.

He loped after her, slowing to a walk when he caught up. He kept a safe three

feet between them and waited for her to speak.

“Here’s your sweatshirt,” she said quietly, handing it over. Still not looking at him. “We should talk. Really talk. No more of…” she pointed to the woods behind them. “Whatever that was.”

“I’m free on Sunday.” Two long days away. He wanted to promise tomorrow, but knew he couldn’t. Who knew how long the raid and all the associated statements, evidence collection and paperwork would take?

“Are you going to your mom’s for dinner?”

“Nah.” That stopped being fun the day he’d left Olivia. He showed up for command performances but the weekly thing was too painful.

“You want me to feed you?” Her words were…not quite reluctant, but definitely not loaded with suggestion. He looked at her in surprise and she shrugged. “A peace offering.”

“You don’t have anything to make up to me, Liv.”

Her lips twisted into a sad smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “We can talk on Sunday. I have to get back to work.”

He rolled those words over and over in his head as he drove to the small, three-story apartment building that he now called home. Thought about them as he took some melatonin, darkened his room and forced himself to sleep. They were the first thing on his mind when his alarm told him it was time to get up and, fifteen hours later when he dropped back into the exact same spot, he still hadn’t made any more sense of them.

In between he hadn’t thought of Liv much, or her words, because that was how he pretended the dangers he faced every day at work couldn’t touch her. That the long stretch of wild lake shore on the peninsula wasn’t prime drug-trafficking territory and he hadn’t spent the last handful of hours waiting for a transfer bus to take some grower peons to the county jail. It was a drop in the bucket. Last night’s bust hadn’t netted any of the bosses—their goal in moving it up three days.

It was possible that all three grow-ops that had been hit at once in a coordinated sting just happened to only have recent hires on site. More likely was the extraordinarily unsettling possibility that they’d been tipped off. And

with only twelve hours' notice, that narrowed the pool of potential turncoats to the officers involved and a limited number of support staff. All trusted.

When they'd returned to the detachment office, Dean Foster had thrown a chair across the room. Rafe couldn't blame him—and while Dean had been letting loose in a rare tantrum of epic proportions, Rafe had quietly been watching the room.

It wasn't necessarily in their house. Three busts, three detachments. And a lot of tactical unit officers brought in from across the province. But he didn't let out a sigh of relief when he only saw matching anger on the faces around him. That meant nothing.

Cops made epic liars.

On his way out, Dean had quietly stopped by Rafe's desk and suggested he come over later in the afternoon for a beer, an offer he was definitely going to take his friend up on.

The Fosters and the Minellis had grown up together. Dean and Zander had been in the same grade. Three years junior, Jake and Rafe had idolized their older brothers. Funny how that handful of years faded into nothing in adulthood. Even the younger siblings were all grown up now. Matt and Tom, both twenty-eight. And then the babies, Sean and Dani—the only girl between two families. It was like she had seven older brothers—and resented the shit out of it.

Heaven help the asshole who's stupid enough to fall in love with her.

Dean and Rafe were the only two cops in the family. Matt and Dani worked together at Bruce EMS. Zander was full-time army out west. Jake owned his own construction business. Tom was a park ranger in the provincial park system that dotted Bruce Peninsula. And Sean…he liked to tell people he was an adventure racer. Rafe knew that the younger man grabbed more short-term Army contracts than anyone else in their reserve unit, went on every available course, and he'd jump at the next opportunity to go overseas. That worried Rafe, but Sean was a good kid. And not much of a kid anymore, but that was part of the problem. All of his brothers had tours in Afghanistan under their belts. Sean's bad luck was being too young. By the time he'd graduated university and finished his officer training, the Canadian Forces were packing up in the

sandbox.

And Rafe, who was currently serving as Sean's second-in-command—2IC—in their section…his only overseas experience had been a training tour in Dubai. It hardly qualified him to offer counsel. Maybe it was time to loop Dean in on the situation.

And just like that, Rafe realized he'd spent half an hour thinking about everyone he knew except Liv. His Olivia, whom he'd lost for precisely this reason. He shoved the Foster brothers out of his head and thought about what Liv might want to tell him—feel compelled to tell him—that would make her sad.

Another thirty-three hours and she'd tell him herself, but he wanted to get this on his own. Wanted to show up at her house the next day with a bottle of wine and newfound husband wisdom.

— —

THEY HADN'T HAD MUCH of a chance to talk about work before Jake and Matt showed up. That led to a re-cap of Thursday night's trip to Lion's Head. Matt's version of events cast Rafe in the weeniest of lights, of course.

"This dude had a hot chick crawling all over him, and he couldn't even get it up."

"Fuck you, asshole, see if I'm ever willing to be your wingman again." Rafe flipped his friend the bird before grabbing another handful of chips. They were on Dean's deck, in his backyard, which overlooked Rafe's old backyard. Now just Liv's.

After the kiss-that-wasn't-a-kiss-but-was-a-whole-lot-more yesterday, Rafe had a plan. Well, more of a pipe dream than a plan. He wanted Liv back.

She was working tonight. Otherwise he'd just hop the fence and try again. And even though he'd had a nap, he wasn't truly well rested, which he'd need,

because he figured that between him admitting he wanted her back and actually getting her back would be a lot of fighting and making up.

“Stop staring at her house.” Jake slid into the chair next to his and handed over a cold beer.

“It’s my house.” He knew he’d just growled at his best friend and he didn’t care.

“Hasn’t been for two years. Time for you to get over her, dude.”

He didn’t answer. No point in admitting that he hadn’t done that yet, and wouldn’t pretend that he was going to.

“So who was the hot chick?”

“You know what, Jake? Instead of giving me a hard time after the fact, how about *you* go out with your brother. Natalie would have been happy to sit in your lap most of the night instead of mine.”

Jake made a face and Rafe snorted. “See? It’s not me. Maybe we should all stop measuring ourselves against Matt’s oversexed libido. Hooking up isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Matt cackled. “Trust me, it really is. Both of you would be much happier if you’d had a roll in the hay the other night. And you actually have to go through with the hook up before you get to pass judgement on its value. When was the last time either of you got laid?”

“No comment,“ Rafe and Jake said at the same time.

“That means an embarrassingly long time. I’m guessing…not since Olivia for Rafe, and not since college for Jake.” Matt let out a high-pitched yelp as his older brother dove for him. Rafe chuckled to himself as the deck thumped over and over again with flailing Foster limbs. Some things never changed. And never stopped being funny.

Dean plopped into the chair Jake just vacated. “We’re getting too old for this shit, man.”

Rafe grunted. Matt and Jake rolling around like idiots at least served as distraction from the bigger problems in their lives. “How about you? Still seeing that lady doctor from Port Elgin?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“A ringing endorsement for monogamy.”

Dean sighed. “We’re not exactly…I’m pretty sure I’m her piece on the side. Her ex-husband lives in Toronto, and she’s been making a lot of weekend trips away.”

Rafe knew his first reaction should be disappointment for his friend, but all he heard was the phrase *piece on the side* over and over again in his head. It made him see red. “You think she wants him back?”

Another sigh. “Who knows? Probably telling that I’m most annoyed about having to go back to condoms, right?”

“When did you…”

“At the start of the summer. We both got tested, ya know? And then a few weeks ago she pulls out a rubber and says, ‘maybe we should use this…less messy.’ Except the clean up had always been my job. No skin off her nose. So…” He made a clicking noise with his tongue. “There ya go. I don’t know, maybe I’ll end it.”

Rafe didn’t bother to point out that obviously Dean was better off without that drama. Not his problem. But jeez…if Liv had slept with someone else, he’d lose his ever-loving-mind.

Cold, clammy fear punched him in the throat. *He’d know if she’d slept with someone, wouldn’t he?*

If she had dated, he’d need to make his peace with that. Wasn’t sure how he would, because the thought of someone else’s hands on her hips, another man’s mouth on her neck…that enraged him. No. Enraged was an understatement.

But he sure as shit wouldn’t shrug over it.

He definitely needed a plan. Taking Natalie to the diner for breakfast had been a bonehead move, but it had crystallized the fact that Liv still loved him. And if that was the case, they’d made a monumental mistake.

No, *he* had made the mistake. He’d chosen his town and his jobs over the woman who meant more to him than all of those put together. He couldn’t quit and moving would be tricky, so declaring his love at this point would be an exercise in stupidity, particularly considering he’d tried once and had to back off because of work. But he wasn’t going to be content just circling in her orbit

anymore. Somehow, he was going to find a way to be the man she deserved.

CHAPTER THREE

HE BROUGHT wine and a winning smile. She was in trouble.

"Nope. We're not opening that." She shook her head as he grinned and stepped inside. The temperature outside was dropping and he was wearing a leather jacket she hadn't seen before over jeans and a white t-shirt. He looked good. They didn't need to add alcohol to the mix for her to feel unsteady about what was going to come next.

And it wasn't them, together, in an orgasm-fest for the ages. What happened Friday morning could not be repeated. Not when she'd made up her mind about moving forward with her life in a way that didn't involve Rafe Minelli and his future conquests.

If he wore that jacket around town, there would be a lot of conquests in his near future. Hot damn.

"Then put it on your wine rack or something. I didn't want to come empty handed." He handed it over but didn't let go right away. He pressed the bottle into her hands and stared at her intently as if he was trying to unlock her secrets.

She was only hiding two things. One she was just trying to work up the courage to share. The other—that he still melted her from the inside out with his chocolate brown eyes and stupid dimple—was locked in the vault.

This wasn't the first time he'd come over since moving out, but it had been at least nine months. He'd taken the Christmas lights down and replaced the weather-stripping on the front door, and she'd given him a stiff thanks at the door. So he hadn't seen—

“You painted.”

“Yeah.” Because the warm yellow had reminded her too much of him.

“By yourself?” He turned around slowly in her living room, formerly their living room, an inscrutable look on his face.

“It was pretty easy,” she muttered. He’d taken half the furniture, which left a lot of room to move stuff around and create bare walls.

“I like the beige.” He was totally lying. Taupe, oatmeal, canvas … didn’t matter what she called it, he’d never wanted any neutral colours in their space.

“Have you made any other changes?”

“Uhm, I tiled the backsplash in the kitchen.” She pointed the way, which was stupid. They’d bought the house together. He knew where the kitchen was. Had made her coffee in it almost every morning for three years, even if he was gone before she woke up. Had perched her naked on the counter and knelt in front of her, licking—

“Looks good.” He glanced back at her, his gaze lingering on her pink cheeks for a moment. “A lot of good memories in here, huh?”

He couldn’t know what she was thinking, not exactly, but her breath caught in her throat nonetheless when he patted the counter. “Come here.”

She shook her head in short, choppy movements. *Nuh-uh*. They needed space between them. Loads of it.

“I’m not going to bite, Liv.” His voice was low and rough, like he was actually promising to bite her all over.

“I’m not so sure about that,” she teased as lightly as she could.

He gave her a long, hard look before smiling ruefully. “Yeah, I wouldn’t take that bet. So what’s for dinner?”

And just like that, the mood shifted. “Beef stroganoff and a salad.”

He kept his distance as she worked on the salad, flipping through a newsmagazine on the table. When she pulled a bottle of salad dressing out of the fridge, he moved to take it from her. She noticed the pile of opened mail at the same time he did and cursed under her breath.

“What’s this?” He fingered the red flagged letter from the hydro company and she winced.

“It’s nothing. I just forgot to pay that bill.” She watched as he flipped the letter over and frowned.

“Three months in a row?” The incredulous look on his face told her he didn’t buy her excuse. “It says here they’re cutting off the power tomorrow.”

“I paid it last Wednesday,” she mumbled. “It’s fine.”

“The whole balance?”

No, just the minimum, but he didn’t need to know that. “It’s fine,” she repeated, swiping the mail from the counter and dumping it in the nearest drawer.

He shook his head. “Obviously not. I’ll give you some—“

Tight, angry words shot up her throat and she swallowed them back, holding up her hand instead. “No.”

“Liv, this is still my house, too. If the costs are too high—“

“Then it’s time we sell it. That’s the only conversation we’re going to have about money, okay?”

He clamped his mouth shut and leaned back against the other counter, crossing his arms. “I don’t want to sell.”

Even though it was her plan, deep down she didn’t want to either. Hot, sweaty memories of the night they moved in flooded her mind unexpectedly and she turned to the sink so he wouldn’t see the pink of her cheeks or the bright tears in her eyes.

“Where would you move?”

Pine Harbour didn’t have many rental options. Rafe lived in the only apartment building. There were two units above his mother’s cafe but that was obviously out of the question, and any house would be out of her price range.

He figured out her plan just as she opened her mouth to confess, and from the sound of his voice at her back, he was pissed. “You’re leaving.”

“It’s for the best,” she whispered. She couldn’t hang around to see him move on, and it didn’t matter that he’d almost kissed her. *Twice, both times acting like you were an oasis in the middle of a freakin’ desert*. Didn’t matter, she reminded herself, because they’d scorched enough earth in their divorce that really getting back together wasn’t going to happen. If they kissed, and oh god did she want

that more than her next breath, they'd tumble into bed. And on the other side of a torrid love affair with her ex-husband stood her ex-mother-in-law, ready to brand her as a hussy and drive her out of town.

She wouldn't be pushed. If she left, it would be with her head held high. Rafe needed to not kiss her, end of story, and the only way that was going to happen was if she put some significant geographical distance between them. She cleared her throat and raised her voice enough to claim bravery, however false it might be. "I moved here to be with you. We're not together anymore. It was a mistake to stay after the divorce."

"You have friends here," he rasped, and she wanted to turn and look at him. Wanted to soak up the hungry, needy look she imagined was scrawled across his face and pretend it was enough to pull them back together.

But it hadn't been enough to keep them together in the first place. Nothing had changed on that count. Rafe wanted her if it was easy. He wasn't willing to fight to keep her as his wife. She deserved more than that. For the umpteenth time, she promised herself that being alone was better than being lonely inside a marriage. "No, Rafe. I have *you* here. And I don't honestly see how we can be friends. Not really. Not when we can't openly date other people in front of each other."

"Is that what this is about?" His jaw clenched and his dark eyes grew even darker.

"Of course it is!" She shook her head. "The other morning, that was torture for me."

"I told you that nothing happened."

"Really? Because that's not what Matt Foster says."

He frowned. "What did Matt…when did he…"

"At the diner yesterday. He came in for lunch with Sean. He didn't tell me, exactly, but it's a small place and he wasn't quiet." Damnit, she didn't want to cry. She blinked furiously and bit the inside of her cheek to keep the tears at bay. "You kissed her. She sat in your lap for hours and you touched her and kissed her."

He stared at her for a minute, his face twisted in unexpected anger. "So it's

okay for you to want to see other people but not me. Not after two years."

She lost her fight against the storm. "It should be okay," she sobbed. "It needs to be okay. And yet…it's totally not."

Her shoulders shook with emotion as she sucked in giant breaths, desperate to stop crying. She bowed her head and vaguely noticed Rafe move behind her and turn off the heat on the stove. He gently steered her by her shoulders, his big hands warm and comforting, to the couch. "Here," he said gruffly, pushing her to sit before joining her and tugging her to lean back against his body. The afghan from the end of the couch ended up around them both as she pressed her face into his stiff shoulder. She fit perfectly there, moulded to his side.

"Liv," he rasped her name quietly, his lips brushing her forehead. This clearly wasn't what he'd planned—for tonight or for their lives. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to move." It was the only possible solution, even if it hurt to think about leaving him behind for good.

"I don't want you to go." He sighed. "I know that's selfish. I can't imagine you not in my life."

Regret for all that could have been sat like a lead blanket on her chest, and she sighed. They couldn't live in the past. "This can't be what you want, though."

— —

HOW COULD HE ANSWER THAT? What he wanted was Liv and this house and a bunch of kids. No grief for working two jobs. He'd tried once to suggest that if they had kids, she wouldn't be so lonely. That had been an epic fight, one he'd never be stupid enough to start again.

"What do you want?" That was really all that mattered at the end of the day. His displeasure was a secondary concern to her being happy.

“Options, I guess. Right now I feel trapped here.” She’d said that before—that she’d felt trapped in their marriage. She’d wanted him to put in for a transfer to somewhere with more job opportunities for her, and he’d dragged his feet. He’d been damn lucky to get hired into the community he was raised in. Only an idiot would give that up.

Instead, he’d been the idiot who’d given up his wife. Had he known that was the choice he was making at the time, Rafe wanted to believe he’d have chosen differently. But in his heart of hearts, he couldn’t say for sure.

“What about going back to school for something?” If they sold the house, there’d be enough money for her to live on for a year or two. He didn’t want any of it.

She shook her head. “That doesn’t appeal to me anymore.” Her voice drifted up at him, a wistful, doubting slip of sound that got under his skin.

“You could do anything you want now.” His chest felt like it was cracking open and his eyes were hot and itchy. This felt like breaking up all over again. “Nothing’s holding you back.” *I’m not holding you back.*

They’d met, fallen in love and gotten married in a whirlwind three months while he was at the training centre for new police hires down south. When it was time for him to come home, he’d brought her with him as his bride. She’d had no clue what she was in store for. Neither of them did.

Six years later, she was leaving him, but it still felt like *he* was the one who’d failed her. Failed to be enough for her.

She sniffed quietly into his shirt, and he stopped talking. There wasn’t anything else to say. No words would magically make the pain disappear. They were well and truly over and it fucking hurt. So he just held her, fearing it might be the last time he ever got the privilege.

After a time, his stomach growled. He cursed himself as she sat up, the moment slipping away, but then she patted his mid-section and gave him a too bright smile. “Come on, let me feed you.”

It didn’t take long to reheat the sauce and cook up noodles. They ate in surprisingly comfortable silence, given the pile of emotion they’d just slogged through, and after they cleaned up the dishes together. Rafe knew he should

leave. He just didn’t know if he could.

He leaned against the open arch between the hallway and the kitchen and notched his thumbs into his pockets. “You’ll let me know if anything needs to be done to the house before we list it?”

Liv turned toward him, wiping her hands on her jeans and drawing his attention to the gentle roundness of her hips and thighs. He dragged his gaze back to her face, trying not to notice the swell of her breasts under her snug purple t-shirt. She nodded sadly and he fisted his hands to keep himself from dragging her in for another hug. He’d undone so much distance in a few short days. Tumbled so far down the mountain it felt like he’d never be able to climb back up again. She belonged in his arms. Too little, too late on that realization.

“I should go. Thanks for dinner.”

She followed him out to the door, grabbing his jacket off the side chair in the living room before he could. “Maybe we should have done this more often after…”

“Might have made it too hard.” He said, not caring if his voice sounded rough and raw. *He* was raw.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

He pulled out his keys and lifted his hand in a silent goodbye, but she shocked him by reaching out and grabbing him. She squeezed his fingers, her eyes big and bright blue under a glossy sheen of unshed tears.

“Don’t cry over me, Liv, I’m not worth it.”

“You like to pretend you’re so tough.” She smiled, a delicate, shaky curl of her lips. “How about you don’t cry over *me*, okay?”

He lifted their hands, still gripped together, and kissed her knuckles. “You’re totally worth my tears, baby.”

She hesitated for a minute, indecision warring with something else in her eyes, then she pressed up on her tiptoes and covered his mouth with hers, a bittersweet goodbye. He wanted to haul her tight against him, but he’d done that twice already and it had only made things worse. So instead he cupped her face with his free hand and let the kiss linger. She parted her lips to take a hitching breath, and he thought long and hard about licking into her mouth with his

tongue, stirring the passion he knew would never die between them.

A part of him wanted to push her, to fight and force his way back into her heart, but that only served his own purposes. His own happiness.

Letting Liv go was the only way to make *her* happy. Passion had never been enough to make up for his home town being a claustrophobic let down for her. He pulled back in regret and kissed her nose, then her forehead.

“Night, Rafe,” she whispered, pressing two fingers to her lips.

“Sleep tight, Liv.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SLEEP TIGHT. What a crock of horse manure. Olivia had tossed and turned in her stupid eggplant-coloured bedroom that seemed to leak R-rated Rafe memories from every nook and cranny.

Why on earth had she kissed him? He was going to walk out the door and out of her life. She'd managed to get through dinner—and a cuddle on the couch—without allowing the one thing she needed not to happen. And then she was the agent that made it happen.

As far as kisses went, it hadn't been anything naughty. Which only made it worse. Because as long as Rafe was the aggressor, she could push him back and pretend he was going too far. But now she had no cover to pretend she wasn't disappointed.

Disappointed. Holy crap. She'd wanted Rafe to kiss her, wanted him to touch and grope and grind against her. She was all kinds of messed in the head. She needed to focus on all that hadn't worked in their marriage, all the reasons they got divorced. Attraction and desire had never been lacking. It was more surprising that it had taken this long for one of them to try something.

Her alarm beeped at her again and she ground the heels of her palms against her gritty eyelids. Time for work. Monday mornings were busy but had a predictable routine to them. The semi-retired cottagers often didn't head back to the city until after breakfast, to avoid the glut of cars on Highway 9 across Sunday afternoon and evening. As it had been one of the nicer weekends of the early fall—not too hot, not too cold, gorgeous colours in the trees—that

population would have been up en masse.

And then there were the handful of people who worked in town who would want the four dollar special before their nine o'clock start. Shannon the bank teller and Lindsay the town clerk, sisters from another mister, for example. They'd snicker at that joke, or one just like it, and Olivia would laugh along for real. She liked the twins, as she called them, and Barry the insurance salesman and Kurt the…wood art guy. Rafe called it folksy shit that cottagers paid far too much for, but she kind of liked it. She liked everything about Pine Harbour.

It took her a long time to stop feeling like an outsider. Maybe because it was cottage country, and for half the year, more than half the population was so-called "city folk", but no one had ever made her feel like an intruder. That was all in her head.

Well, hers and her mother-in-law's. *Ex-mother-in-law.*

And now she was leaving, and maybe the only person who would be happy about that would be Anne Minelli.

She washed her face, grateful that it wasn't later in the year and dawn had in fact broken. It wouldn't be long before she was making the short drive over to Mac's in pitch black, which was just cruel. She was *so* not a morning person. Maybe she should have looked into being a bank teller or a town clerk. Except Pine Harbour only needed one of each, and Shannon and Lindsay seemed quite happy in their roles.

She arrived at work thirty seconds before her quarter to seven start time.

"Cutting it close, Olivia," Frank teased.

"Had to make myself beautiful for you, boss." She gestured at her black fitted t-shirt and dark blue jeans. Pretty much her standard uniform that took all of ten seconds to put on. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her face free of makeup other than a swipe of lip balm.

"It's a good thing Rafe likes you just the way you are."

"You do know we're divorced, right?"

He raised his eyebrows and snorted. "Do *you* know that?"

"Don't you have hash browns to make or something?" She'd deflect that conversation forever, even with Frank, who'd unexpectedly assumed a father

figure role in her life. A grunting, unemotional father figure, maybe, but he was all she had.

The door chimed just as she hit brew on the first pot of coffee for the day. Two men walked in, one in a slick, pretty suit that screamed *city*, the other in tight black jeans, studded belt, Doc Martens and a long-sleeved Social Distortion t-shirt. They looked about the same age, in their thirties, but other than that…yin and yang. And totally out of place in Mac's. Olivia was instantly curious.

"Morning. Coffee's just brewing. Can I get you menus?" she asked as they grabbed seats at the counter.

Suit nodded. She handed over the laminated sheets and gave them a minute before wandering back. "Can I get you started with a drink? Coffee or tea?"

Social D yawned. "Coffee for me, please. And keep refilling my cup."

Suit wanted the same. Olivia pulled two clean mugs from the tray under the counter. As she poured, she asked, "So what brings you guys to Pine Harbour?"

"Location scouting," Suit said at the same time as Social D said, "Cottage hunting."

"Seriously?" Suit looked at his companion and laughed. "Like anyone would believe we're buying a cottage together."

Olivia suppressed a lip twitch and lifted her hands. "We get all sorts of strange bedfellows in here. But I'm betting the location scouting is the truth, huh? That sounds fun."

Suit rolled his eyes. "Not fun if you leave Toronto at two in the morning because someone wanted to tuck his kids in last night, and be back for bedtime tonight."

She couldn't hold back her reaction to *that* revelation. "Awww! How many kids?"

Social D smiled for the first time since coming in and handed over his phone. "Three boys."

"Gorgeous." Not for the first time, she had a tiny pang of longing for the pile of love in the photo. Three mini-rockstar clones and a pretty brunette smiled up at her. She blinked away her personal thoughts—no point dwelling on what could have been. "Do you need another minute?"

They didn’t. She put up their orders, then greeted a few new customers, did a round with the coffee pot, and by the time she had a minute to stand behind the counter again, Suit had his business card out and was tapping it on the counter.

“Listen, you’re probably as good a place as any to start. We’re going to spend the morning driving around, but there’s no way we’re going to see everything we need to find in one day.” He handed over the card. *Greg DeCecco, Locations Manager, Dancelight Productions*. “This is Trey Rogers, he’s a freelance cinematographer working on this project.”

Social D held out his hand. “And you are…?”

“Olivia Minelli.” She shook his proffered hand. “This is pretty exciting, I gotta tell you. We get the occasional celebrity cottaging in the area, but a movie shoot would be neat.”

Greg nodded. “Here’s the deal. We’re here because my assistant did a pre-scouting mission and thinks Pine Harbour would be a perfect stand-in for a town in a project we’re working on. But given how far we are from the city—“ Ha. Spoken like a true Torontonian. There were two or three other cities that they would have driven through to get to the peninsula. “—We’d like to hire someone local to be a location assistant. It’s not a lot of money, more of an on-call type of gig, but might be good for someone just out of college or someone who wants a part-time job.”

Her heart started hammering in her chest. *Me, pick me*. She had a job. One that kept her pretty busy. But the lure of a bit of extra money that she could sock away. “Uhm, how long would you need someone to help out?”

“Six months, longer if they want to come on as a production assistant during filming, but our department will relocate here once filming starts, so that’s optional. Filming will start in April, if all goes well. We have a list of key sites that need to be sourced in one central area, then a list of secondary sites that could be filmed elsewhere—”

“But that’s getting a bit ahead of ourselves,” Trey interjected. “If you know anyone who might be interested…”

Could she stick around for another six months? A nervous flutter started in her gut. “Well…maybe me.” She offered what she hoped was a winning smile.

“Depending on the terms, of course. I work here thirty-five hours a week, but I do split shifts sometimes, and finish early other days. I might have time for whatever you need.”

Behind her, Frank cleared his throat. “Hey, traitor. Orders up.”

“Settle down, mister.” She set their breakfast specials in front of them. “Anyway, it sounds interesting.” She needed something interesting in her life. Something that wasn’t Rafe, and wasn’t racing out of town without a plan.

“Can you email me a resume?” Greg lifted a reassuring hand at what must have looked like apprehension on her face. “Honestly, we don’t need many qualifications other than *knows Pine Harbour better than us*. But HR likes us to cross our t’s and dot our i’s.”

“Yeah, I can do that.” Behind her, Frank dinged the bell.

Greg and Trey left with a wave right in the midst of the first breakfast crush, right before Deena, the second waitress, showed up.

At ten, once they hit the mid-morning lull, Frank waved her away when she asked for an hour. She dashed home and googled both men and the company. Reassured they weren’t scam artists, she sent off her resume to Greg’s email address, including a couple of questions about compensation and a job description.

When she returned to the diner for lunch service, her city visitors were waiting. Greg waved his phone at her. “I thought it would be easier to answer your questions in person. And eat whatever Frank has on special because it’s sure to be delicious.” He winked at her as the man in question made a pleased harrumphing noise from the kitchen.

“I think that bought us ten minutes,” she whispered and pointed them to a booth. Them coming back was a good sign. It had to be.

“So here’s the deal…” Trey outlined what they needed—someone who could take video and pictures on demand—fill in the details of the high-level sketch from the two trips up north by their staff—and do some legwork in advance of their monthly visits.

“What should I say to property owners?” Olivia didn’t want to misrepresent a film studio. But the thought of playing a small part in the making of a movie

made her want to squeal with glee. *This* was something fun and exciting that didn't involve her heart or her ex-husband.

"Nothing, hopefully. We'll take care of negotiating contracts with property owners. We just want you to document what we can't see from our visits and internet research. As we get closer to filming, the role might expand a bit—that would be up to you. But basically, we need someone on-call for occasional *get up and go find something out for us* work. Probably once or twice a week for a few hours at a time, but it might be more than that."

"How much more?" She didn't want to burn out, but the thought of earning a few hundred bucks more a month was really appealing.

"Well, we'd pay a stipend of a thousand dollars a month to start, but if you ended up doing a lot we could increase that." She frowned, trying to do the math in her head, but every way she turned it that seemed like a lot of money for what they described. Misreading her silence, Trey glanced sideways at Greg. "We can go as high as twelve hundred dollars to start, but if that's not enough, then maybe we should find a teenager—"

"No, that's…fine." More than fine. Freedom-level fine. Super fine. She swallowed hard. "You swear to me this isn't anything illegal? My ex-husband's a cop."

Greg laughed. "The only thing illegal is how fast I'm going to drive back to city so this guy can tuck his kids in tonight."

Fair enough. "What do we need to do to make this official?"

— —

IT TURNED out that in the twenty-first century, it was pretty easy to get hired by a company five hours away. Within twenty-four hours, Olivia had a brand new iPhone and MacBook Air delivered by courier, property of Dancelight Productions, and an upgraded internet connection at home that allowed her to

connect via VPN to the Dancelight servers. She only had access to an empty Pine Harbour Project folder, which didn't tell her anything about this mysterious movie that she was going to help find filming sites for, but still…it was exciting.

She had a sheaf of papers to sign and send back, so she printed them before her shift and at a mid-afternoon lull, poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down in an empty booth to fill them out on her break. In an uncharacteristically social move, Frank slid into the seat opposite. "Pretty exciting stuff."

"I'm not going to let it interfere with work." A niggle of worry had eaten away at her all day, that Frank would be upset. She was excited about this project in a way that she just wasn't about serving coffee at the diner.

He snorted. "I'm not worried about that, Olivia. You've been a great employee."

She searched his face for a reason not to let her enthusiasm bubble over—she didn't find one. "A movie might be shot right here in Pine Harbour, can you imagine?"

"Should be a nice steady stream of income for a few months, no doubt." He kicked her foot gently under the table. "And it'll be nice to keep you around a little longer."

A single wet, fat tear rolled down her cheek, startling both of them. Frank turned red and Olivia busied herself with the confidentiality agreement in front of her. "Oops, it says here I can't tell anyone about the movie."

They both laughed. There was no way that it would stay a secret for long. Frank reached across the table and roughly patted her on the arm. "I never thought you'd work for me forever, Olivia. You think these movie folks are going to take you away from me before you hightail it out of town anyway?"

She flushed at the bald honesty. Her guilt was definitely misplaced. "No. They don't want to piss you off," she teased, knowing that Greg had phoned Frank earlier and made the initial inquiry about using the diner for some outdoor secondary shooting.

"I kind of like the idea of Mac's being memorialized like that," he chuffed. "And it's good to see you so excited about something that isn't Rafe Minelli, that no-good deadbeat."

She laughed again and tipped her head back against the booth's cushion. "You love Rafe."

"Sure, everyone loves Rafe. And you. But the two of you are like…" He scratched his chin.

She sighed. "I know, oil and water."

"Nah, that's not it. You mix well at first. Too well, as evidenced by him batting his pretty brown eyes at you and you falling into his arms last week." He lifted his hand at her gaping mouth. "I'm never going to say this again, Olivia, so let me have my piece now. You're more like two explosive chemicals—individually dangerous, but deadly in combination. And entirely unstable."

"You just saw us at our worst." When her marriage had started to fall apart, she'd quit working at Rafe's mother's cafe and started working for Frank instead. A heavy ache started in her chest. "We weren't always like that."

"I've been through two divorces, Olivia. Neither of them was quite like yours. Not by a long shot. And then the cold war you and Rafe have been playing at for the last two years? That's something else that's hard to wrap one's head around, I gotta tell you."

Olivia just sat there, stunned. She'd never heard Frank string together so many words at once. And they didn't feel good. "I don't know what to say."

"I can see you falling for him all over again. And if that's what's meant to be, there's probably no stopping it, but you gotta know it's not going to be smooth sailing."

She shook her head. "No. I took this second job to build up a little nest egg so I can leave. Rafe and me…we need more distance than Pine Harbour allows." In more ways than one, given how much her boss seemed to know about her divorce.

"We'll see." He thumped on the table. "Finish your paperback, young lady, then back to work."

CHAPTER FIVE

Six years earlier

"BABY, I'M HEADING OUT," Rafe quietly whispered in her ear, squeezing her hip in one last reluctant goodbye touch.

"Mmm-kay," she half-said, half-groaned. It was way too early for conversation. She'd woken up and made him breakfast his first few day shifts, but when he admitted that he preferred just a cup of coffee, she happily let him hit the brew button while she snuggled deep into the blankets and dreamed of what they'd do when he got back from work. "I love you."

"Not as much as I love you. I'll be home late, don't wait up."

"Only if you promise to wake me up when you get in." She squeaked as his hand slid around to cup her bottom, his fingers teasing between her cheeks.

"I promise to wake you up with dirty demands every night for the rest of your life, my beautiful wife."

When she roused again, he was long gone and her legs rubbed restlessly against each other. She blushed at the heat that instantly bloomed as she thought of Rafe's hands on her. She'd been so nervous when he'd proposed—yes, she felt things for him that she'd only read about in romance novels, and it felt like the real deal, but marriage? And a move, way up north?

She'd been working at Starbucks, it wasn't like she'd left behind a major career, but six months earlier she hadn't even known this man and now she was completely dependent on him. It wasn't a permanent situation, this housewife

business. She was looking for a job, but with her limited resume, she wasn't qualified for much.

And yet…they were making it work. And much of the time, just *making it*. Which definitely worked for her. Her husband was walking sex dipped in sugar.

A knock at the door interrupted her horny reflection. When it repeated a minute later, she dragged herself out of bed. Who would want to see her at eight in the morning? She was halfway across their small apartment before she realized there was only one possible answer. A quick glance at her bare legs peeking out from underneath one of Rafe's green army shirts had her turning around—she needed to be wearing her own pyjamas, buttoned from tip to toe, before she opened the door.

"Anne, what a pleasure!" she said twenty-five seconds later, quite out of breath as she gestured to their thankfully tidy sitting area. "Come in!"

In the two months they'd been in Pine Harbour, they'd had dinner at Rafe's parents' place every Sunday night he wasn't working—seven long meals that hadn't given her any insight into how to win over this woman. The rest of his loud, loving family was a different story. She'd bonded right away with Rafe's nineteen-year-old baby sister, Dani, and his brothers were all awesome. Even his dad seemed to like her. But Anne Minelli had proved a tough nut to crack.

"Rafe is at work, I'm afraid."

"I know, I came to see you."

"Me?"

"I understand you've been circulating your résumé around town."

"Yes, I'd like to find a job."

"You didn't apply with me."

"I'm sorry?"

"I own a cafe and a catering company. You're a waitress. Is there a reason you don't want to work for me?"

Olivia could think of at least two primo reasons right off the top of her head, but instead she shook her head. "Of course not, I just didn't want to put you in an awkward position."

"I'm a professional, Olivia. You have nothing to fear in that regard."

“Well….” There was no good way to decline the offer. Crap. “Of course, I’d be honoured if you’d consider me for a wait staff position.”

“This will be a good thing, dear. Give us a chance to get to know each other better, and if you both have jobs, it’s easier to get a mortgage.”

Olivia’s scalp prickled with new understanding. “We’re not in a hurry to buy a house,” she said tentatively, feeling out the other woman. Watching her carefully for any clue that she was on the right track.

Anne pulled her lips together tight and glanced around. They’d done their best to make the rental unit a little home. It didn’t look temporary. And until five minutes ago, Olivia had been quite proud of it. “You’re not happy here?”

“Here?” No way was she offering any new information.

“In Pine Harbour.” Her mother-in-law’s face settled into a mask. Clue-time was over, but Olivia had more information than she’d had before the day started, so that was something.

“Of course we’re happy here.” She leaned forward and smiled. “Rafe and I will probably be house-hunting in the spring. We’d love your help.”

— —

“YOU TOLD her she could help us find a house?”

“It was a trap, what else could I say?” She buried her face in Rafe’s chest. He’d come to bed naked and instead of sex, he’d gotten an earful about his mother. Really, it was his own fault for moving Olivia to his hometown.

“I’m sorry she came over.”

She rolled away from him, stretching out on her back. “It’s okay. I need to build a better relationship with her. At some point she’ll be my kids’ grandmother. Can’t have her bad mouthing me behind my back.”

Even in the dark, she caught the feral grin caused by her words. “Kids?”

“Eventually.”

He slid his hand over her belly—her still flat, unmarked, youthful belly. That he wanted to fill with babies. A smile twisted at her lips as he teased his fingers around her navel, then dipped lower, under the waistband of her panties. “You’ll be so beautiful pregnant.”

This was a dangerous game to play, one that made her want to flush her pills down the toilet and take a leap of faith. But even though they were married, they were still just getting to know each other. They weren’t ready, no matter how hot this conversation made them both. It did, though, and she couldn’t resist playing. “You like that idea? Filling me up?”

He groaned and took her mouth, hard and fast, at the same time as he floated his fingers over her sex. She opened for him in every way, kissing him and lifting her hips, moaning as he found her soaking wet. She wound her arms around his neck and pulled their bodies together as he shoved her underwear down her legs. He took her hard and fast, neither of them needing any more foreplay than the whispered words and lingering image of conceiving a child together.

They surged as one, her legs riding high on his waist as he braced his arms on either side of her face. He held each thrust deep inside her, and she wondered how he knew just how perfect that felt. “Ohmygodohmygod,” she chanted as he rocked over that spot again and again, sending her rapidly in the direction of a screaming hot orgasm. “Come with me, Rafe. Come in me.”

He lost it at those three words, as he always did, and she exploded around him. He pistoned his hips against her bottom, his hands tangling in her hair as he joined her.

The crisp, curly hair on his legs slid roughly against the sweat-slicked backs of her thighs as she collapsed beneath him, her limbs heavy with satisfaction. “God, that was…intense.”

He mumbled something into her neck about a wash cloth, and she pushed him over, leaving a loving kiss on his arm as she scrambled out of bed and hopped to the bathroom. “You know condoms would be less messy, right?”

“But not nearly as hot.”

“The post-sex crab walk is anything but hot.”

“I offered to clean up,” he protested lamely.

She shut the door, did her business, then ran a clean washcloth under the hot water tap before sauntering back to bed. She handed it over and curled up into his side with a yawn. “You cleaning me up usually leads to a second round of sex.”

He kissed her brow. “You saved us from that awful fate?”

“Mmm-hmmm,” she mumbled, and he said something else with a low, rumbly laugh, but she didn’t hear it because sleep had already tugged its all-encompassing warmth over her head.

— —

IT WAS NEVER good when Liv came home from work and slammed the door. She’d been working for his mother for a couple of months and he’d come to understand a lot about how her day had gone from how she came home. She dumped her purse on one of the piles of moving boxes, kicked her boots on to the mat beside the door, and stomped into the kitchen.

“Long day?”

She shot him a grumpy look over her shoulder as she filled the kettle at the sink. “Your mother is something else.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry, it wasn’t your stupid idea that I go work for her. That’s all on me.”

Something about that didn’t quite feel right, but he couldn’t sort out what. He’d told her over and over again that she didn’t need to work. He made decent money, and after a few years on the force, his salary would be more than enough to support a family. Until then, he supplemented with his army reserve duty. They were fine. But Liv wanted to work, and in Pine Harbour, her options were limited. And while she was happy to talk about babies in the abstract, she kept

taking her pills religiously.

He wasn't in a *hurry* to start a family, exactly, but it was on his mind. Maybe it was because he was three years older than her. Or that he came from a large family himself. Liv had a sister, who lived in Vancouver, and her parents were divorced and living at opposite ends of the province. None of them were close. Whereas even though Rafe's two younger siblings were at school in cities further south, they came home at least once a month for a family dinner. Speaking of which…

"Dani and Tom are going to be home this weekend. Ma wants to do a big dinner—"

"On Sunday, I know, she told me today." Liv ripped a tea bag out of a cardboard box then jerked the cupboard open, looking for a mug. He said a small prayer of thanks that he'd thought to do the dishes before she got home. At least their new place would have a dishwasher. And a backyard, which would be nice in the summer. It had been a long winter stuck in a tiny apartment together. Getting used to living together.

Even though he was twenty-five, he'd lived at home until he went south to for the three-month long Police College course after he was hired on to the OPP. As long as they paid nominal rent, his parents didn't say a word about any of their grown children coming and going. So this had been his first real home of his own, a fact that Liv found shocking. Even though she was only twenty-two, she'd lived on her own since she was eighteen.

Their differences made conversations like this a challenge for Rafe. If she was mad at him, why didn't she just yell at him? Tell him he was a fuckwad and how he could fix it? That's what his family would do. Well, his mother wouldn't say fuckwad. She'd call him an idiot.

"Hey, Ma hasn't said anything inappropriate to you, has she?" He was grasping at straws and he knew it.

Liv shot him a *you totally don't get it* look. No shit. "No."

"You want to tell me how I can make this better?"

"Make what better?"

"You're in a bad mood."

“Yeah, sometimes that happens.”

But it didn’t feel the same as when he had a bad day at work. Because when she rubbed his shoulders and kissed his head, it made it all better. And the closer he got to her as she simmered with undefined rage, waiting for the kettle to boil, the worse her mood seemed to get.

“I just need some space, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” But the week before she’d told him how much she missed him now that they were often working opposite shifts. Space seemed like the wrong thing, even if it was what she asked for. He hovered in the kitchen door for a minute, then returned to packing up the living room for the move.

She came and found him after half an hour and tugged him to bed. Four months into their marriage and this was still amazing to him, how much they continued to want each other—and how different it was than anything he’d had with women in the past.

She shoved his t-shirt up, splaying her small hands across his midsection and his dick jerked to attention. Her touch undid him every single time. “Liv,” he said, his voice rough with desire. “We should talk.”

“Nothing to talk about,” she breathed, sliding her hands north to circle his nipples, then higher still until he got the message and pulled his shirt off entirely. “I need you. I need this, us together. I need to feel your love for me.”

He watched as she lost her own shirt, then tugged her hair out of its ponytail. He slid his hands through her silky waves then lifted her effortlessly into his arms. “I love you with all of me. Not just my body. I love talking to you, baby, and I want to know about your shitty fucking day. Don’t shut me out.”

“I’m not. I just don’t want to talk about it. I want…” She wiggled in his arms and sighed as his mouth found the valley between her breasts. He breathed in the scent of her skin. Faint remnants of baby powder deodorant and a fruity body wash teased his nose, but mostly he just smelled her. His wife.

“I want you to be happy.”

“I am. Right now, with you…this is perfect.”

— —

"MASTER CORPORAL MINELLI, do you have a minute?"

Captain Jacobson strode toward him across the parade square and he stood at attention. "Yes, sir."

"There's an opportunity we'd like to put your name forward for, if you can get time off work."

"What sort of opportunity?"

"Dubai. Training, short contract. Thirty-three brigade has given up a spot and we can nab it if we're quick."

The provincial police force was supportive of reserve military service, but tours of duty were more tricky to accommodate. "When?"

"Go see the RSM, he'll get all the details for you."

An overseas tour was something any soldier wanted, reg force and reservist alike. Rafe hadn't had a chance before he joined the police force, and he wasn't sure when or if another short contract would be offered to him. He'd find a way to get the time off.

"And if your wife needs support while you're away, the regular provisions would be made, of course." The captain clapped him on the shoulder and moved on, leaving Rafe standing there, reeling. It wasn't just his decision any longer.

She was fast asleep when he got home. He tucked into bed with her, spooning her from behind. She made some welcome home noises, and he kissed the back of her neck. "Go back to sleep," he whispered as she wound her arm backwards around his waist.

Jesus, she was going to be pissed at him.

The next morning he got up extra early and made her favourite coffee. They were moving in two days, but the coffee machine would be the last thing packed and the first to come out of the boxes. Outside it was a cold early March morning, still dark, and he had no idea how she'd take the news.

Thirty minutes later, she sat and stared at him for just about as long as he'd

expected, her face unreadable. “Is it dangerous?”

He shook his head. “No more dangerous than any other business travel to the Middle East.”

“And you won’t have to go to Afghanistan?”

“No. But I would—if something freaky happened, another large-scale terrorist attack or something. I won’t lie to you about that. I’m a soldier, Liv, that’s my job. I’m not afraid of doing it.”

She tilted her head to the side and stared off into the distance. “I’ll miss you,” she said, her voice small and light. Like the words could float away if he didn’t grab on to them.

“It’s just three months. Ninety days.” The same amount of time he was at Police College and it took them to go from meeting to marriage. A blink of an eye.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

She offered a small, sad smile. “I’m not going to hold you back from your dreams.”

“Will you stay here?”

Her head jerked back. “Of course.”

“I just meant, if you want to go back to London, stay with friends or something.”

“No, this is my home now. Besides, your mother would have a fit if I quit for three months to go party while her son was off at war.”

“I don’t want you to be lonely.”

“That’s a given.” She shrugged. “I’ll manage. Maybe I’ll decorate this place while you’re gone. When do you leave?”

“Not until June.”

“Then let’s make the most of the spring together, yes?”

Yes. The tightness in his chest eased. It was going to be okay.

CHAPTER SIX

Present day

THE THOUGHT of going to a bush party would have made Olivia's heart ache a few weeks earlier. She'd loved them when she first came north. That first summer, while Rafe was in Dubai, his siblings and friends made sure she was invited to everything. Bonfires, beach parties, barbecues…even though she'd missed him like crazy, that summer had a lovely side effect of Olivia finding her new Pine Harbour self. Sort of. Enough of an identity that she didn't turn tail and run while he was gone. It had taken another five years for her to find something professional to get excited about.

She refused to think it was sad that her excitement was so high over a six month, part-time gig where she basically waited for a phone call to go take a picture of something. It was still more fascinating than anything she'd done in her life to date. And worthy of celebrating. So when Lynn Howard texted and invited her to a bonfire at Scott Turner's farm on Saturday evening, it didn't take long for her to accept.

For the first time in two years she didn't feel like she was just barely hanging on—to her independence, a livelihood, or her sense of self. She was going to celebrate. That Rafe might be there, and she knew it would be okay if he was… that was the icing on the cupcake. It might even be nice now that they'd had a bit more closure. Sure, his visit had been bittersweet and kissing him had probably been a mistake, but she hadn't woken up in a tizzy over it all week. She'd been

too busy. This would be a good test. Now that she had a second job, one that she was super excited about, maybe Rafe wouldn't have the same effect on her.

Wishful thinking.

As soon as she hopped out of the Howards' truck she saw him across the clearing. He was hauling sandbags out of his own truck and stacking them next to a big water barrel.

He waved and she returned the gesture, butterflies rioting in her belly. She needed back-up. Her sister-in-law answered on the first ring. "Dani, you need to come to Scott Turner's bonfire tonight."

A groan warned her this conversation wasn't going to go well, as did the protest that followed. "No. No, no, no, no, no."

"Jake isn't here." Olivia looked around, hoping that was true. She was the only person in Pine Harbour that knew about Dani's secret crush—she'd found out after the divorce, but even if she was still with Rafe, she'd have kept that news private. Nothing good could come of the Minelli brothers finding out their sister wanted their best friend.

"Why are *you* there?" Dani asked, dodging the rarely discussed but ever-present reality that she avoided any event where she might see Jake Foster tangled up with a woman. Olivia understood exactly how Dani felt, and suddenly felt foolish for thinking she could brass out a get together with Rafe. Seeing him at the diner was one thing—she was working, he was eating, and most importantly, that was before they kissed. And tangled in the woods. Cuddled on her couch. She groaned at the raft of fresh memories of his warm Adonis body wrapped around her. Dani correctly interpreted the groan as being related to her big brother. "Walk out to the road and I'll pick you up."

"No, I want to stay." Olivia tracked Rafe as he finished unloading the truck. He hopped into the cab and pulled it away from the bonfire area, parking it a safe distance back. He dropped the tailgate, spread out a blanket on it, and headed in her direction. Yep, she definitely wanted to stay. Crap.

"Don't do anything with my brother."

"I won't." He walked leisurely, giving her plenty of time to start moving in another direction. She stayed where she was.

“You will. You still love him and he’s an idiot who will never be good enough for you.”

“I won’t, I don’t, he’s not, and that’s not what this is about.”

“What is this about? We live in a small town, honey. Everyone will know what you guys do tonight.”

“We’re not going to do anything.” Rafe stopped in front of her, a wicked grin slicking across his face as he caught her last words. *Dani?* he mouthed. She wouldn’t talk about him with anyone else. She nodded and licked her lips. “He’s my friend.”

He gave her a decidedly heated look that peeled away at the statement, revealing it as mostly a lie. They were friendly, for exes, but at the first whiff of him moving on she’d lost her mind. They weren’t friends. Not really.

“Maybe you two should just fuck and get it out of your systems. Lord knows you aren’t getting it anywhere else.”

“You’re one to talk, D.” Olivia was just dragging the conversation out now, but she was enjoying making Rafe stand there and wait for her. It was a harmless game that she’d never indulged in when they were together, but she liked feeling his eyes on her.

“Oh look at the time, I have to go wash my hair.”

“Come on, don’t leave me—”

“I’ll pick you up if you want to head out, but I’m not traipsing around in the woods like a teenager.” Jeez, Dani had such an old soul for a twenty-five year old. She’d chosen the wrong career—she would have made an excellent schoolmarm.

“No, I’m good. False alarm.” She hung up over the protests of her former sister-in-law and her pounding heart. Two steps forward, one step back. Nope, that would mean some progress. One step forward, two giant flirting steps back into the arms of her sexy ex-husband. Today those arms were wrapped in a white cotton long-sleeve t-shirt and a red flannel over shirt. She just might combust from the hotness. “Hey.”

“I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight.” The sun was setting, but he was close. Really close. And his eyes were bright and interested. “This is a nice

surprise."

"I didn't know you were going to be here." Strictly speaking, that was true. Knowledge and hope weren't the same thing.

"How've you been?" The past week had been the longest they'd gone without seeing each other since his tour of service in the Middle East.

"Well…" She shoved her hands in her pockets to keep from reaching for his forearm and squeezing. "I've got some news. Good news," she hastened to add as the happy look dropped off his face. "I have a new job, one that will keep me around for the next six months."

Her heart twisted at the eager enthusiasm on his face. Telling him was a mistake. Loving him was a mistake. Every conversation they had proved it was an impossible task, truly leaving Rafe Minelli. Too bad staying with him had been impossible too.

"What kind of job?"

"It's a long story…" She let him guide her over to his truck as their host lit up the carefully assembled giant pyre in the middle of the cleared field. A few coolers of beer were set up at the edge of the circle and he grabbed a bottle on the way past and lifted another in offer for her. She shook her head. She'd have a drink in a bit, but she didn't need alcohol right now. She needed calm, cool, friendly distance.

They wandered over to his truck and sat on the blanket spread out on the tailgate. She told him about the job, and he asked a bunch of questions, all of which she could answer. "You aren't curious about what the movie is called?"

He laughed. "Can you tell me?"

"Nope, I don't know myself." She sighed. "You're good at not being nosy."

"I'm curious. Really. I want to know everything you can tell me. But I get that there are some things you just can't share, and that's okay."

It was a part of his job she'd always struggled with, that confidentiality. "So I guess I shouldn't ask how work is going for you?"

"You can ask." He gave her a look she couldn't decipher in the half-light surrounding them. "I just can't tell you much."

"Crime still alive and well in Bruce County?"

“As ever.”

They continued talking, exchanging platitudes, but the flirting tone set with her call to Dani had slipped away while they talked about work. That was for the best, she told herself.

“I’m proud of you, Liv. Maybe this will turn into something you can do again.”

“Yeah, maybe. Let’s see if I still like it in the spring.”

He cleared his throat and looked at the ground. “You’re still thinking about leaving then?”

She nodded. “This doesn’t change anything. I want a fresh start.” Beside her, he was frozen, like a wall of granite, and she forged ahead. *Rip off the bandage*. “It gives us more time to settle everything with the house, but it doesn’t change __”

“Don’t sell the house.”

“I need my half of the equity in it when I move.”

“I’ll buy you out.” He stared straight ahead, his jaw set.

“Why would you want to do that?”

“I miss having a yard.” That was a total lie, and a trickle of fear rolled down her spine. No good could come of Rafe wanting to hang on to a part of her.

“It would be better for both of us if we had a clean break,” she whispered.

“Don’t tell me what’s better for me,” he muttered. “You lost that right with the divorce decree.”

“I never had that right when we were married.” God, she hated that whiny edge to her voice. “Now I can say whatever I want. Up to you if you hear it or not.”

Rafe obviously decided to be a diplomat and changed the subject. “There are a lot of good memories in that place.”

Sure, when he’d been there, they’d been happy. It had been when he was away—long shifts, weekend exercises with the Army, the constant tug from his family—that sadness had flowed through the rooms. Longing for her husband that was never fully satisfied when he was home.

“I’m not moving for a while yet. Let’s revisit this conversation in a few

months.” She reached for the beer bottle and their fingers brushed. A shiver danced up her arm at the rough slide of skin on skin, igniting way too much desire. A simple, accidental touch and she was squirming in her seat. Right after talking about moving on.

“You cold?”

She gave him a pointed look through narrowed eyelids. “Don’t you dare offer me your shirt.”

He gave her an innocent *who me* look and she laughed. “What? You look cold!”

“Here’s how that plays out,” she said, tipping the last of the bottle back. She licked her lips, enjoying the last drops of his beer, then pointed her finger firmly in his direction. “You wrap it around me, taking the opportunity to be all close and big and strong. Show off your muscles. Then I’m actually *surrounded* by your yummy smell, and now you’re cold, so you stay close. Put an arm around me. All in the name of warmth, of course. And then all of a sudden, your hand is on my ass, your tongue is down my throat, and everyone is talking about Rafe and Olivia making out in the back of a truck at a bonfire.”

He stared at her for a minute, then bit his lower lip and nodded. “Right. K. Well, I’m gonna grab another beer.”

He hopped off the tailgate and unbuttoned his shirt. She gasped as he tossed it into her lap before he ambled over to the cooler.

Between the moon overhead and the orange glow of the bonfire, it was almost like he had a spotlight on him. And from her perch on the back of his truck she felt like she could watch him safely from the darkness. Without anyone else noticing her hunger for his broad shoulders and long legs. His strong arms and tight butt. Even with the warm flannel that she greedily wrapped around her body—and it did in fact smell yummy—he still sent shivers down her spine. From thirty feet away. The man was dangerous.

He stopped to talk to a couple people on the way back, then handed her the beer before continuing to the cab of the truck. He returned wearing an OPP sweatshirt and she was absurdly disappointed that he’d gone and covered up most of the muscles she’d just complained he might show off to tease her.

He hopped back up next to her, leaving a solid six inches between their thighs, and smirked as she stared at the blanket between them. “Miss me?”

Like you wouldn’t believe. “Nope.”

“Can I have a sip?” He nodded to the beer, and it dawned on her that he’d only brought one bottle back from the cooler. The first one had been shared… well, sort of by accident. But he could have brought two back and he didn’t.

The hoodie, the space…that was for her. The public show of Rafe and Olivia just being friends. But the single bottle of beer, passed back and forth? That was something else. She twisted the cap off and drank first, then quietly handed it over. He kept his eyes locked on hers as he tipped the bottle back, his lips where hers had just been.

When he handed it back again, she reached across her body and took it with her right hand. Leaving her left hand pressed on the itchy blanket between their bodies. He slid the bottle into her grasp, then dropped his hand on top of hers.

They sat there for another hour, sharing that bottle and then another as many revellers took their leave. Rafe didn’t drink much of the last one, just holding it on his turns.

“Are you driving?” she finally asked.

“Hmmm?” He’d been staring at the fire for a few minutes. He slid her a curious look.

“You’ve stopped drinking.”

“Oh. No, Dean drove my truck. I’ve got the second row of seats, so we can take more people back.”

Leave it to cops to have a responsible bush bash.

“Can we give you a ride home?”

“I came with Ryan and Lynn, but…”

“Who’s driving?”

“Lynn, I think.”

His jaw clenched. “You’ll come home with us, okay?”

“Rafe?”

He rubbed his thumb over her knuckle and stretched his neck left and right before answering. “She disappeared into the woods for a bit. I wouldn’t be

surprised if she had a joint on her."

Olivia sighed. Her friend should know better than to bring drugs to a party at Scott Turner's farm. Or anywhere in public, but especially around cops. Jeez. And driving… "Yeah, I'd love a ride home. Thanks." She pressed her lips together, not sure how to ask the next question.

"I'm not going to do anything about it," he said roughly. "I didn't see anything and I'm off duty. Plus she's Ryan's wife, not that I'd let that stop me if __"

"She's a mother of three."

"Do you think she ever smokes up before she drives them around?"

That silenced her. Ugh. Maybe she should talk to Ryan. She looked around for her friend but couldn't see him. All of a sudden she didn't feel like drinking any more. She tucked the bottle against the wheel well behind her and lifted her legs up, wrapping her arms around them making a Livvie-ball, as her father used to call it.

"What are you thinking about?" His voice was quiet. She didn't look over at him again, keeping her gaze trained on the moonlit tree line instead.

"How we're too old for bush parties," she admitted. "And my dad…I miss him. That he's gone now makes me feel old too. Like…I should have done more, ya know? I don't have much to show for someone my age. This job is fun, but it's yet another temporary gig, ya know?"

— —

HE CRANED his neck at her in surprise. She felt *old?* She was three years younger than him and he felt like their lives were just beginning. He reached out and tugged at her ponytail. She turned her face back in his direction and dropped her cheek to her knees. She looked exactly the same as she did the night he met her at a house party in Woodstock. Fresh, innocent, and beautiful. The urge to

kiss her was overwhelming.

Instead, he pushed off the truck bed and moved to stand in front of her. “You want to dance?”

Someone had rigged up an mp3 player and a pair of portable speakers. A slow Guns N’ Roses power ballad floated around them. She slowly unwound her limbs and looked around.

“We’re among friends here, Liv. Dance with me.” *Let me take us back in time six years and start over again*. He wanted nothing more than to pretend he hadn’t fucked up the better part of her twenties. Flirt and touch and tease like they really could build a future together instead of having a history so tainted that his beautiful wife thought she’d missed out on something good.

She nodded and eased against him, her arms going around his neck and her head onto his shoulder. He slipped his hands under the borrowed shirt and found her waist. She giggled quietly against chest. “Your hands are cold.”

“You’re soft and warm. I’m not moving them.”

“I’m not asking you to.” They shared a long, warm gaze.

“Good.” If this was the reward he got for going slow, he’d pace his win-Liv-back plan out over the entire six months reprieve he’d been granted. They swayed back and forth in the shadow of his truck, even after the song ended and something faster set the tempo for the rest of the party. Laughter and jeers filtered through the dark as people got a little silly around the fire, but all he cared about was the woman he held in the circle of his arms. “You having a good time?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She wiggled closer. *For warmth,* he told himself, but his dick paid no attention to the caution. He knew the moment she found him hot and ready for a laundry list of bad ideas because she froze, then eased away just enough to pretend she didn’t know how much he was enjoying having her up against him.

“There’s a stag and doe next weekend,” he offered after he found his voice again.

“Yeah?” She sounded skeptical, but tempted. In the country, the pre-wedding fundraisers were often the only real opportunity for dancing. If he was flooded

with memories of slow dancing, maybe she was too.

"We could meet there or something."

"Are you asking me out on a date?" She tipped her face up to his and smiled. "That's a terrible idea."

"Don't call it a date. We could accidentally run into each other."

"And share a few beers? Maybe have a dance or two?"

"Would that be so bad?"

"Is your mom going to be there?" He heard the edge to her voice.

Hell no. They weren't fighting about his mom tonight. "Not her scene."

"We're not dating, Rafe. I'm leaving town in six months. And when I do, it's going to suck. Let's not make it worse."

"If leaving would be so awful, don't leave." There, he'd said it. *Don't leave*. Pathetic begging, something he'd promised himself he'd never do.

"Do you want to do this now?"

Listen to her list all the reasons why they don't work as a couple? It was a short list of two razor-sharp points, but Liv had a way of exponentially expanding the list until it filled hours of endless, torturous fights. They always started as conversations but devolved quickly into sniping matches. "Let's skip to the end where I'm an asshole."

She stiffened against him, and then shrank away. *Fuck*. "You're not an asshole, but you are a workaholic. And you come with a family that's… overwhelming, to put it mildly. And you shut down when I ask you for even a little bit more. More time, more attention—"

"You have my attention. All of it. All the fucking time. I can't get you off my mind." Why wasn't that enough?

She pinched her eyebrows together. That made two of them that found this frustrating as fuck. "For now, sweetie. But not forever. You live a life best suited to a single man. There's a reason why soldiers had to ask their officers for permission to marry way back when."

He rolled his eyes. "This isn't way back when. Guys in the army are married."

"Soldiers and cops?" She snorted. "I think the divorce rate is pretty high in

both professions. Mix them together and you're better off in a relationship like Dean's. Something easy. No strings."

A spark of something stupid and awesome came to life in the back of his head. An idea that he was surprised neither of them had suggested yet. "Let's do that."

"What?"

"Something easy. No strings."

She laughed, then stopped when she realized he was serious. "No."

"Why not?"

She reached between and slowly tucked her fingertips just inside the waistband of his jeans. "Because when I do this…" She stepped closer and pressed up on her tiptoes, bringing her pelvic bone up against the bottom of his quickly hardening junk. "And this…you lose your mind and say stupid things like you love me. We're a mess of strings already. We can't fall into bed again. It's a recipe for disaster."

"I do love you." The words spilled out with ease, and he was relieved to not have to hold them back. "But you're right. An affair isn't right for us. We need to take this slow."

"*This* isn't anything."

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her against his body. "This is everything, Liv. And I'm going to find a way to make it right."

CHAPTER SEVEN

PART OF STARTING anew with Liv would also have to be repairing his relationship with his mother, because eventually he was going to have to ask her to be nice to his wife. So without a plan but with a clear mission, he headed over to his parents' house a few days later, when he knew Dani had an evening shift. The last thing he needed was to have mother and daughter picking sides and hollering at each other over his head. Besides, he wasn't going to dive right into the Liv conversation. That could come later.

Unfortunately, his mother did not get that memo. He found her in the kitchen baking bread. She barely let him sit down before serving the first volley. "According to Toni Ross, you were seen leaving your former residence at four in the morning on Sunday."

"Is that right?" Rafe couldn't care less what the uptight shrew across the road from Olivia thought of his comings and goings. For that matter, he didn't really care what his mother thought either. He didn't bother to set the record straight that he'd just walked Liv to her door, and it was closer to midnight than four a.m.—and Dean had been sitting in the truck the whole time. She wouldn't believe him.

"It's not the first talk of a reunion that I've heard about."

"We're not reuniting, Ma." Not yet. They were just…rediscovering each other. Maybe. Liv still hadn't given him a clear answer on if she'd be at the stag and doe. The next time he saw her, he was going to get her to say yes.

"So if someone said they saw you kissing in the woods behind the diner?"

It would, strictly speaking, be a lie. "I haven't kissed Olivia in two years." *She kissed me a week ago, but I kept my hands mostly to myself.*

"That city girl has you wrapped around her finger, Rafe. It's not healthy."

"Ma, you can't talk about Liv that way."

"I'm your mother. I can talk about whatever I want."

"Not if you want me to listen." He shook his head. "You're the only person who never welcomed her to Pine Harbour."

"I gave her a job!"

"So you could keep her close and monitor her every activity."

She gasped. "Rafaelo, that's not true."

"No?" He stood up and grabbed his jacket.

"What are you doing?"

"Something I should have done two years ago. Setting some boundaries."

"This isn't very mature." Her voice slithered under his skin, the reproach making him doubt himself for a second before she made his point for him. "Besides, she never embraced our family."

"Why was it her job to build the bridge?" She didn't have an answer for that. Obviously didn't think she needed one, because she waited until he winced in apology. "I'm sorry, Ma. Look, I need you to dial it back. I'd prefer if you actually tried to make an effort to like her—"

She sniffed. "I don't know where you got the idea that I hate her. I don't, you know."

"It never felt like that to Liv." He took a deep breath. "It doesn't feel like that to me, either, I gotta tell you. Maybe if I'd said something early on, Liv wouldn't have left me."

Silence was rare in the Minelli household, but it was never a good thing. This was no exception. His mother's back stiffened and she resumed her kneading, this time without the commentary on his life. Which is what he wanted. Too bad thirty-one years of conditioning had trained him to feel badly for hurting her feelings.

"Ma…"

"Don't *Ma* me, Rafe." Her voice was cold and stiff.

“Maybe this isn’t an all-in-one-day kind of conversation.” He waited for her to say something, anything, but she’d returned to the silent treatment. He thought about getting up and leaving but that didn’t help Liv at all. Or himself. “Ma, I’ve missed feeling welcome here.”

“You’re always welcome. You should have moved here instead of that stupid apartment. Then maybe you wouldn’t feel like a stranger in your parents’ home.”

“I couldn’t. A part of me hoped it would be temporary.” *And moving home would have underlined all of Liv’s fears about Rafe prioritizing his family over her.*

“But it wasn’t. Doesn’t that tell you something about her character?”

“Sure does. It tells me she’s got backbone and self-respect.”

“You have no clue what it takes to make a marriage work for almost forty years. And if you think I don’t have a backbone—”

What the hell? “I wasn’t talking about you, Ma.” Not exactly. Without a doubt, Anne Minelli was tough as nails. “But you seem to have this idea that the perfect woman for me—for Zander and Tom, too, probably—is an empty vessel who can take on all our wants and make them her own. That’s not real life.”

“You’re a good man. And you deserve a good woman at your side, not one who’s going to walk away.”

“She wasn’t happy.”

“So? You think I’m always happy?”

No. His parents fought like cats and dogs at times. But they didn’t seem to *hate* fighting the same way he and Liv had. “That’s different. You guys always make up. Our fights…each one sucked a little more life out of our marriage.”

“Then she should have—”

“What, Ma? What could she have possibly done?” He was yelling now but he didn’t care.

Anne rolled her dough one last time and dropped the round, raw loaf in a baking pan. “She could have refused to let you go.”

Something in her voice gave him pause and he sat back down. “What’s going on, Ma?”

“When you were a baby, your father…” She wiped her hands and leaned

back against the counter. “This goes no further than this room, you hear?” She pointed her finger sternly in his direction and he nodded, struck dumb and unable to respond with any words. “He left me. Life with a wife and two young boys wasn’t all the fun and games he thought it would be, and he wanted out.”

Disgust at his father roiled in Rafe’s gut. “No.” He shook his head. “You wouldn’t take him back if he did that.”

“Take him back? I *dragged* him back. He was done.” She frowned. “And that would have been the end of our love story if I’d let him go.”

Memories from his childhood slammed into Rafe. His parents necking in the kitchen…the look of joy on his father’s face when Anne told him, in front of their three boys, that she was pregnant again…whispered plans for birthdays and Mother’s Days, year after year. “He loves you so much.”

She nodded. “He does.”

“And he left you?”

“It was a moment of weakness, Rafe. And not one he’s proud of, which is why I’ve never told any of you about it.”

He closed his eyes. “And you think that Liv and I…”

“It’s not the same thing. You don’t have children. But neither of you fought for your marriage. So no, I can’t respect her. You…well, you’re just lucky you’re my son. Because I don’t respect you for letting her go, either.”

“Even though you don’t like her?” He opened his eyes and shook his head in confusion.

“I liked her just fine. She should’ve cooked more and not been so damn resistant to having babies, but she was your wife and she made you happy. But now she’s dead to me.”

“Well, she’s not dead to me, so cut that out.”

“I just want you to be happy. Staying hung up on your ex-wife impedes that.”

“She’s my *wife*, Ma. The ex part is a legal technicality. There is no one else for me, don’t you get that?”

A pin could have dropped and he would have heard it in the long pause before his mother started yelling at him. “No, you idiot! I don’t get that. Are you planning to be miserable for the rest of your life? If she’s it for you, then you’ve

made a giant—no, colossal—error of judgement in signing damned divorce papers. You. Are. A. Fool.”

He started laughing. “Wow, tell me how you really feel.”

“It’s not funny. I don’t approve of how you two have carried on, but if she’s the one for you, then you need to fight for her.”

“I know. I’m working on it. But she’s skittish, as you can well imagine. I promise you, I’m not going to stay wrapped up in her if at the end of the day she won’t take me back. But I think she will.”

His mother poured him another cup of coffee, a silent sign of approval. She shrugged when he wrinkled his brow. “What?”

“You really don’t object?” He found it hard to believe that he’d been so wrong about how she felt about his wife.

His mother rolled her eyes again. “Drink your coffee and stop being ridiculous.”

— —

OLIVIA HAD SEEN Rafe three times that week. Each time, her heart had skipped a beat and her stomach had pitched itself into her throat. He hadn’t come in to the diner for breakfast. He just grabbed coffee to go twice, each time flashing a smile so sexy it melted another layer of her resolve not to have anything to do with him. And the third time they’d bumped into each other in Wiarton, the larger town thirty minutes south where Rafe’s detachment was located. She’d stopped for a coffee at Tim Horton’s on her way back from doing her weekly big shop in Owen Sound.

Her routine hadn’t changed in four years. When they first got married, they’d shared a car, so their big shops had to happen when Rafe had a day off, or he’d go at the end of a shift if he wasn’t too tired. But for their second wedding anniversary, he’d surprised her with a new-to-them second car—a five-year-old

Honda Civic that she still drove today. That had been the golden period in their marriage. The fighting started a year later, when he'd worked a double shift over the same weekend and didn't remember their anniversary until she tersely pointed it out four days late.

Every Wednesday she worked a short shift, so she took the afternoon to head south. When they'd been together, she would have looked for his cruiser, that familiar black and white shape that made her so proud. And once they'd split, she'd look for it in a different way—a mix of longing and apprehension that filled her with sorrow. The Bruce Peninsula detachment had a lot of area to cover, so the chances of him randomly being in the same place as her were slim to none. Over time, she'd stopped looking.

So when someone tapped her on the shoulder as she stood in line for coffee, she thought maybe she'd dropped some money. Instead she got a face full of navy blue flak jacket. She tilted her head up and was rewarded with a slow grin that said Rafe remembered just how much she liked his uniform. She blushed. "Coffee break?"

He nodded, his gaze never leaving her face. Maybe he liked the way she'd pinked up. She liked remembering how she used to strip him out of the uniform when he wore it home. He cleared his throat and leaned in close. "But if you keep looking at me like that, I might need to forgo the coffee and drag you back to my cruiser so we can make out a little."

God, that thought made her a little lightheaded. But it also made her laugh, which was a good thing. She chuckled and shook her head. "Oh, Rafe."

He grinned wider still. "Yes, baby?"

"Nothing." *Nothing*. She needed to remember that.

"I like it when you say my name like that."

"I didn't say it like anything."

"Mmm, I disagree. I heard a breathy little catch there." He dropped his gaze to her mouth. "And I liked it. A lot."

He needed to stop before she did something stupid. She lowered her voice and tried to sound stern. "Rafe."

He laughed. "Yeah, I like it like that, too."

“You’re incorrigible.” It was her turn to order, so she gratefully accepted the distraction and paid for a coffee and a small box of donut holes. She moved out of the way so Rafe could order, but she couldn’t force her feet to march out the door and over to her car. *Go*, she told herself fiercely. *Stop flirting with your ex*. She should pick a fight with him instead. That was the proper order of things. They broke up because he worked too much and she always came last in his priority list—if she rated at all. They should talk about *that*, not how much he liked it when she said his name.

He turned from the counter and nodded to an empty bank of tables. “I’ve got five minutes, want to sit?”

As she was a total glutton for punishment, she followed him.

“Grocery shopping trip?” he asked as they settled in opposite seats.

She lifted one brow in mock surprise. Of course he remembered, but she didn’t need to give him that inch. He’d already declared a freaking courting season, for goodness sake.

They talked about nothing and everything. She couldn’t concentrate on words when, with the addition of his uniform, his everyday dark good looks were transformed into pure bad-ass sex appeal. It didn’t help that he kept glancing at her out from under long, thick eyelashes. The looks were pure intent, nothing coy about them, and she was grateful he had to get back to work soon.

“Last weekend was fun,” he finally said, turning the conversation to them. *Them*. Jeez, she didn’t want to discuss the electricity zinging back and forth. “Have you given any thought to bumping into each other at Neil and Becca’s stag and doe?”

So much thought she’d been worried she might spontaneously combust. “Not really, I’ve been busy.”

His lips twisted in disbelief. “Yeah, I bet.”

She bristled, welcoming the affront because it was a more effective shield against his full-court press than her willpower. “I really have been.”

He frowned. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Liv.”

“I know.” She bit back a sigh. It didn’t matter. “Listen, I’ve got cold stuff in the car, so—“

“Wait.” He slid one strong hand down her arm and loosely manacled her wrist with a loop of two fingers.

“I can’t.” On any level. She couldn’t risk her heart again.

“Tell me how the new job is going.” He stroked his fingertips back and forth over the inside of her wrist.

She ignored the fluttery joy that sprang to life at his simple touch and tugged her hand back to her side of the table. “You tell me how *your* jobs are going.”

He accepted her mulish question and considered his response for a minute before telling her a few things. Probably nothing more than was published in the police beat report in the weekly paper, but still offered readily enough—something that had been missing when they were married. If she had the same agenda Rafe did, she’d accept the baby step in the right direction.

But she wasn’t a fool. They had no real future, and she wasn’t going to pussyfoot around their problems for a doomed affair. He might think he was playing for keeps again, but Olivia knew the truth. He was still hung up on them. They’d been good together, when it wasn’t awful. That desire needed to be excised, and not in a misguided reunion attempt. She braced herself for the lecture that was about to land on her. “What about the big bust two weeks ago?”

His shoulders flexed as he took a deep breath in and held it. His dark eyes lost their playful light and he stared at her for a long minute before lowering his voice and answering her in a clipped, angry burst. “You know better than to ask about that, Liv.”

“Everyone is talking about it.” She lifted her chin defiantly.

“It’s not safe for anyone to think that my wife knows anything—“

“Stop,” she cut him off in a rush. “Just…stop calling me that.”

“No.” He pulled his lower lip between his teeth and hooded his gaze. He was still tense, but he wasn’t yelling at her. Maybe they should have had more of their fights in public. Although that had never stopped him at the diner. Maybe it was because he was in uniform.

She’d always respected that he needed to focus on work, and a deep sense of shame washed through her gut that she’d slipped now after all this time. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything about the bust. I’m going to go.” She

pushed up to a stand and this time he didn't reach out to stop her. He let his words do the heavy lifting instead.

"You'll always be my wife." His voice was rough and tense, and then he stood and stepped right into her personal space. "And because of that, you can ask me whatever you want. I need to do better by you on that front. Listen more. But baby, there are some things I can't tell you. That I won't tell you. And you can be pissed at me about that all you want, but this time I'm not walking away because you're mad at me."

They were almost the right words. Beautiful, perfect words that made her heart swell and her sex clench. Stupid heart, stupid sex. Her head knew better. This had been a nothing conversation and it had put him on edge. If she let him close, it wouldn't take long for all the old hurt to bubble up and boil over. And he'd leave her again in a heartbeat.

"Fool me once, Rafe…You can try your damnedest, but there won't be a *this time*."

His jaw pulsed hard. But then instead of biting out a retort, he slid his sunglasses back on and smiled. "Keep saying my name, baby. As long as my name is on your lips, I've got hope we're going to make it."

— —

HE KNEW Liv thought he was delusional. He didn't care.

When he saw her car outside the coffee shop, he hadn't really thought about pulling in—he'd just done it, like a moth to a flame. Except no matter what she thought, there was nothing destructive about their love. They just hadn't known what to expect the first time around. They hadn't dated, not really. From the first night, he'd had the looming deadline of heading back up north in his head, and it hadn't taken long to decide he wanted to take her with him.

And then he lost her, and like a fool, he thought that would sort itself out.

So now they had another looming deadline. Six months instead of three. Too many similarities, really, but he was six years older and at least a little bit wiser. This time he was going to show her what he was offering.

It might not be what she wanted, not exactly, but it was what they both needed.

And for that reason, he had no doubt she'd show up at the legion for the stag and doe on Saturday night. Because he was her flame just as much as she was his.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LIGHTS FLICKERED ON, encouraging the last partiers to head somewhere else, and Rafe shoved his empty beer bottle to join its friends in the middle of the table. She hadn't shown up.

"You look miserable." Jake Foster dropped into the chair opposite him and he gave his friend the finger. "And thanks for that."

"I didn't see you here earlier."

"I had a date." Jake wrinkled his nose.

"Don't let Matt see you make that face."

"Who do you think set me up? I've already sent him a few texts suggesting what he can do with future blind dates." His friend hesitated for a minute, then leaned forward on the plastic covered table. "I wanted to ask you—"

Before Jake could spit out his thought, Dean clapped him on the shoulders. "Need a ride, baby brother?"

"Nah, I didn't drink anything."

"Good, then you can take me home."

"Hey, I was in the middle of talking to Rafe, ass-wipe."

Dean looked in Rafe's direction. He shrugged. Jake was such a girl. Who wanted to have deep and meaningfuls at the end of a Saturday night? Or ever? "I'm heading home, too. We can catch up later." He wasn't in the mood for whatever Jake had on his mind. He stood. *Whoa*. Who'd let him have so many beers? Shit. His apartment was only two blocks from the legion, so he'd walked over, but it probably wasn't good for anyone to see him stagger home.

Jake stood, his question forgotten. “Come on, I’ll drive you both home.”

“You’re a good brother, man.” Dean was obviously in that happy drunk stage. Rafe had passed that a while back.

“Let’s call Matt and Sean and put you on speakerphone while you repeat that.”

“No can do, buddy. It’s our little secret.”

Rafe snorted and pushed through the glass doors, not caring that the early October night was damn nippy. “Take him home first, Jake, he needs to be put out of his misery.”

“You’re the miserable one, but I’ll loop back.” Jake lived just outside of town, past Rafe’s apartment, in a house he’d built himself—the house that had started his contracting business. A big four-bedroom monstrosity.

“Why is your house so fucking big, dude?” Rafe stumbled against the dark green Foster Construction pickup truck. He managed to get the door open on the second try and climbed into the back seat, shoving aside a thick binder and a box of screws on his way.

Dean snorted. “The fucker wants a wife and kids.”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it.” Rafe leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Jesus, his head wouldn’t stop swimming. “Tell Dean about your date tonight.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Good, because I don’t want to share.” Rafe heard a heavy thump of a fist on denim and Dean swore as Jake lit into him. “Keep your damn feet off my dashboard.”

“You obviously didn’t get laid tonight.”

Rafe tipped his head forward and grimaced. “It’s a good thing Matt wasn’t here, he’d have a field day with the lot of us.”

“Is that why you’re drunk out of your gourd? Liv stand you up?”

Not exactly. She’d warned him she wasn’t interested. He just hadn’t believed her.

Jake turned off the main drag, then again onto Dean’s street. He didn’t bother to turn the truck off, just idled as his brother slowly and happily undid his

seatbelt. “Thanks, bro.”

“No worries. You need a ride to get your truck in the morning?”

“Nah, I’ll walk. Or maybe catch a ride with Liv on her way to the diner.” Dean flashed a wicked smile back at Rafe, like he knew what he was doing, but the asshole had no clue. Rafe was over the centre console and rather ineffectively whaling on his friend before the smile had made it all the way across his face.

“Rafe, don’t be an idiot,” Jake yelled as Dean shoved his door open and tumbled out, laughing the whole way.

Rafe followed, weaving back and forth. Why were there two Deans? That made it hard to hit him. “Leave her alone.”

“Man, I was just…she’s my friend.”

“Well she’s my wife!” he yelled.

Both Deans stopped and shook their heads. “Not anymore.”

Bah. What did they know, anyway? Rafe pushed away at the air around him and spun in a circle. In front of him loomed Dean’s house. And forty feet behind that was his woman. He staggered toward the side path to the backyard. Behind him the Foster brothers fought about who should follow him but he didn’t care. He’d grabbed a ride as far as he needed tonight and he was done with them.

“Liv!” he hollered as he jogged into the backyard, triggering the motion sensor floodlight. “Livvie! My Olivia fair!”

Behind him, Jake snorted. “I need to record this for blackmail purposes.”

Rafe turned. “That’s a great idea, let’s make a video.”

Dean stepped between them. He was drunk too, so why wasn’t he staggering around? “Time for bed.”

Sure thing. He notched his thumb toward his house. Where his wife was sleeping. “I’ve got one over there. She didn’t come to me, so I’m going to her.”

“If she didn’t come out tonight, man, that means she doesn’t want you banging on her back door in the middle of the night.” Dean reached for him and Rafe danced out of the way. Except he wasn’t nearly as nimble as he wanted to be, and he tripped over his feet and tumbled sideways, hitting the ground hard.

“There’s a time and a place for crazy declarations of love, man, and this isn’t

it.” Jake gestured to the house. “Want to crash on Dean’s couch? Think this over and maybe do it in the morning if it seems like a good idea once you piss out all that beer?”

“What do you know about love? She’s my fucking soul mate.”

Jake gave him a long, level look. “I know what it’s like to want something you can’t have.”

“I can have her.” He ground his teeth together.

“You’re divorced for a reason, Rafe. You guys fought constantly for months. Don’t you remember?”

He really didn’t. Sure, there had been a few fights, but all he could remember was the soft, warm heat of Olivia sleeping next to him and how much he fucking missed that. He turned away from his friends and looked toward Liv’s house again. He’d hopped the fence plenty of times when sober. And in the daylight. He took a running start and grabbed the top of the fence, heaving himself into the air. One leg got up and over the top rail, but his momentum was short of what he needed, and he just hung there like an overfed baboon before dropping to the ground, still on Dean’s property.

“Come on man, let me take you home.” Jake tapped him on the shoulder.

Maybe the beer was starting to wear off, or maybe he wasn’t as committed to acts of insanity as he should be for a man in love, but Rafe was done. “Sure.” He nodded a vague goodbye at Dean and trudged back to the truck.

Jake started laughing at him as he pulled away from the curb. “Fucking idiot. It’s only five degrees out tonight, you’re drunk as a skunk, there’s no moon, and you’re trying to hop a fence like a teenager.”

“Fuck you.” Rafe grinned. Whatever. He had five more months of acting like a fool—he didn’t need to spend it all in one night. “Speaking of acting like a teenager. I’m not so drunk I didn’t notice what you said earlier. Who are you pining for, anyway?”

Jake snorted. “Oh, the time for sharing has passed, trust me.”

— —

IT TURNED out her willpower wasn't completely shot after all. She'd curled up on the window seat in her bedroom and watched Rafe stumble drunkenly around Dean's yard. Other than the first few shouts of her name, which had woken her up, she hadn't heard anything he said. That didn't stop her from watching him, though, her private perch allowing her to hungrily soak up the sight of him. Even drunk and disorderly Rafe was yummy.

She knew he'd be upset that she didn't show up. She'd thought he might even come over and insist on dragging her out—or coming in. She'd been half-disappointed that he hadn't, and when she'd gone to bed it had been to a bittersweet memory of the first stag and doe he'd ever taken her to. Of sitting on hard plastic chairs, drinking toonie drinks and dancing all night. Rafe got handsy when he drank, and she missed that possessive slide of his body against hers, his big hands stroking up her back and across her hips.

It would have been so easy to go downstairs and turn on the back light. Let him come in and sober up, maybe let him do some of that touching and brush it off the next day as a drunken mistake.

But they'd both know the truth. So she just watched instead, biting her lip, until long after Jake dragged him away and Dean's yard went dark.

When she fell asleep, it wasn't to a memory. Instead she dreamed of a late night visit, of muttered promises of renewed effort and quiet, desperate lovemaking. She woke up five hours later with her sheets tangled around her legs and she cupped her swollen sex. Lifted her hips in tiny, hard jerks. Touching herself and thinking of Rafe…the very opposite of emotional progress. As she spread her legs and dipped her fingers into her shockingly wet core, she promised herself that she'd find new fantasy material tomorrow. Or maybe the next day.

It didn't take long. As always, she didn't get much further than Rafe's face between her legs before going off like a rocket. It had been far too long. Dani had urged her to go away for a weekend and have some vacation sex, but Liv couldn't even fathom getting naked with someone else. And dating in Pine

Harbour was out—all the single men were Minellis or Fosters.

Besides, the only man she wanted was Rafe. As long as he was around as a living, breathing example of exactly what did it for her, no man would measure up.

So she'd go another six months without sex. Once she moved away, it would be easier to start again. Date and kiss and—

She shuddered. Unless it was Joe Manganiello, who topped her "top 5 celebrities to sleep with" list, she just wasn't interested. But maybe Joe would be cast in this movie. She snickered to herself at the possibility of actually seeing famous people in Pine Harbour.

Greg had sent her on three reconnaissance missions in the last week, and her first paycheque had been deposited into her account. It was nice to see the extra zeroes on the balance line, but that didn't make the project any more real.

And from the little she gleaned from the information she had, she doubted there were many sexy male lead roles.

She stepped into the shower and closed her eyes, letting the steam wake her up the rest of the way. Rafe looked a bit like Joe with shorter hair. Maybe she should transition her fantasies to a celebrity. But as soon as she pictured Joe kissing along her collarbone, Rafe showed up behind her. He cupped her breasts and lifted them for Joe to nuzzle his face between.

That wasn't like Rafe at all. He wasn't into sharing. She shampooed and tried to start again, but this time the fantasy was just two Rafes, front and back, and she gave up.

Masturbation would need to be off the table for a while, too. It was the only answer.

She briskly finished her shower and headed for the diner. Sunday was a short day, as they closed at one in the afternoon. Maybe she'd go for a hike after work, do something physical to burn off the energy. But the good intentions disappeared as she arrived at the diner to find Rafe sitting on the steps.

"Frank didn't let you in?" she asked in disbelief.

He stood and offered a rueful smile. "I didn't ask. I thought I'd wait for you here."

“It’s cold out!” She pulled the door open, holding it for him to follow her in. She shrugged out of her fleece zippy and wrapped on her mini apron. She put coffee on then dashed back to the office to grab the money tray for the till. She counted out a float for her apron, writing the amount on an IOU note for the drawer, steadfastly ignoring her ex sitting at the counter. When the coffee machine beeped, she finally gave him a bit of attention—in the form of a cup of joe. “Here.”

“Thanks.”

“You look rough.”

“Last night didn’t go exactly as I expected.”

“Really? People didn’t bend to your magnetic will?”

He gave her an inscrutable look. “I only want one person to bend on my command, Liv.”

She blushed. Damn him. “Are you up for food? Or are you too hungover?”

“How do you know I was drinking? Rumour mill find you this early?”

She bit her lip. In the kitchen, Frank wasn’t listening, but he wasn’t *not* listening either. “I heard you last night. At Dean’s. Just the first bit when you were hollering my name.”

He groaned. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Not quite Romeo and Juliet, eh?” She stumbled over the words as she realized what she was saying. “Not that I would want you to be Romeo. And I’m no Juliet.”

He smiled, and it was soft and deep, reaching all the way to his eyes, but it wasn’t happy. “I know, baby. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She ignored the nickname. “Do you want eggs?”

He shook his head. “Just toast. Four slices, please. With peanut butter.”

“This is a meal you could make at home.” She cast him a baleful glance and he just stared back at her, naked emotion written all over his face. He was done pretending he couldn’t cook for himself. “Well, it’s a stupid and expensive way to try and win me back.”

“Or it’s the only way I get to spend time with you, and since we’re not married anymore, you don’t get to tell me what to do with my money. So shut

up.”

“You’re rude, you know that?”

“You’re pretty.”

It was her turn to tell him to shut up, then it got too busy to keep teasing each other. But she felt his eyes on her as she hustled coffee and plates and bills. It was different now, and a nervous disquiet rippled through her. Somehow a humble Rafe was so much more dangerous than his normal cocky self.

— —

HE WAS TOO DAMN TIRED to keep up the game today, but that hadn’t stopped him from rolling out of bed and heading to the diner anyway. It was like he needed to be there any day he wasn’t working. Why couldn’t she understand that? His attachment to her wasn’t optional. Maybe it would be easier if he actually could disassociate. But love didn’t work like that.

Not for the first time, he considered the possibility that she really had fallen out of love with him. This time the thought had a new stickiness to it and he didn’t like that one bit.

Had he mistaken her residual fondness for something deeper? Conflated his own feelings with what he wanted to see in her eyes?

She filled up his mug on a quick pass-by with the steaming carafe and he avoided her gaze. Swallowing his toast was proving an impossible task. He swilled some of the piping hot black liquid then dug in his pocket for the bottle of Tylenol he’d brought along just in case. Enough embarrassing himself.

He wasn’t giving up, but it was time for a serious retreat, review and regroup.

CHAPTER NINE

SHE WAS RUNNING LATE for her first team meeting. Crappity crap.

She'd been a part of Dancelight Productions for five weeks and so much had happened, but she hadn't been able to video-conference in to their weekly Thursday meeting yet because of her schedule at Mac's. This week, she'd switched her half-day with Deena to be able to call in. Even though she was just observing via Skype, and it really didn't matter—she'd warned Greg that she would be cutting it close, getting back to her place after the lunch rush—she still wanted to make a good impression with her co-workers, such as they were.

In the last month, Greg had filled the online folder with more information about the film project. A new sub-folder had appeared that morning, *Accommodations*, that she had a feeling would be discussed today. It was a question she'd been meaning to ask her boss for a while, given that there weren't any hotels within an hour's drive and the motels and B&Bs between Pine Harbour and Wiarton weren't exactly used to Hollywood types.

She sprinted up her steps, dried leaves crunching underfoot, and wrenched her screen door open. A small white envelope fluttered to the ground, having lost its purchase between the outer and inner doors. She pinched it up off the ground and flipped it over. Rafe's familiar scrawl spelled out her name and a warm ache tightened her chest. She didn't have time to read it, and maybe that was a good thing. It was the third note he'd left in the last few weeks and each one had undone her in the most bittersweet way.

Inside, her computer was already powered on, the program loaded, so she

clicked on the profile for Ashley@Dancelight and waited for the call to connect. Enough time to trace her fingers over his handwriting and wonder what was inside. She placed it just behind a blank pad of paper she'd laid out that morning in anticipation of this meeting. And now she was totally distracted by the thought of her ex-husband squirrelling secret notes for her to find.

She hadn't seen him in almost four weeks, not since the morning after his drunken episode. He'd backed off completely at first, but then these notes started appearing. Like he'd come by exactly when he knew she wouldn't be around. The thought made her breathless, which she both loved and hated. This new tactic of his was totally working, which made her a sucker.

The screen changed in front of her, revealing a small meeting room. She recognized Greg, and when the young woman closest to the camera spoke, she connected the voice as Ashley, the PA she'd talked to a couple of times. Greg started the introductions as she waved. When it came time for him to introduce Olivia, she was genuinely surprised at some of the words he used.

"You guys all know how helpful she's been, dashing out to get us more information as we fill in the filming schedule and figure out what contracts we need to have on offer when I head up there next week. I'm quite thankful Trey and I stumbled across her at that diner, and hopefully we can convince her to do even more for us, because I think Olivia's quite the rare gem. So welcome to the team, Liv."

She blinked at the nickname. Only Rafe called her that. She thought about correcting him but then a hipster in thick black glasses leaned in and the moment was gone. "You'll probably regret joining the call by the end of the meeting, but nice to put a face to the voice." She realized this man—John, Greg had called him—was the Johnny who'd called her the week previous with questions about Wilson Island.

And then they returned to the agenda she'd interrupted with her call. She had a copy of that printed out, Ashley had emailed it the day before, and she scanned the page. It took a minute to orient herself to the conversation but once she did, she had no problem following along. She found the entire process fascinating and more than once she had something small but substantive to offer.

Once they'd concluded all their planned discussion, Greg brought up the question of accommodations. "So we'd planned to use mobile homes for everyone, but it looks like we're going to run into service overloads if we go that route. And if Hope Creswell and Joshua Pearce don't have electricity when they wake up one morning, there will be hell to pay."

Olivia blinked hard. *Joshua Pearce?* Holy crap. This wasn't just any movie if one of Hollywood's most mercurial A-list bad boys was one of the stars. And Hope Creswell…achingly beautiful and super aloof, according to *People* magazine. She lifted her hand tentatively, unsure how to break into the conversation that John and Ashley were having about seasonal temperatures. "Uhm…"

Five curious faces turned toward her and heat crawled up her neck and around the side of her face. "How many rooms do we need? And how much privacy?" *Do they come with entourages that also need to be put up in prime space?* She grabbed the pad of paper and started jotting down questions and answers as they fired more information at her.

"Olivia, what are you thinking?"

She nibbled on the tip of her pen for a moment, then pointed it at her web cam. "I think I might know of a set of cottage rentals that would work for the primary players." She glanced down at the short list of names she'd made down the left margin of her pad. "Will Trey be commuting or bringing his family up here?"

"I think that's up in the air, but you might want to plan on him needing a house for himself—but his wife might have already looked at some options online."

Olivia frowned. "Do we know if anyone else will have family with them? Is that a list someone could put together for me?"

"On it!" Ashley moved to the desk in the corner of the room and started typing.

"There's a certain standard…" Greg cleared his throat. "I'm not sure cottages are the way to go."

Olivia laughed. She was pretty sure that Lynn Howard's parents' place was

only called a cottage because it was on the lake. “I think I know what you need. I’m going to take a run out to the properties I’m thinking of right after this. I’ll have pictures for you before the end of the day.”

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BLUE HERON LANE was just outside the village, on the far side of the ridge that hemmed in Pine Harbour to the south. Ryan and Lynn lived in the house at the top of the lane—her parents’ old property. Between them and the lake lay five rental cottages, each one nicer than the last. The house at the very end of the lane was their retirement home, and it was truly breathtaking. Lynn’s father, Mike Fenich, had been a contractor before selling the remains of his business to Jake Foster. Now their only business interests were the cottage rentals. Olivia was pretty sure they spent most of the winter down south and they might not even be around, but she could start with Lynn.

The trees here were mostly pine, but around the Howard house there were a few tall oaks and the leaves had all fallen on the lawn. Three unlit jack o’lanterns smiled ghoulishly at her from the wide front porch, a reminder that she needed to pick up candy on her way home. Halloween was only five days away. Olivia parked her little Civic next to Lynn’s navy blue minivan.

As soon as she knocked at the front door, it swung open. Maya, the youngest Howard, gazed up at her with super solemn eyes but didn’t say anything. Behind her came Lynn, laughing as she wiped her hands on her jeans. Tall, thin and blonde, Lynn Howard had a timeless beauty that shone through no matter what—even when she was tired or sad. Today she looked both, despite her ready smile.

“Olivia, this is a surprise!” They hadn’t seen each other since the night Rafe insisted she come home from the bonfire with him and Dean. She hadn’t explained the change of plans to her friend, and suddenly she was reminded of

the fact that she didn’t talk to Ryan about Lynn disappearing into the woods.

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, not at all. Come in, I was just catching up on dishes.”

The living room was neat and tidy, but through the open kitchen door Olivia saw a stack of plates and dirty pots on the stove and a row of glasses on the counter, like it had been a couple of days since anyone had filled the sink and done any scrubbing.

“Ryan at work?”

Lynn nodded. “Last day of four in a row. The kids will be glad to have him home for the weekend.”

Like Rafe, Ryan worked out of Wiarton. The EMS station was located at the regional hospital. Olivia remembered how a twelve hour shift basically meant he’d be gone for everything but sleeping with the commute back and forth. “That must be hard, having him basically gone for a bunch of days when he’s working.”

Sadness drifted across Lynn’s face. “It’s okay. It’s not great for us when he’s home, either. But the kids are happy. I’ll probably go to my sister’s place for the weekend.”

Olivia was dumbfounded. “I had no idea. You guys always seem…” Happy wasn’t the right word, in hindsight. “Content.”

“I think I was too busy having babies to notice that we’d drifted apart.” Lynn picked at imaginary fluff on her jeans. “Anyway, my marriage troubles weren’t the reason you came over, I’m sure.”

“I’ve got time, if you want to talk.”

“No…” Lynn blew a big raspberry, making Olivia jump and Maya giggle. “Come here, baby girl, Mama wants a cuddle since you refused to nap.”

Maya toddled over. Lynn kissed her forehead and pulled her into her lap. Olivia’s heart ached at the sight of her friend clinging to a fading happiness. Would that have been her if they’d had kids? Resenting Rafe’s time away? Losing all sense of self?

Hell, she’d already been down that road and she hadn’t been caring for children, either.

On the other hand…people work. Spouses spend time away—sometimes a lot of time. That wasn't necessarily a death knell to a marriage. And maybe they were failing each other by wallowing in that loneliness instead of leaning on each other.

"Maybe we should do something fun…go dancing in Owen Sound or have a girls' night in."

Lynn gave her a strangely knowing smirk. "I think our ideas of fun are too different these days, honey."

Olivia thought of the disappearing act at the bonfire. Maybe that was true. "I'm sure we can find something to agree on."

Lynn shook her head. "That's the problem…I don't want to have fun anymore. I'm just *done*."

"I don't understand." Nervous, Olivia leaned forward and tried to catch Lynn's eye. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Yes. Of course." She laughed, a hollow sound that did nothing to quell the storm churning in Olivia's gut. "So, why did you pop by?"

Reluctantly, Olivia allowed the conversation to steer toward the cottages. "The thing is," she explained after outlining her idea. "By my initial count, we'll need three private residences, each with at least three bedrooms, and then an additional twelve rooms in any configuration. The rental contract would be more than fair, and my boss will lay that out for your parents, but I just want to know if they might be interested. If not, I need to come up with an alternate plan before the team comes up next week."

Lynn counted bedrooms on her fingers, arriving at the same thought Olivia had already. "So you'll want to rent my parents' place as well."

"Renting the entire lane would really be perfect. Except your place, of course."

Her friend shrugged. "Let's go ask them."

Behind Lynn's house, a path wound through the woods, running parallel to the edge of the road—a safe route for the kids to visit their grandparents. On the opposite side of the lane sat the five Blue Heron Lane cottages, but as they followed Maya through the thick brush, Olivia couldn't see any of the modern

glass and wood structures.

The path opened into the clearing behind the Fenich home. Gloria Fenich was hanging laundry on a line strung between her back door and a free-standing pergola at the side of the house. Maya started running as soon as she saw her grandmother.

“This is a lovely surprise, I thought you had preschool today, little one.” Gloria kissed her granddaughter and looked at Lynn with a furrowed brow.

“We had a long nap and missed the start of it.” Lynn tossed out the explanation in a quiet, hurried burst of words, then busied herself with hanging up the rest of the wet laundry in the plastic basket on the deck. Olivia tried hard to pretend she didn’t know it was a lie. *What was going on with Lynn?*

“Olivia, it’s lovely to see you again.”

“And you as well, Gloria.” She took a deep breath. It felt weird, being something other than the waitress at the diner. A good kind of weird. “This isn’t just a social call, however. I have an interesting proposition for you…”

Olivia outlined what she knew about the project—which wasn’t a lot, but she made it sound good—and promised Gloria that they would have all the information laid out really clearly by somebody else before they had to make any commitment. But in broad strokes, if they were interested, she could arrange for a meeting with her boss.

“Oh my,” Gloria said, a pleased smile dancing on her lips. “I’ll need to talk it over with Mike, of course, and he’s on a hunting trip, but he’ll call tonight. Can I give you an answer tomorrow? And in the meantime, how about I make us some tea?”

Olivia couldn’t believe her good luck as Gloria bustled off to the kitchen. Maya followed along behind her asking for some milk.

“You’ve got a knack for that,” Lynn said quietly.

“For what?”

“Selling an idea.”

Olivia grinned. “It’s not much different than convincing fifty people they want Frank’s lunch special.”

Lynn laughed. “I guess not.” For the first time since they’d arrived at her

mother's house, Lynn really looked at Olivia and held her gaze. "I envy you."

"My mess of a life?" Olivia shook her head. "Grass is not greener, honey."

"Yeah, probably not." But Lynn didn't sound convinced.

Olivia didn't know how to press harder without offending her friend. She knew she was chickening out even as she leaned back and pasted on a bright smile. "This is a good opportunity for them. Maybe for you too, if they're going to be away." Gloria had mentioned maybe staying at their Florida condo until the filming was done, to free up their place entirely as a rental unit. "You could be the contact person for the tenants."

"Well, yeah, but that's not interesting."

Interesting is what you make of something, Olivia wanted to yell. Instead she smiled politely and looked toward the kitchen. Tea couldn't come fast enough.

Lynn snorted. "Don't try to save me, Liv."

"I'm not," Olivia said quietly. *Save yourself, don't give up on the lovely little life you have.* "I'm just saying if I could do things differently, I would."

"I can see the look on your face. You think life is a fairytale."

"God, I really don't. If it was, I'd still be married."

"So…you get it?" Lynn looked at her, eyes wide, almost pleading for affirmation…of what?

Olivia shook her head slowly. "I'm not sure I do." Tea wasn't coming, so she leaned forward and looked Lynn in the eye. "What's going on?"

"How did you get up the courage to leave Rafe?"

"I didn't. He asked me for a divorce."

Lynn's shoulders slumped. "Ryan will never leave me. He wants to go to counselling."

"That sounds like a good idea." Olivia fought back the harsher words that bubbled up and wiggled on the tip of her tongue. *Don't throw your marriage away*. But that would make her a hypocrite. She wasn't sure she would have been able to save her own marriage even if she had handled things differently.

CHAPTER TEN

Three years earlier

THE FRONT DOOR OPENED SLOWLY, followed by the sound of Rafe's heavy footsteps. One, two, three. Just far enough inside the door to swing it shut, and there he stopped. Waiting. She clattered dishes in the sink, a pathetic, passive-aggressive warning that he might not want to come and find her in the kitchen. Not without armouring up first, anyway. Except it was also a pathetic, passive-aggressive vie for his attention. She hated that she was throwing a tantrum.

At least the kitchen was getting tidied at the same time.

She couldn't see him but his routine was the same every night. He'd sit on the bench at the door and take off his boots. *Thunk*. Then he'd go upstairs and wash off the uglier side of humanity he'd spent his day with. Another point of contention that she had no right to be upset over. She wanted to be his first priority when he came home, not taking a minute to decompress. He'd tried to explain it to her and she'd just gotten wound up. Like she was yet another stressor in his life that he needed to mentally brace himself for.

Tonight he didn't go upstairs. It felt like a hollow victory, because he certainly didn't come and wrap his arms around her waist, although that might have something to do with the giant butcher knife she was furiously scrubbing.

"I'm sorry, I know you were looking forward to this weekend." He filled the kitchen doorway. He'd changed at the detachment before driving home, but he

still had on “work clothes”. An OPP t-shirt and navy cargo pants, his standard almost-in-uniform uniform.

“It’s not about the weekend, Rafe.”

He looked confused and she didn’t blame him. Her rage didn’t make much sense outside her head. “This course is only offered once a year, and I need it.”

“I know.” She scrubbed harder, as if she could wash away their problems with extra elbow-grease.

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“When?” She shook her head and placed the knife in the dish rack. “I switched three of my days off to make this weekend happen. Two of them I took out of time we had off together. And I’m sure you’re going to get called in—“

“I’ll say no.”

“No, you won’t. And I don’t want you to. It’s not just work, Rafe. I get it, I really do. You’ve got responsibilities that are greater than me.” She waved her hand in front of his face, spraying sudsy dishwater as she cut off his interjection before it even began. “No. I *understand*. What you need to understand is *I’m still pissed*. Logic has no place in this conversation. I’m just…sad and hurt and looking at yet another weekend alone. Nothing makes that better.”

That was true, but it didn’t change the fact that she wanted him to *try*, even if it was in vain. But he had tried. And she’d tried not to care. They were both tried out. So Rafe turned slowly and went upstairs. The shower turned on, then off after a few minutes. He didn’t come back downstairs.

She wiped down the counters. Then the front of the fridge and the windowsill.

Finally she trudged up to their room. He was lying on their bed, reading a book he’d read a dozen times before. She wanted to make a snipping comment about the meaning of life being a happy wife, but knew it would go over like a lead balloon. So she quietly grabbed a tank top and sleeping shorts and got changed. “I might go sleep downstairs.”

He snorted. “That’s a great solution to us not spending enough time together.”

“Quality time, Rafe. Not like this.”

“This is what we make it, Liv.”

“It’s not enough.”

He pushed up, sitting on the edge of the bed. His book sat beside him, open facedown on the bedspread to keep his page. “Come to bed.”

“I don’t think sex is a good idea.”

“Not for sex, woman. Jesus, I certainly don’t feel like it when you’re harping at me.”

Great, so now she was a harpy. “Then it won’t matter if I sleep downstairs.”

“It will matter. It *does* matter. Let’s just…read together. Watch a movie. We’ve got tonight, anyway.”

And he wanted to spend it watching a movie together. Not talking. Not slowly peeling off the new lingerie she’d bought for the weekend—online, with express shipping, because that was her only option for anything other than Wal-Mart. Forty-five minutes of half-assed cuddles before he’d inevitably fall asleep and she’d lie next to him for hours wondering what had happened to her marriage.

“Fine.” She didn’t mean it, but she didn’t want to sleep on the couch, either. She curled up next to him, fully expecting to be fuming again in short order. He pulled her close and played with her hair, twisting it this way and that, then burrowing his fingers closer to her scalp. His movements slowed but never stopped. And before she could remember she wanted to be mad, she was the one drifting off to sleep.

— —

RAFE HAD SENT Liv no fewer than six loving text messages while he was gone for the weekend. She’d responded to two of them. He didn’t like that response ratio.

But when he got home, she’d made chili for dinner, one of his favourites and

something that kept nicely. If she was truly pissed, she'd have made salmon or something that didn't survive re-heating.

He heated up a bowl and ate it on the couch while they watched a singing competition reality show.

They didn't talk.

They didn't fight, but that might have been better, more of a warning of what was to come.

Bedtime that night was quiet. They didn't make love, but when he pulled Liv into his arms, she folded agreeably into his side. He'd had a long weekend, the course had involved overnight training and it had rained all day, one of those cold late autumn dumps that seeped under the skin and turned him to a prune from the inside out.

"Love you, Liv…" he mumbled as he drifted off, and he wanted to believe she said it back, but it might have been sleepy wishful thinking.

— —

HE TOOK a seat at the diner counter and waited for Liv to have a break. He could have sent her a text message, but after the last month of what felt like non-stop fighting since *the weekend that wasn't*, he knew that wouldn't go over well. But doing this at her work didn't feel great either.

She stopped in front of him and wordlessly held up the glass carafe. He nodded and she poured him a cup. "What is it this time?"

"We're short-staffed." He braced himself for the bitching. "I need to go in for a night shift tonight."

"It's fine."

"Maybe you could go with someone else."

"Nah, I'll just give the tickets to Deena."

"Go with her."

“We work together, Rafe, but we’re not friends. I don’t want to go to a play with her.” She glared at him, her eyes yelling the unspoken next sentence. *I wanted to go with you. My husband.*

“Isn’t there someone else you could go with?” Why did her social life live or die on his work schedule?

She pursed her lips, then crooked her finger in a *follow me* gesture. In the office, she smoothed her hand down his arm and gave him a sad smile. “Why’d you come here, Rafe?”

Why did they have to dissect everything? His throat tightened and he struggled against the knee-jerk reaction of a smart-ass remark. “Because you deserve to look me in the eye when I let you down.”

She closed her eyes, brows pinched together, and he drifted his fingers over her forehead. She had a tiny mole just above her left eyebrow. He’d always loved it. She had the sweetest, prettiest face he’d ever seen. And behind it lay such a complicated girl brain that made his head explode.

“Liv…”

She fluttered her eyes open and the sadness there gutted him, but it also pissed him off. “Take someone else to the show.”

She shook her head slowly. “You don’t get it, do you? I don’t have anyone to take. Dani’s at school, Lynn had a baby a few weeks ago. That’s it, the sum total of my friends here. And it’s not like I’m not friendly, Rafe. It’s that *there aren’t any other women my age here*.”

“Maybe Tom—“

“Your brother isn’t a substitute for you! And don’t suggest Dean or Jake, either. I don’t want to go anymore.”

“But you wanted to see this play.”

Her eyes flared, and too late he realized her not having anyone to go with wasn’t really the problem. “I wanted to go on a date with *you*, you idiot! Jeez, get a clue.”

She thought he was an idiot? Maybe she shouldn’t be so fucking complicated. He saw red and knew he should walk away, but he just couldn’t. “Maybe you should give me more clues then, Olivia.” She blanched at the use of

her full name but he pushed on. Maybe they kept fighting because he let her bitch at him. “Look, I want to go on dates with you, okay? I want to make you happy. But I have a fucking job to do, got it? Two jobs. And I can’t just blow them off because you’re feeling a little needy.”

Her lips pinched together and her face went from pale to stark white. “I’m not *needy*.”

He let out a hard, ruthless laugh. “Are you kidding me? *Rafe, spend time with me*. *Rafe, I’m lonely*. This is life with me, Liv. I’m busy.”

“It’s not always like this—“

“No, but when it is, it just *is*. And I can’t change that for you.”

“I’m not asking you—“

He exploded, the words spilling out of him before he could pull them back in. Before he could stop himself from tearing a strip off his wife who most definitely didn’t deserve his anger. “Yes, you fucking are. With your silence and your whining and your fucking neediness, Liv. Jesus. Give me some space.”

She stared at him for a minute. Regret cut him in half, but before he could pull her close and apologize, she took a deep breath and nodded. “Space. Got it.”

She left him standing there, and he couldn’t follow her. Everyone probably heard him yelling, which embarrassed him greatly. Embarrassed Liv even more. Damnit. He took a deep breath, then several more, and headed back out front. He didn’t look at anyone else, just Liv. She was behind the counter, her face bright red, and he wanted to re-do the last five minutes in the worst way.

But what was done was done. He stalked around the counter and pulled her into a gentle hug. “I love you, Liv.”

She didn’t say it back, and after a few beats, he gave her another squeeze and let her go.

— —

SHE GAVE the tickets to Deena. And before she went to bed, she wrote Rafe a long letter, hoping that he might understand her perspective better if he saw the words on paper instead of having them hurled at him in anger.

He hadn't returned yet when she woke up the next morning. Instead of waiting for him, she left the letter on his pillow and drove south to visit her sister. They weren't close, but Mina was happy to meet up with her in Kitchener for some retail therapy. Olivia didn't tell her what was going on. They didn't have that type of relationship. If anyone would understand, it was Dani, but that felt too much like a betrayal of Rafe's trust.

It was close to midnight when she finally parked in front of their little house in Pine Harbour again. Rafe's truck was in the drive, but the lights were all off except the front foyer. She found him fast asleep in bed, and she curled up next to him. Had he missed her? Had he been grateful for some space, as he'd asked? Would he want to do something together the next day? Sadness filled her as she lay next to him, realizing she doubted the answer to the last question would be yes.

They'd inflicted enough damage on each other that her own husband was wary of her. Tears slipped down her cheeks, soaking her pillow and the back of his shirt where she pressed her face. He didn't wake up.

— —

HE SEEMED to like his space. It had been three weeks since their fight in the diner and they'd managed to spend all their time apart. They slept beside each other, but she couldn't remember the last time they went to bed together. There had been two half-assed attempts at middle-of-the-night sex, but neither had been satisfying for either of them. Olivia wasn't even sure Rafe had been awake either time. He certainly didn't act like he'd tried to fuck her. Her heart ached for her husband to hold her, but he wasn't interested anymore.

She finally sent him a text on a Sunday afternoon. **I'd rather have dinner at home tonight, just the two of us.**

Fine. His response didn't leave her much room for hope that it would go well.

It didn't.

As they silently tidied up, she thought about suggesting counselling or a getaway. Both would require time, though, and Rafe legitimately didn't have any of that. He was heading into four days on, and she wouldn't see him again until the end of the week.

He put the plates away, then turned and stared at her. When he spoke, the question was the last thing she'd ever expected to hear from him. "Do you want a divorce?"

What? No! But as they stood there, a new thought took root. Rafe was a good Italian boy. He couldn't leave her. His mother would flay him alive. Maybe he wanted her to leave him. He certainly didn't want to work on their marriage. And she definitely wasn't happy. She turned the word over and over in her head. *Divorce*. It felt like a meat cleaver type of word. She thought they needed something like a vegetable peeler or a paring knife, but maybe she didn't know her husband as well as she thought she did.

Maybe he didn't want to be her husband at all.

— —

SHE STARED at him for a long time, so long he thought maybe she hadn't heard him. When he opened his mouth to take it back, tell her it was a stupid question that should never be uttered in their marriage, she shattered his heart by nodding. "Yeah, I think I do."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Present day

"HERE'S OUR TEA, GIRLS." Gloria set a tray between them on the wide coffee table and Lynn and Olivia both busied themselves making cups and ignoring their previous conversation.

"Gloria, would you mind if I took some pictures?" Olivia pulled out her phone and checked her email for the generic list of secondary sites they were still looking for. "The cottages and maybe some of the property?"

"Of course, dear. Maya and I will do some colouring while you two go exploring."

Lynn cleared her throat. "Actually, it might be faster if Olivia goes by herself." She caught a hard look her mother sent her way and twisted her lips. "But I can grab the keys and show you the cottages once you look around a bit?"

Olivia nodded. It was probably for the best, they'd talked as much as they probably were going to. Today. She'd try to make more time for Lynn soon. But wandering down to the dock by herself was nice. It gave her space to think about Rafe, and his notes, and how they fell apart.

How she'd somehow morphed him asking her if *she* wanted a divorce into him just asking for it. The realization made her slightly nauseous. It was a miracle he didn't hate her.

But he really didn't hate her.

Her pulse slowly picked up as she wandered back up the hill and Lynn let her

into the first cottage, then the rest. Maybe it was time for her to do some relationship repair. Go back to the beginning and start over.

After she exchanged final pleasantries and headed back to her car, leaving Maya and Lynn at the lakeside house to finish their milk and tea, she forced herself to celebrate the fact that she'd found the perfect place for their stars to stay. The Blue Heron Lane cottages were perfect, and the Fenichs were on board.

This was a big to-do list item for the locations team, and she was about to check it off. Little ol' Olivia, who was supposed to just run around and take pictures. She couldn't wait the five minute drive home to call Greg. Her car was too old to have built-in Bluetooth, but Rafe had bought her an add-on kit that served the same purpose. She used the fancy Siri voice commands on her work iPhone to place the long distance call to her boss.

"What's the good word, Liv?" His warm, rich voice boomed throughout her small car.

"Uhm…the cottages were perfect. I'm going to email you pictures as soon as I get home."

"Great stuff. Hang on." He muffled his end of the line for a minute, then came back. "Sorry, John was just leaving my office."

"No problem."

"Was there anything else?"

She bit her lip. Why was she nervous? She corrected people who called her honey at the diner. Why did this feel like the stakes were higher? "About my name…I'd prefer to go by Olivia, professionally."

"Ah." A phone call was an awful medium to know how a request had landed. "Thanks for letting me know, I tend to shorten names without thinking."

"It's not a big deal." She took a deep breath. "But thank you. Anyway, I'll send you the contact information for the owners, the Fenichs. Ashley will want to add them to your itinerary for the contracts trip."

"We're going to have to split it over two days, I think at this point. Would you recommend I stay in Owen Sound or Port Elgin?"

She laughed. "Are you looking at a hotel map on Expedia or something?"

He snorted. "Maybe."

“They’re both kind of far. Why don’t you stay at one of the cottages? They’re all winterized. And normally they do week-long rentals, but I’m sure the Fenichs would make an exception for you.”

“And bring my own linens and food? No thanks.”

“You’re forgetting that hospitality and service is my business,” she teased. “I’ll coordinate with Gloria Fenich. It’ll be just like a hotel, I promise. And right where you need to be.”

“Sounds good. Two rooms. Ashley is coming with me this time.”

“No Trey?”

“Not for this. He’ll probably have a couple of trips of his own between now and the start of filming, though. These poor people have no idea what they’re signing up for.”

Olivia was pretty sure the entire town would bend over backwards to accommodate a film shoot. “Speaking of that…I have another idea.” She pulled up in front of her house. “I’m home now, I’m going to head inside, upload these pictures, and when you’ve got some time later today or tomorrow, can we have a video conference? Maybe bring Ashley in on it as well.”

“We’ve got time in an hour, sound good?”

“Great. See you then.”

As the photos downloaded, heavier thoughts started to land in Olivia’s head. She was worried about Lynn, but they weren’t close enough for her to push any harder than she already had. Maybe she should foster more of a relationship with the other woman. But wouldn’t that have happened organically if they were meant to be close?

Is that why she walked away from her marriage? Because it didn’t just work out on its own?

Relationships took work. Olivia had always prided herself on being a good wife to Rafe—supportive, understanding, ready with a back rub or dinner whenever needed. But what if he’d needed something else entirely? He’d called her needy. Maybe she hadn’t been as giving as she thought. Superficially in it for him, but underneath that…had she undermined the foundation of their marriage?

She puffed out her cheeks and turned back to work. This was something that

made her happy, that she *could* be selfish about.

A few clicks of the mouse and the photos were copied into the shared folder. She fired off an email to Greg letting him know they were there, and then she started sketching out her ideas for a town meeting.

A half hour later, she had a poster design, an agenda, and a list of benefits for Dancelight. She pushed away from her computer. There was time to make a cup of tea and practice what she wanted to say a few times before they called her.

A knock at the door surprised her. It was a Thursday afternoon, and Rafe was working. She blushed to herself that she'd ferreted out that information from Dean the day before—although it made the note that much more of a mystery, because he would have been at work while she was at the diner. Maybe he was in the cruiser today, patrolling the north end of the peninsula.

On the other side of the door stood her second favourite Minelli. Genuine pleasure filled her chest. She hadn't had enough time for any of her friends lately. "Dani, this is a surprise!"

"Is it okay that I popped by? It's been a while." Her friend offered a hopeful smile. The last few times they'd tried to meet up for coffee, one of them had been working. "I've missed you."

Olivia waved her friend inside. "I actually have a video call in a few minutes, but it shouldn't take long. I put a pot of tea on, come have a cup. And no heckling when I embarrass myself, okay?"

Dani asked a few questions about how the location scouting was going and Olivia told her about her visit to the Fenich properties. After hesitating a beat, she also told her about Lynn's strange behaviour.

"That's rough. Do you think she might be suicidal?" Dani's voice shifted to medical professional mode. Olivia remembered that Dani had volunteered at a distress centre throughout college, but that was a serious over-reaction—wasn't it?

"God, I hope not." She thought back over their conversations. "No. I think she wants…to start over, maybe. Be young and fancy-free again."

Dani rolled her eyes. "As someone who is still young and very much single, I'm happy to tell her how awful it is."

Olivia held her hand up as her laptop lit up and started ringing and she scooted over to the desk. “Hold that thought, my call’s about to begin.”

“Twice in one day, Olivia, you’re earning your keep for us.” Greg’s face popped into view.

“Thanks for fitting me in at the end of your day.” She took a deep breath. “I was thinking that if you come up for two days, we should hold a public information night to explain the impact and benefits of the project to the town.” On the screen, her boss didn’t say anything, he just pinched his brows together and made a note on the paper in front of him. In for a penny…she ploughed ahead. “I imagine that in larger urban areas, a film shoot just happens and is a matter of some curiosity, but you don’t need anything from the surrounding community. Here it’s a little different. In a good way,” she rushed to add when Greg looked concerned. “In a *let’s get them on our side* kind of way.”

He leaned back in his chair, then turned and spoke to Ashley who was halfway out of the shot because they were in his office, not the boardroom. Olivia couldn’t hear what he was saying, and prepared herself for a gentle—or not so gentle—letdown.

“This is something I’d need to take to the production team, to be honest. And only one of them is here in Toronto, while the others are in Los Angeles. I’m not sure when they’re meeting next, so hang on to that idea and I’ll get back to you, okay?”

It wasn’t a no. It wasn’t, *thanks but no thanks, waitress girl*. She’d take it. “I put together a proposal, it’s in the shared drive now.”

“Great. Now tell me more about these cottages. It looks like the dock is really nice, maybe we could use that for some of the lakeside scenes.” He was talking mostly to Ashley, and Olivia realized that she still didn’t know much about the movie. There were lakeside scenes? Well, that made sense, given that they chose Pine Harbour. While Greg talked, she flipped to another browser window and did a search for “Hope Creswell and Joshua Pearce new movie”. The Internet knew more about this project, tentatively called *Unexpected*, than she did.

She jerked her attention back to the conversation in time to explain that there

were photos of the wide, easy path down to the dock, and actually there were two docks, about forty feet apart. Greg asked a few more questions, then he signed off after confirming her availability the following week for other location scouting.

From the couch, Dani cleared her throat. Olivia glanced over just in time to catch her friend waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“You sound and look like your brother when you do that, you know?”

Her friend laughed. “Uh huh. Is that your way of avoiding the subject of your super hot boss?”

Olivia shook her head. “I have no idea what you’re getting at.”

“Are you sure your excitement about this job has nothing to do with Mr. Smooth In a Suit?” Dani leaned forward, her eyes bright with mischief. “Maybe underneath that suave exterior lies the perfect rebound.”

She stiffened. Ew. No. Greg was good-looking, sure, but he wasn’t Rafe.

Rafe. She rolled her eyes at her friend and made an excuse about needing another cup of tea. On the way to the kitchen she grabbed the white note she’d stuffed under the notepad. With shaking hands, she ripped the flap open. The first two had been short, and this one was the same, but unlike the others, it included an invitation of sorts.

Liv,

I should have written you love letters when we were married. You deserve a mountain of notes telling you how beautiful you are. You’re simply gorgeous, from the inside out.

This Christmas might be our last in the same town. The last two have been pretty lonely, I have to be honest. I’d like you to consider spending part of this holiday with me. As friends, if that’s all you want.

Yours,

Rafe

How could he think she didn’t ache for him? She didn’t have time to think about that, though, because from the other room, Dani started carrying on again about how yummy suits were. Olivia tucked the note carefully between two cookbooks to retrieve later, shook off her nerves, and poured herself a new cup

of tea. “That sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself of something,” she called out.

Dani blew a loud raspberry.

“That’s mature.”

“That’s me. The kid sister, forever and ever.”

Olivia flopped onto the couch and put her feet up on the ottoman. “You’re not a kid.”

Real, heavy pain sliced across Dani’s face. “You’re the only one who knows that.”

Oh no. A sinking feeling came over Olivia and she winced in anticipation. “What happened?”

“Jake came over to give my mom a quote on new windows. He had to take measurements in every room. And in my room, he made a dumb-ass comment about me doing my homework at my desk.”

She should get out the tequila. Why had Jake been so stupid? “That really sucks, Dani.”

Her friend pinked up, from her nose to the tips of her ears. “I wish it was just that.”

“Oh no, what did you say?” Olivia’s eyes got really wide as her mind raced through the worst responses she could imagine Dani giving.

“I told him the only homework I needed to do these days was researching new and exciting ways to use my vibrator.” She wailed and flung her head back against the cushions. “I don’t even *have* a vibrator!”

“You don’t?”

Dani gave her a wide-eyed stare. “You do?”

Uhm, yes? “I haven’t had sex in two years, what do you think?”

“I think you should hook up with the guy in the computer. He looks like he wouldn’t run scared at the first mention of a dildo.”

Neither would Rafe.

“Ew, are you—“ Dani squeaked buried her face in a throw cushion. “You’re thinking of my brother right now, aren’t you?”

“Jeez, maybe Jake was right to make a high school joke, you brat,” Olivia

said without malice. It wasn't fair that Dani's crush would never be returned. The last thing she needed was a friend poking holes in her self-confidence too.

"Come on. You're not looking for a rebound, are you?"

Olivia shook her head and smiled.

"Oh my god, my mom's going to have a heart attack." Dani fluttered her hands in the air. "Well, she's going to pretend to have one. Then she'll go out and buy baby stuff."

"Whoa there, chickadee. That's putting the cart *way* before the horse. We haven't seen each other in almost a month."

"Then what has you smiling?"

"He's been leaving me notes."

Dani squealed and kicked her feet in the air. Sex was gross, but romance was one hundred percent shareable. Olivia grinned. "So now I need to find a way to make a move. But not, like, you know…a big move. Something PG-13."

Her sister-in-law clapped her hands together. "Haunt the Park. Hayride in the dark, spooky goblins…it's sweet and sexy and totally public. He's going to be there, working, but we can probably work it out so he has a break around when you get there."

"We?" The thought of others knowing her and Rafe were…were…what *were* they doing? Flirting again? Oh, jeez. "Hang on, maybe this isn't a good idea."

"Sure it is. Just Dean needs to know, and he's good with secrets."

But you aren't, sister-of-mine. Olivia offered a weak smile and nodded. "Sure."

After Dani left, Olivia pulled the note from its hiding place in the kitchen and lay on her bed, reading the words over and over again. Yes, she'd make a move. And if it didn't work out, they'd have Christmas together as friends and then she'd move on in the spring. That would give her seven weeks to gird her heart in impenetrable steel and find a way to truly just be friends. *Or not*. The tiny voice that represented her heart squeaked the ever-so-seductive alternative. *Maybe this is the start of something new and special*.

But he *hadn't* written any love letters when they were married. And while she wanted him to have turned a new leaf, this wasn't really proof of that. This

was just another attempt to woo her back to the same old, same old. *Which maybe you gave up too quickly, too easily*. Yep. Maybe she had.

With a growl, she shoved to her feet, stashed the note beside her bed and put on some running clothes. Not that she was actually going running—she'd done the Couch to 5k app on her phone a few times and decided that week three was her favourite workout. So that's where she stayed. It also had the best playlist.

She left the house at a brisk walk, hoping the fresh air and extra oxygen pumping to her heart would help her sort out her mixed up feelings about Rafe.

Thirty minutes later she was sweaty, marginally healthier, and had absolutely no more clarity regarding her gorgeous hunk of an ex-husband.

Love notes.

Seriously.

What was a girl to do with that?

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHE WAS GOING to Haunt the Park in two days. To surprise Rafe. Right after Olivia tucked into bed with a book that night, Dani texted to confirm Dean would point Rafe in her direction, and they'd take a wagon ride together. It would be fun.

So why did she feel so damn nervous?

All the way through Friday morning breakfast rush, with everyone talking about the event, she was flustered. What would she wear?

That was a stupid question. It was the end of October in the Bruce, she'd be wrapped in warm stuff from head to toe.

Her phone chirped at ten o'clock, and then again at quarter after. By the time she sat down with a fresh cup of coffee, four messages were waiting from Greg. **Good to go on the town meeting** read the first one. Then, **You're working this morning, sorry.** She laughed to herself. **When you get a chance, call me**. And then the last one was the longest. **Will you call sooner if I tell you we want to offer you a full-time job until June?**

Her head shot up and looked toward Frank in the kitchen. As it was, her Dancelight paycheque already matched her take-home from the diner, tips aside. He'd told her he wasn't expecting her to stay forever, but still…her hands shook as she texted back. **Swamped this morning, will call soon.** And then, worried that wasn't enthusiastic enough, she sent another. **Really thrilled on all counts, have many questions.**

She put her phone on silent and did the rest of the morning on autopilot.

Her first instinct was to talk it out with Rafe. *No, he won't see the drawbacks.* From what she'd observed already, everyone on this project worked long hours. The same kind of workload she'd always resented Rafe having. Did she want to take that on, just as she was considering re-investing in their relationship? *He didn't choose you over his job.* She rubbed the space between her eyebrows and slowed her breathing. That wasn't fair. He *couldn't* choose her. She'd known he was fulfilling a life-long goal of becoming a police officer when she met him. That he was a soldier, like his brother, and he felt that calling deep in his bones. He couldn't separate himself from those roles, not without stripping a part of his soul. She shouldn't have asked him to, no matter how subtly. And maybe if she was doing something she was passionate about, they'd be on more equal footing. *So…take the job for him?* Her head spun with all the possible implications of a job offer that hadn't even been officially made yet.

No, she needed to make her own decision. Stand on her own two feet.

What was in Olivia's best interest? She needed to trust herself to make the right call.

And when she thought about *not* taking the job, of turning Greg down and staying at the diner full-time…that tipped her sideways. A profound sense of loss and sadness gripped her from the inside, and she realized this was what it was like to love your job. She'd known in her head, but never truly understood in her heart, what compelled Rafe to work so hard all of the time. Now she got it and panic threatened at the idea of missing out.

No way was she letting this opportunity slide through her fingers.

After punching out, she waited for Frank to hand off to the afternoon cook, Lily Gill, whose name was so cute everyone used both first and last when referring to her.

When he saw her waiting on the steps outside, Frank shoved one hand through his hair. "It's too cold to be loitering outside today, Olivia."

"I wanted to talk to you." Her voice wavered and she tried to smile to compensate. It didn't work. Her lip wobbled and when he patted her on the back, she started to cry.

"This is either really good or really bad." He nodded toward his beige SUV.

“Want to sit for a minute?”

Inside his car, he handed over a box of tissues. “Are you pregnant?”

She laughed and hiccuped. “No.”

“Someone die?”

“No.”

“Then whatever it is, just tell me.”

“The movie people…I think they’re going to offer me a full-time job.” She took a deep breath. “And if they do, I’m probably going to take it. I’ll give you lots of notice and help you find someone else, of course. But…” She trailed off and started crying again. This was embarrassing. If she was pregnant she could blame it on hormones at least.

“But you’ll miss me.” He grinned, his eyes disappearing into crinkly skin. “Totally understandable. I’ll let you stay on the roster and take the occasional shift to make you feel better.”

That made her laugh, and actually was a great idea. “You’re not mad?”

“No, sweetheart. I’m proud of you.” He made a shooing motion with his hand. “Now get out of my car, I’ve got to meet a hot date for bingo at the Wiarton Legion.”

She called Greg as soon as she got home. He was agreeable to a gradual transition to full-time, starting in mid-December or as soon as she could get away from the diner. He emailed a revised job description while they were talking, and explained that over the holidays she’d be expected to do some remote office reception to cover rotating time off, but for the most part she’d do work on the ground to prepare for the arrival of just over a hundred crew members and another dozen in the cast. By the time they arrived, she’d know everyone’s assistants and be the location liaison for the duration of filming.

“And we’re just one of three production companies involved in this film, remember. You’ll be able to do a lot of networking. I don’t know if you’d be interested in traveling for work, but these types of things have a way of turning permanent.”

“Oh.” The thought of moving to Toronto or Vancouver to work on movie projects thrilled and terrified her. Mostly the latter, given that she’d just allowed

herself to start fantasizing about a new start with Rafe. Not just fantasizing—actually *doing it*. She couldn't think about leaving Pine Harbour. Except this job made her heart thump in an entirely different but equally awesome way.

Hot tears pricked behind her eyelids. She didn't want to think about leaving.

She didn't want to leave. But she didn't want to drift without a purpose, either.

"Olivia?" Greg's voice filtered through the noise of her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Greg. I got a bit overwhelmed there. Can you repeat that last bit?"

"If you aren't interested in a permanent position with a single production company, than freelance work might be more up your alley."

She cleared her throat. "This would be the second time today that I asked one of my bosses if he'd mind if I worked for someone else, so you'll have to excuse me if this sounds rude, but … I'd like to know more about that."

He laughed. "No worries. I get that you're attached to your home town. You're a real rock star of hard work, Olivia, you'll land on your feet at the end of this project."

A different kind of heat rocketed through her veins. Frank had always said she was a good waitress and she liked that work, but this was on a different level. Pride. It made her a little lightheaded to think that she might have value to other producers.

A niggle of an idea took hold, something she'd have months to work out all the details on. But the kernel of an idea was there, something she might be able to do in Pine Harbour.

Excitement took hold and for the afternoon she almost forgot to be nervous about the next day.

Almost.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HAUNT THE PARK was a family affair.

Even if his brother hadn't been the park ranger in charge, Rafe would probably still have signed up for off-duty service for the annual pre-Halloween event. He had fond memories of making out on the hayrides in high school and never tired of hearing kids talk about how they survived the loop through the dark campground and all the scenes of gore and horror they encountered on the way.

His mother donated the hot chocolate and apple cider, and Dani was manning the table on the far side of the parking lot. When Liv had worked for his mom, she'd stood right there next to his sister. That familiar ache pulsed in his chest—regret and confusion, because it wasn't supposed to be like this. And then the newer but still just as recognizable reaction of self-loathing. Fuck, he needed to get over himself. The notes had been his last attempt to ask for a second chance and she'd obviously passed.

Maintaining distance while he sorted his head out had been hard. Now that he was avoiding her, he caught tail-end glimpses everywhere. Her car driving away from the diner at the end of a shift. Her ponytail swishing into the bank mid-afternoon. And on Facebook, all of a sudden this morning everyone was sharing a flyer notice about a public meeting about the film shoot. And there was Olivia's name as a local contact down in the bottom right hand corner. *Olivia Minelli*. He traced the letters with his eyes, over and over again. She still used his name. She was still *his*. Except he didn't have a decent plan to remind her of

that fact in a way that didn’t send her running for the hills.

He even thought he’d seen her here tonight, but that was wishful thinking. Liv hadn’t come to Haunt the Park since they broke up.

The detachment had been asked to provide two officers for traffic control as the fundraising night brought more visitors to the park than any other evening event of the year. As always, Dean and Rafe were the first volunteers. And as usual, both of them weren’t needed for the whole night, so they took turns riding the loop. Dean returned from his ride on the wagon just in time to nip Rafe’s melancholy in the bud.

“Your turn.” Dean nodded to a small figure bobbing along in line. She hadn’t been visible ten seconds earlier, but the queue weaved around the administrative building. His friend bumped an elbow into his side, a dull thud against the layers of his uniform. “Go join her.”

“Nah.” She’d made it clear she didn’t want to try again, and he wasn’t any closer to having a plan to win her back. Taking a break from her hadn’t brought clarity about their relationship. If anything, seeing her again tumbled him backwards by a month. He stared at her, all bundled up against the cool fall night. Why couldn’t he get over her? Their marriage hadn’t worked. It was a fool’s errand to think she’d ever give him a second chance. He’d tried the cocky bastard routine, he’d tried sweet and adorable. There was a reason nothing had worked. “She doesn’t want me.”

Dean snorted. “Man, you gotta pull your head out of your ass. Why else would she be here? Do you think she likes freezing her pretty little ass off?”

“Eyes off her ass,” Rafe groused.

“Go join her in line. Just see what happens.”

That had been his plan before—just see what happens—but he hadn’t lasted long with it. Probably wouldn’t this time, either. By Christmas, he’d be drunk and on her front lawn in a red suit.

He stared across the parking lot. She was talking to the kids ahead of her in line as they bobbed around their parents, but clearly hadn’t come with anyone. Fuck it. It wasn’t like it was a big secret that he was mooning over her. Might as well enjoy the rush of being near her again before she dashed his hopes to

smithereens.

And maybe this time would be different. *Wishful thinking*.

He wandered in her direction, eyes on his prize the whole way, but he didn't rush. She was bundled up in a fleece hoodie, mini mitts and a toque, but her pink cheeks and bright eyes were super cute. He wanted to kiss her—hard. Make her shriek and laugh and blush so furiously everyone would know he'd turned her on. But he wanted to loop her arm through his and just stand together, too. Be seen as a couple and go home with her at the end of the night, where he'd kiss her all over again, not stopping until she was screaming his name with her legs wrapped around his head.

He really had no self-restraint when it came to Liv fantasies. He also had a hard time remembering why that was a bad thing, especially when she caught sight of him.

Her eyes lit up and a gorgeous smile spread across her face. "Hey, you." Was he imagining that her voice was softer, more sultry, than he'd heard in two years? She tilted her head toward the front of the line. "You want to take a ride with me?"

There was no way he was imagining *that*, not with the way her lower lip plumped out and she glanced up at him under her eyelashes. He stepped into line with a quick thanks to the couple behind them, who both gave him knowing winks—even if he didn't recognize them, they definitely knew him and Liv.

They crawled ahead a few more feet, then the queue paused again. His heart beat fast and sure in his chest. His Olivia had just flirted, hardcore, with *him*. He hadn't said anything, just walked over, and instead of being cheeky or combative, she'd suggested…well, hell, his mind filled in all the possible ways they could ride each other. Like a technicolour X-rated slideshow, snapshot memories of all the various ways they'd loved each other slammed through his head.

He slid his arm around her waist, sneaking his fingertips under the edge of her sweatshirt to press against her bare skin. He needed to remember that he was in uniform and had to return to work in half an hour. This wasn't going to end with him hauling her over his shoulder and driving ten over the speed limit back

to their house for a *ride*. They were going on a wagon covered in hay bales and excited, impressionable children.

He absolutely should not lean over and brush his lips against her temple, knowing it would make her shiver. He did it anyway because full restraint was a lost cause. So while he was there, Rafe decided to play with fire. Just a little bit. Just enough for his fingers to feel the pinch of the flame as the match burned. He wouldn't use the match. Just light it and then blow it out.

"I'm surprised to see you here tonight, Liv. I didn't think a slow, bumpy ride in the dark was your kind of thing." He whispered the words against the outer curve of her ear and was rewarded with another shiver. Of course, it was also cold as hell. He shouldn't assume…

She slowly turned her face towards him and smiled again, a simple curve of her mouth that tugged at something dangerous low in his gut. Really low. He gave silent thanks for the dark cover of night and a navy uniform as his erection started to swell. She knew what she was doing, the minx, because she kept her voice low and for his ears only. "As long as we keep our clothes on, I'm game for pretty much any kind of ride you want to take with me."

How much trouble would he get in for causing a public scene and abandoning his post? Rafe couldn't be sure he cared. But then her first words slid through his lusty haze. Clothes on? "Wait, what?"

Her face fell. "Weren't we teasing each other? I thought…your comment about the bumpy ride…"

He kissed her forehead and pulled her close, pressing her hip into his pelvis. Hopefully it just looked like a hug, but between his gun on one side and his stick on the other lay proof of what her words did to him. She twisted and gasped against his chest and he quietly laughed. "This is so not the place for this conversation."

"Maybe I shouldn't have come tonight."

Jesus, he couldn't resist that. He squeezed her waist and ducked his head again. "I think you should come every night."

"Haunt has been a once a year—oh." She stilled, then turned her face even more towards him. "Who says I don't come every night?"

Blood pounded through his veins, racing for his cock at the breathtaking image of Liv getting herself off. His tongue felt thick and useless in his mouth and he gave up any hope of responding. She'd most definitely won that round.

Smirking in knowing victory, she pushed away from him, but it was okay because she found his hand and wove her fingers into his and pulsed her hand reassuringly.

They moved forward again, silently this time. Even when he found his voice again, he wasn't going to ruin the perfection of the moment. It was hot and heady and everything he couldn't figure out on his own.

It felt like a first date.

A really, really good first date. So he didn't say anything, just held Liv's hand and savoured the warm press of her hip against his thigh. She didn't say anything either. Probably didn't want to risk goading him into saying something even more outlandish. Which he would, if it made her laugh or turned her on—or even better, did both at the same time. She might have landed a direct shot, but dirty teasing was his specialty when he wasn't blindsided by it. He'd have another chance soon enough.

Two wagons came in back to back, and the line leapt forward by forty people. Pretty soon it was their turn and they found a hay bale at the back of the wagon. Rafe sat first, secretly hoping Liv would choose to nestle into his side. He wasn't disappointed. He wrapped his arm around her and rested his cheek on the soft fleece of her hat.

The driver snapped his reins and off they went, the wagon bumping and swaying gently into the night. In the distance, spooky music promised a scary good time, and the kids in front of them were bouncing in anticipation.

Rafe knew the feeling. "So…"

She smiled up at him. "So?"

"I'm surprised to see you here tonight."

She looked at him for a long moment. There was more in her eyes than she was willing to say out loud, and his heart thumped against his chest. *Shut up, hope, there's no place for you here*. Except it felt like there really was. "We might want to use the park at night. This is easier than asking Tom for an after-

hours tour.”

We, huh? “So the job is going well, eh?”

She nodded. “Yeah, actually—“

The driver slowed the wagon to a stop and Liv cut herself off to listen to his opening spiel.

When they started moving again, Rafe decided a real conversation could wait until they weren’t going to be interrupted every few minutes. He cleared his throat. “Are you giving candy out on Tuesday?”

Liv nodded. “I bought a giant bag of Snickers and another of Rockets.” His favourites. “If you come over, I might give you some. If your costume is decent, of course. I have standards.”

He chuckled. “What if I wore one of my uniforms?”

She smoothed her hand over his knee. “Hmm. Not very original. I’d like to see a French maid costume, or maybe a tiny red devil dress.”

He didn’t say anything. Most of his responses weren’t hayride-appropriate. She laughed gently against his side. They reached the first station and his brother Tom stepped forward. He wore his park ranger shirt, but his pants were a ripped-to-shreds replacement for his usual ones, and his face was made up in the most gruesome way. He made an excellent monster. “Turn back,” he warned in a booming growl. “No good lies ahead.”

The driver of the wagon laughed, an unexpected interaction that made even Rafe jump a little. The driver gestured to the people sitting behind him. “You think your zombies are any match for these soldiers?”

Oooh, zombie warfare. Tom had changed the show this year. Liv squeezed his knee as the kids in front of them huddled closer together.

Tom stomped around the wagon, shining a flashlight here and there, muttering threats of death and destruction as he moved. Finally he stepped back into the shadows of the woods, yelling a final warning as he faded into the darkness. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, good people of Pine Harbour.”

With a jerk, the wagon started again, this time with a lot more nervous chatter as they headed around the bend in the dirt road. Murmurs turned to screams as they encountered the first wave of zombies, moaning and groaning at

them from the side of the road. The actors followed them to the next bend, then faded back to their staging position.

The driver kept the suspense levels high as they encountered more zombie stations, and then he jerked the wagon to a stop when his radio crackled to life.

This time, it wasn't zombies that came out of the woods, but two of Tom's fellow rangers. They leapt onto the wagon and urged the driver to go again. They gave everyone on the wagon instructions to stay seated no matter what, then made a big production of giving the driver a map for a short cut. He begged them to stay with them and get out safely, but they said there were other wagons of innocent people in the park they needed to find. He slowed to a stop, they jumped off, and then he made one final turn.

Into what looked like a wall of zombies.

The wagon moved forward agonizingly slowly, and all around them, actors banged on the sides. Their hands were wrapped in what looked like torn clothes covered in blood, and as they moaned and gnashed their teeth at the wagon, Rafe thought this was probably the best Haunt the Park ever.

Mostly because Liv was practically in his lap, but the entertainment factor was pretty high, too.

When the wagon burst into a clearing on the far side of the administrative building, everyone cheered and a few people close enough clapped the driver on the back.

The unloading zone was at the opposite end of the parking lot from where they got on. Before they disembarked, the driver turned in his seat. He scrubbed his face with his hands and waited for everyone to give him their full attention. "Listen, folks. I know this is going to be hard to do, but you can't tell anyone else what we saw in the woods. The park rangers will make sure we clear the park safely, but if we tell anyone over there—" He gestured to the crowd waiting for their turns. "It will just cause panic." And then he winked, which caused everyone to laugh. "Now, if you want to head in the direction of Butterfly Hall, you'll find hot chocolate and apple cider, courtesy of Anna's Kitchen, and a really excellent silent auction. There's also colouring tables for the kids, and zombie face-painting for a dollar."

As they were at the back of the wagon, they were the last ones off. The group headed for the main doors of Butterfly Hall, but Rafe had other plans. He had a few minutes before Dean would be looking for him. He intended to make the most of them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BREATHLESS AND VIBRATING WITH EXCITEMENT, Olivia let Rafe pull her toward the post-Haunt activities until she remembered that his family was serving the community mugs of cocoa on the other side of the building. She said his name a few times, finally yanking on his arm to get him to stop.

He turned and looked at her. Why did he have to be so good-looking? Dark hair, strong jaw, gleaming eyes. She mock scowled at him and he laughed. “Regretting this already?”

“We haven’t done anything untoward.” She crossed her arms over her chest and hopped up and down. It was cold enough that just standing around wasn’t fun.

He winked. “Not yet.”

“Your mom is serving hot chocolate, so we can’t just walk up hand-in-hand.”

He gave her a scathing look. “Please. I’ve got ten minutes before I need to go back to work. You think I’m wasting that on hot chocolate, my mother or anything to do with other people?” He notched a thumb in the direction of the side door. “We’re going in there.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Why?”

He moved closer and slid his hands up and down her upper arms. “To warm you up.” He got a wicked gleam in his eyes. “Maybe from the inside out.” She started to say his name, loading it with reproach and concern, but he cut her off with a quick kiss on the cheek. “We’ll keep our clothes on.”

That didn’t fill her with confidence, even though she’d been the one to draw

that boundary. There was a lot that Rafe could do to her with their clothes still on that would make it difficult for her to think straight enough to drive home. “Is this just because you have fond memories of necking with teenage hussies here?”

He laughed and pushed her toward the building. “Jealous?”

Maybe a little, but she still scoffed. “Of something you did like, twenty years ago?”

“Ouch, you’re aging me a bit more than necessary, baby.” The side door swung open silently and he wrapped an arm around her waist. The possessive hold twisted around more than her body. “Maybe I just missed you.”

She’d missed him too. She didn’t think he’d intended his absence from her space to inspire such longing. The last time she saw him, he didn’t give any indication that he was playing hard to get. More that he was trying hard *not* to get. Being good.

But it was a futile effort, avoiding the chemistry between. And now… “I believe that. The feeling is mutual. We actually have a lot to talk about.”

He pressed her up against the wall and lifted her chin with the point of one finger. “That’s definitely what we should do right now. Talk.” He winked, and even in the shadows of the dimly lit hallway, she could tell he was teasing.

What could it hurt to scratch the itch one more time? She ignored the obvious answer—it could hurt both of them in a really big way. It *would* hurt both of them. But it also seemed inevitable, the slide back together. Maybe if they could control it. Boundaries to protect their hearts and ensure that no one else would ever find out.

Ha. Unlikely. If they did this, it wouldn’t be a fling. It would be the start of something big and messy. And awesome, right up until they ran into the same old problems.

“I’m not working Friday night, we could talk then. Over dinner. Maybe go dancing.”

She laughed. There wasn’t really anywhere for them to go dancing, unless one counted the sketchy dive bars in Owen Sound. She did not. Stag and does and weddings were pretty much it for that kind of thing.

“Is there a dance at the legion you want me to meet you at? You tried that, remember? I’m not ready for that kind of public statement.”

“I remember you giving up before we even got a chance to dance.”

“What is it with you and dancing lately?” Although she had liked having his arms wrapped around her at the bonfire.

His lips curved into a naughty smile that made her melt on the inside. “It’s the only type of bumping and grinding I’m going to get with you, right? We can do anything as long as the clothes stay on?”

She propped one hand on her hip and wagged the other in his direction. “Yes, and don’t you forget it.”

“Then I want to…dance with you, a lot. You’re not leaving for four months, two weeks and one day. I’m going to ask you to some sort of event that has dancing every single week until you leave. And at some point, you’re going to forget that you don’t think we should dance naked.”

Oh god, he had a countdown to when he thought she was leaving. She was doomed in the most delicious way. “That’s not dancing, that’s sex.”

He pressed into her, slowly and deliberately, and lowered his head, stopping just a hair’s breadth away from her mouth. His eyes were dancing, the cocky bastard.

“Why are you so confident this is going to work?”

“Because we’re made for each other, Liv. I can survive without you, but it won’t be living. That’s powerful motivation that we didn’t have the first time round. If you give us another chance, we’re going to get it right. I’m going to get it right.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “You keep saying that.”

“Does it feel like a lie?” His hands dusted her hips, close enough for her to feel the heat radiating against her body.

She shook her head slowly. “I know you’re going to try.”

“I’m going to succeed.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Rafe, I need to tell you something.”

He stilled around her, a frozen mountain of a man. “Yeah?”

“I might not be moving in March.”

“Oh?”

Why was she dragging this out? Because he’d be happy? Because she wasn’t sure she was happy? Rip off the bandage. The moral of their divorce, really. “They’ve offered me a full-time job for the duration of filming. It’s only until June or July, but—“

She didn’t get any further before his mouth cut her off. Hard and hungry, his kiss poured out two years of pent-up desire and need and pulled her under. She clung to him as he wrapped himself around her, kissing her over and over again. He raked his hands into her hair, loosening her ponytail just enough for his fingers to gain purchase and then he held her head just so as he plundered her mouth.

He licked and sucked and teased, and she gave back as good as she got. He tasted like cold and hot and everything she’d been missing. Her heart pounded in her throat and she wrapped her arms around his neck, sliding her fingers over the shoulder straps of the bullet-proof vest—trying desperately to gain some leverage to pull herself up his body. He splayed his hands, strong and sure, under her bottom and lifted her effortlessly. She wrapped her legs around his hips, awkwardly bumping into his utility belt and all the things attached to it, and they rocked together.

Ten minutes, she reminded herself. He had to go back to work, even if it was just parking lot monitoring. And somewhere nearby was his—

“Rafaelo Minelli, what in God’s name are you doing?” His mother. Holy frigid moment in hell.

Olivia groaned and buried her face in his neck. Rafe froze against her, his grip on her bottom still steady, but any second now he would drop her and she’d be left—

“Go away, Ma.” He brushed a kiss across Olivia’s brow and whispered that he was going to set her down when it became clear that his mother was going to do no such thing. Her feet found the ground and he kept a tight grip on her, making sure she was settled before he turned, keeping her tucked safely behind his back as he took on the dragon lady. “Seriously? You couldn’t turn around and give us a minute?”

“No, and I can’t believe you’d suggest such a thing. You two have no shame.”

“*I* may have no shame when it comes to my wife. She was dragged in here entirely against her will, I assure you.” He laughed when his mother made a shocked and offended harumphing noise. “What are *you* doing, spying on me?”

Olivia peeked out from behind Rafe. Anne pointed to the open office door she was standing next to and frostily explained she’d been getting more paper cups from their supplies. Olivia pressed her face into the back of Rafe’s vest. Maybe if she stayed there until Anne left, she could pretend this never happened.

Between them, her chest started vibrating. *Saved by the bell*. She fished out her phone. The Dancelight office number displayed on the screen. She could call back in a minute…or she could get the heck out of the most awkward encounter with her mother-in-law in almost two years.

She tapped on Rafe’s back and he turned around, glancing at her phone as he did. “I gotta take this, sorry. See you around?” And with that far-too-glib-for-what-they-just-did blow off, she skedaddled back out the side door Rafe had dragged her in just a few minutes earlier.

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THE CALL HAD BEEN from Johnny and she’d answered his question before she even got to her car. She could have turned around and waited to say goodbye to Rafe, but something told her to go home. A gut feeling that they should do this in baby steps, and walk away while an interaction could be called a success.

Not that being caught by Anne hadn’t put a damper on what they did. But her heart was still thumping hard—in a good way—at how Rafe had kissed her.

The barn doors were wide open. They were definitely doing that again.

Dean gave her a knowing wave as she navigated her way past the crowds and out of the parking lot.

She drove home humming the entire way, and once inside her warm, cozy little home, she poured herself a glass of wine and opened her laptop. It was time to buy some new lingerie. Something told her she'd need something sooner than later. Definitely by Christmas.

Her curves were a little too generous for Victoria's Secret, but Deena had clued her in to British lingerie shops and their amazing online stores. Even with international shipping, the prices were reasonable. And the silk and satin? Totally sexy.

And with her new income, and her credit card almost paid off…it was time to indulge her secret love of lace and ribbon.

When the knock came on her door two hours later, she wasn't surprised, but part of her wanted to text him and tell him to go away. That she had a date with a fantasy Rafe in her dreams and tonight had been perfect, so they shouldn't mess it up with talking that would inevitably lead to fighting.

But on the other side of the door lay a good probability of another smoking hot kiss.

She may have been a little breathless when she wrenched open the door. She covered it up with a bright smile. "Is this about me ducking out?"

Rafe cocked one eyebrow and moved right into her personal space. He closed the door behind him and cupped her face in his hands, pressing a hard, hot kiss against her mouth. "This is about us having a lot of unfinished business."

Heat unfurled in her belly and she pressed her lips together as he took off his leather jacket. He'd changed out of his uniform and now wore a black thermal henley over dark green cargo pants. He looked every bit the bad-ass soldier and cop she knew he was—but that just underlined some of that unfinished business between them, and not the good kissing kind. He sat on the bench and unlaced his boots, then held out his hand. She let him lead her to the couch, where he moved her laptop out of the way and took a seat at one end. She sat at the other.

"Did I interrupt you working?"

She shook her head and let a small smile play on her lips.

He raised his eyebrows. "What? You look like the cat that got the canary."

“I was doing some online shopping.” *Why are you telling him this? Clothes must stay on!* “For lingerie.”

Laughter was not the response she’d been hoping for. “Baby, really?”

She crossed her arms. “They haven’t shipped yet, so there’s still time for me to cancel.”

“No, don’t do that.” He sobered up and gave her a hard stare. “You’re teasing me. Yesterday you weren’t speaking to me, today you’re, you’re…” He trailed off and let his sentiment be known with a bite of his lower lip and a slow up and down sweep of her body. Which was clad in yoga pants and a hoodie, quite the opposite of sexy silk, but it probably wouldn’t matter.

She lifted her hands in the air. “I know. But today I’m not leaving town. I’ve got two jobs to the middle of the summer, and I don’t know…maybe I won’t leave at all.”

He stared at her. “Why?”

“Does it matter?” She didn’t really know the answer to that question yet. It just didn’t feel right, leaving. She’d been running away from something she didn’t need to fear. No matter what, she could stand on her own two feet in Pine Harbour.

He nodded slowly. “I think it does. I think if we’re going to do this, we have to start differently. As equals, no obligation.”

She looked at his hand resting on top of the cushions at the back of the couch. Tan skin, a light dusting of dark hair at the wrist, neatly trimmed nails at the end of big, blunt fingers. He was a giant of a man, and when she’d met him she knew he would be a good husband and lover. He had been. A good father and provider. He would have been. Hurt stabbed through her chest. Not her own…his. She might have come to Pine Harbour because he had the career and she didn’t, but her obligation to him faded pretty damn quickly after that. And she started demanding more and more of him. More attention. More understanding. More and more until he couldn’t give it.

She knew now that she should have sought the stimulation she needed in something else. A hobby, although that sounded weak. Should have looked harder for a more interesting job. Been more serious about taking up running or

having children. Rafe had wanted kids. She'd wanted to wait, but now that she was nearing thirty, starting a family sounded way less frightening than it had in her early twenties. But maybe that wasn't on the table. Not the way Rafe was talking about no obligations and doing things differently.

"That doesn't sound like a second attempt at marriage," she said softly.

He shook his head. "I don't know if we were meant to be married, Liv."

Now the hurt was one hundred percent hers. Oh. Heat flooded her cheeks, crawling down her neck and across her chest. "I thought we'd agreed there was too much history between us for something casual."

He shifted forward enough to grab her hand and pull her toward him. Not hard against his body, just close enough for their knees to bump and his hand to reach her face. "There is." He sighed, a deep, heavy release that left a lingering crease between his brows. "But we need to build a better foundation this time. And who knows if that'll happen? But I want to give it a shot."

The truth of what he was saying stole her breath away. She felt the trembling start in her middle and travel across her entire body.

"Hey, hey," he murmured, stroking her knuckles with his thumb. "Was that too blunt? I *want* it to happen. I want nothing more than to find a way back to you. Permanently."

She offered a shaky smile. "It's not very romantic, though, is it?"

He gave her a hard look. "Is that what you want? Romance?"

She turned the question over in her head. "I don't know. I liked…" Realization dawned on her. "Oh. You aren't sure how I felt about your notes."

Now it was his turn to blush, just slightly, his tan cheeks turning the barest shade of red. "I figured you saw it as an opening, but the way you were acting tonight…"

"Like a hussy?"

"Hey, I like hussies." He laughed at the mock offence she took. "One in particular, who has this bizarre clothes-on policy that makes things… challenging."

"A good challenge?" Her breath hitched.

He nodded and tugged her closer still, not stopping until she was splayed out

on his chest. “A smart, delicious, frustrating challenge.” He nipped at her ear. “One that I’m totally up for, by the way.”

“It’s just for a little while,” she whispered, nuzzling her face into his neck.

“Until the lingerie order gets here?” His hands were everywhere—squeezing her bottom, stroking her back, tangling in her hair. Her elastic band went pinging off the wall behind them and Rafe slid down the couch a bit, settling her more squarely on his lap. She rocked gently back and forth, cradling his growing erection in her soft heat. “Please tell me you ordered express shipping.”

She shook her head, her hair hanging down around them both like an intimate curtain. “Sorry,” she whispered. “They’re coming on the slow boat from England.”

“Damn,” he groaned. “I’m going to have to torture you, then. Make you as crazy for me as I am for you.”

“You’re crazy for—“ He cut her off with a punishing kiss, like *how dare* she not know that, and then they were done talking.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NINE DAYS LATER, Olivia came home and found a brown package with UK postage propped against her front door. She might have a masochistic side, she decided, because after trying everything on, she tucked the box away in her dresser. *Not yet.* And not because they weren't having a great time. They were having an *amazing* time. Rafe had worked four day shifts in the middle of the week, and then three in a row starting on Sunday, but on his way home every night he'd stopped at her place for a few hours. They ate dinner and talked and kissed.

They kissed a lot. Slow and fast, hungry and sweet. As soon as he arrived, in between sharing the events of their days and gossip about people they knew, and for a long time before he regretfully left each night.

He didn't need to leave. She'd thought about suggesting he stay—they'd slept together with clothes on for the better part of four years. They could do it now and not have sex. But she was afraid he'd say no. Rafe seemed to enjoy this early relationship renaissance. For reasons she knew were illogical and unfair, that pissed her off.

She wanted him to want more.

She wanted more.

So when he showed up Tuesday night, dead on his feet at the end of his run of shifts, she was prepared to tell him to go home. It wasn't what she wanted, but she didn't know how to show him her heart without risking too much. Without knowing that all his professions of intent would be followed by real, lasting

action. But then he wrapped himself around her, sagging hard against her like her embrace was exactly what he'd needed at the end of his day, and none of it mattered.

"Hungry?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "Tired. Can I snooze on your couch while you watch TV? Is that awful?"

It sounded almost perfect. "I have a better idea." She led him to her bed and reached for his belt. "Underwear counts as clothes for tonight."

"I couldn't get it up if I tried, baby. Which is a damn shame." He laughed, a bone-weary sound that cracked her heart. They snuggled under the blankets, Rafe's hand cupping her breast through her t-shirt, his lips pressed to the back of her neck. He started snoring, a light, reassuring sound she'd missed with all of her being, and as she watched streaming TV on her iPad, his erection slowly rose behind her. *Soon*, she promised in her head.

— —

RAFE WOKE up ready to convince Liv they should take their relationship to the next level. He'd spent all night wrapped around her body, and had taken her six ways from Sunday already in his dreams. But when warm sun hit his face and he reached for his wife, he found a note on her pillow instead. **Gone to work at the diner. Come find me there for coffee.** Beside her note was her discarded t-shirt, and like a lovesick teen he buried his face in it and fisted his ready and willing cock. *Not this morning, buddy*. But soon, really soon. He dragged himself into the shower, emerging five minutes later smelling like a fucking meadow, a fact that Liv found hysterical when he showed up for his promised caffeine hit.

"You smell pretty," she whispered as she sashayed past him. He was going to miss that little apron when she stopped working there. He wanted to fold her

over his lap and spank her soundly for being cheeky. “And you look… frustrated,” she added after she filled his cup. She set the carafe to the side and leaned across the counter, kissing him lightly on the cheek.

He shot his hand out and cupped the back of her neck, holding her in place. “That’s not a good morning kiss,” he muttered, trying to keep a smile at bay.

She arched one eyebrow and took a deep breath, her pupils dilating. “Oh no?”

He shook his head and pulled them back together, ignoring the dozen or so other people in the place. They could all go to hell. There was only one way he wanted his wife to kiss him in the morning—long, hard and dirty. He licked across the flesh of her lower lip, and then inside her mouth as she sucked in a breath, parting her pretty little lips. Far too quickly for his own liking he pulled back, enjoying the slightly glazed look on her face. “I’ll take the special.”

She stared at him for a minute, her cheeks pink and her lips swollen, then gave him a mock-scowl and scribbled his order on her pad. “You think you’re something else, don’t you, Rafe Minelli.”

“That I do, Olivia Minelli.” He lowered his voice and leaned forward. “Thank you for last night.”

Her eyes softened and she shook her head. “You work too hard.”

“I know.” He really did. He couldn’t see a way around that, but it was on his mind. She deserved more of his time.

“You off today?”

“I parade tonight with the regiment, but that’s it until the weekend.” He didn’t want to assume too much, but just in case she didn’t want to ask… “I’m free for whatever. Morning, noon or…night.” He grinned on the last point and she flicked him with her tea towel.

“Will you be late tonight?”

“Probably.”

He could see the battle in her eyes. Kindness won out, and he silently pledged to get himself out of the armouries as soon as humanly possible. “You still got your key?”

“You didn’t change the locks?”

She gave him a grumpy side-eye for that question. “Seriously? Because you’re so scary or something?”

“Or something. It’s the thing to do, baby.”

“Well, I didn’t, and now you can let yourself in when you get back, so take your judgement and stuff it, mister.”

He smiled into his coffee.

“Stop smiling. I might get the locks changed this afternoon.” She tossed that one over her shoulder as she took menus to two newcomers, and he reached out and patted her behind. That got a round of chuckles from the room, and Liv turned bright pink.

But it was the good kind of blushing, the kind that said she knew she was loved.

— —

HALF HIS SECTION didn’t show up, which would normally piss him off—two of them were out of work and could use the money, and if he could make it every week, they had no excuse—but when he got the hell out of there at quarter after ten, he didn’t mind so much.

He sped the whole way home, knowing that he was spending the night with Liv and it would be worth the caution if he got pulled over by one of his brothers in blue. The lights were on when he pulled his truck into the drive, and he hopped out, grabbing his already packed overnight bag.

The door wasn’t locked and he didn’t bother knocking. From the entrance he could see her sitting on the couch, and she twisted to give him a smile. “You’re back earlier than I expected.”

“Had to see my girl.”

She reached up as he neared her and he let her pull him down. She sank into the cushions beneath him and he pushed himself up.

“No,” she whispered. “I like how heavy you are.”

He took her mouth, slow and sweet, showing her how much he missed her. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

“Then we should go to bed,” she said, nipping at his chin.

He moved on top of her, settling himself better between her legs. If they went to bed, they could lose at least some of their clothes. “Are you tired?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” He hauled her up in one swift motion and tossed her over his shoulder like a rag doll. He strode into the bedroom, setting her down just long enough to whip off his shirt. She giggled as he wrapped his arms around her again and lifted her high against his body.

“We keep meeting like this,” she said breathlessly, tightening her thighs around his waist.

“My arms were made to hold you,” he said. It was supposed to sound romantic, but they both started laughing. “Too much?” he asked as he pressed her against the wall, freeing one hand to start exploring under her shirt as the other cupped her magnificent ass.

She gasped as his thumb found her nipple on the outside of her bra. “Nope, totally…sweet.”

“I wasn’t going for sweet,” he growled, sucking on her neck.

“Sweet in a…” She interrupted herself with a moan. “Take my clothes off kind of way.”

He froze. “All the way off?”

She nodded.

He shoved his hand higher, all the way under her shirt and up out the scoop neck. He traced a line up her neck and tapped on her chin. She blinked hard as she looked him in the eye. “That’s a big step.”

“Trying to talk me out of it?” she squirmed, trying to make more deliberate contact with his erection. He jerked hard against her and then tilted his hips out of reach.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” He traced circles around her collarbone with his index finger, just watching her as she wriggled against the wall. He shifted closer

and kissed one cheekbone ever so lightly, then the other. “Are we officially back together?”

“Maybe?”

He pulled back and raised his eyebrows. “Maybe?”

“Can’t we just do this?” She licked her lips and arched toward him. “I don’t want to think about what we’d tell people if we started dating again.”

They already know. “We don’t need to tell them anything,” he said, not really a lie. He tugged the low neckline of her t-shirt down, exposing the lace of her bra. “I definitely don’t want to share this with anyone.”

“Is that what we’re doing? Dating?” She ran her hands over his shoulders, up into his hair, and back again.

“We should figure that out before we go any further,” he said before diving in for another kiss.

She slid her hands around his neck and squeezed, trying to get him closer. “That would be smart.”

“The right thing to do.” He tightened his hold on her and spun them around, aiming for the bed. She landed in the middle and he stood over her, half out of his mind with lust. “Take off your clothes.”

“So much for talking?”

“It’ll give us something to fight about tomorrow.” His heart pounded in his chest, his dick strained at his fly, and all of a sudden he needed this to be real. Enough playing. “Olivia, I don’t know what we’re doing. But I love you.”

“Good enough for me,” she whispered, unbuttoning her jeans. He did the same, never taking his eyes off of her as every curve he’d missed for too damn long came into view. Soft, smooth, porcelain skin, dipping and swelling around red mesh panties that left very little to the imagination.

“Oh baby,” he groaned, falling on top of her.

“We need a condom,” she said as he helped slide her out of her t-shirt, then her bra and finally those teasing bottoms.

Fuck. “I don’t have one.” He was an idiot. Of course she’d want him to wear a rubber. “It’s okay, we can do other stuff.”

Her mouth parted and she let out a breathless little sound that made him hard

as nails. “Other stuff?”

He grinned. “I want to lick you till you scream.”

“I like the sound of that.” She licked her lips. “But I really wanted…”

He pressed his forehead against hers as she blushed. “Me too, baby.”

She twisted toward the bedside table. “I might have some in here, hang on.”

He followed her, pressing against her back. “Two years, Liv,” he rasped against the nape of her neck. “It’s been two years. I’m going to come on your legs like a fifteen-year-old boy in a minute.”

She froze. “You haven’t slept with anyone else?”

“I never wanted anyone else. I just want you.” Admitting that should have been humbling, but it just felt freeing to admit. He could blame the height of passion if it came up later. After he made love to his wife.

She rolled back toward him, making enough space between them for his cock to wave free like a fucking flagpole. Her breaths were slow and heavy as she stroked his rock-hard length. “You promise me—”

He cut her off with a kiss. “There’s been no one else, Liv. I swear.”

“Me too. And I’m still on the pill.”

“We don’t need to…I’m good with whatever.” But oh god, he’d missed being inside her, and he wasn’t sure he’d kept a pleading tone out of his voice. Fuck it. He didn’t care.

Her eyes were wide and bright as she stared at him, and it wasn’t until he felt her warm, wet folds on the head of his cock that he realized she’d lifted her leg and was slowly bringing them together. Jesus Christ, she was slippery as fuck and felt amazing. After teasing him for a painfully glorious minute, swirling her hips and lodging just the tip of his cock inside her, she pushed him back and straddled his hips. It took all of his restraint to not surge up and into her tight heat, but she was in charge.

She sank down an inch or two, then up again, easing him slowly into her tight channel. She felt incredible, inside and out. “I’m not going to last long,” she admitted shakily, and he gave a silent prayer of thanks.

“Come for me, baby.” He stroked his hands up and down her thighs, then up and over her belly and down to her mound. She liked a thumb right there, just

above her clit, rocking back and forth. In the past she'd done it, and he'd watched her fingers fly just above where they were joined. But tonight he wanted to bring her to the brink. It would satisfy some base male need inside him to be the instrument of all her pleasure.

She tipped her head back as she started to move her hands up and down her torso. Reedy, whispery moans slipped out of her mouth as she picked up the pace, squeezing him inside and out. He couldn't hold back, pumping his hips in time to her lift and sway. Driving deep. How had he given her up? Nothing was like this, that incredible otherworldly sensation of sliding into his mate. Slick and soft and infinitely powerful at the same time.

His balls drew tighter against his body as she ground her pelvis hard against his hand and she tipped forward as her orgasm started, catching herself with her hands pressed to the bed on either side of his head. She held her breath, eyes wide open and shiny bright, as she started pulsing from the inside out. He kept thrusting, chasing his own orgasm as she gasped his name over and over again, and then he was there.

His eyes rolled back in his head and everything went blurry for a minute. He felt Liv settle on his chest, then shift to his side, and all he could do was mumble and pet her hair. When his legs unlocked and he'd managed to blink his eyes back to clear vision, he rolled over and pulled her tight against his body. He was never letting her go.

"You have to let go," she laughed, as if she could read his mind, and he shook his head roughly.

"You stay here, I'll get a washcloth."

"Under the sink!" she called out, but he knew. He ran two of them under the hot water tap, then rung them out. He snagged a towel off the shelf in the bathroom as well.

Back in her bedroom, he stopped and stared for a minute. She was too beautiful for words, stretched out naked for him.

"Stop it, you're being weird." She smiled shyly and covered her eyes. "Turn out the light."

He flipped the switch for the overhead light, but turned on the lamp

immediately after. “I want to look at you all night long.”

She laughed. “That’s your prerogative, but I need to work tomorrow.”

“Call in sick.”

She shook her head, her eyes trained on his. “Can’t do it.” It was a challenge of sorts. *Understand that my jobs matter just as much as yours do.* He did.

“Fair enough, baby.” He climbed in next to her and nudged her legs open.

“Careful,” she breathed.

“Sensitive?” He touched one of the washcloths to the lips of her sex and she bit her lip and nodded. His dick throbbed like he could go again. Damn. “I’ll be gentle.” He cupped her with the warm cloth and leaned to kiss her mouth. He meant it to be sweet and delicate, but she parted her lips for him and he sank inside.

Kissing Liv was like being fed the best food in the world and only getting hungrier. Reward and temptation all rolled into one. She arched her back, pressing her big, gorgeous breasts into his chest. He flicked the washcloth over his shoulder and cupped one swollen peak. Her nipple stood proudly at attention, begging for a kiss of its own, and he closed his mouth over it. The firm nub teased his tongue and he sucked more of her flesh into his mouth. He wanted all of her, over and over again. Rolling her to her back, he loved her other breast, then back again, burying his face in the valley between them before kissing his way south.

Even as she lifted her hips toward his mouth, she was begging him to be gentle. He spread her thighs and blew a breath across her swollen cleft. He could be a fucking feather if that’s what she needed. He kissed the softness at the top of one thigh, then the other, savouring the moment before he actually tasted her. The scent of her sweet musk worked its way into his brain and all thinking ceased.

— —

RAFE'S TONGUE parting her folds was the best damn feeling in the entire world. She felt herself open for him and then he was licking around her clit in delicate circles and all of a sudden she didn't care about being sore. She pressed her hands into his hair, urging him to suck on her, to eat her up until she exploded from the awesomeness of it all.

"Ooooh, oh, oh, oh," she panted, getting louder with each breathy exclamation. "Rafe, oh god, Rafe. Jesus, I love you. Oh, yes, right there. Right —" Her words devolved into guttural noises then, embarrassingly loud, and for a minute she forgot that she'd just told him that she loved him in the middle of oral sex.

He didn't miss it, though. He rode out her orgasm with his face pressed tight against her sex, then he kissed his way up her body and notched his impressively heavy cock against her soaking wet pussy. "Is this okay?" he whispered against her neck.

She nodded wordlessly and he eased inside, seating himself deep in her pelvis. He was big and hard and he filled her so completely, stretching her body in a glorious way she'd almost forgotten about. She'd remembered that sex was *good* and she missed it, but the details had gotten foggy—that thin line between pleasure and pain that is only understood in the moment. When raw, swollen skin *wants* to be pressed to the limit again.

He cupped her neck with one hand and used the other to lift her boneless body up underneath him as he surged into her again and again, slowly and deliberately. Marking her. "You love me," he whispered, and she nodded again. "Say it."

She shook her head. If she said it, she'd start crying.

"Say it, baby. Tell me you love me when my face isn't buried in your pussy." His cock flexed deep inside her and she groaned. He kept it up, a stream of filthy words that made her slippery with want, until she grabbed his face and stilled his lips with a press of her finger.

"Enough." She licked her lips as he pressed into her and onto her and somehow, right through her. "I love you, Rafe."

He stared at her for a minute, his eyes dark, his lips swollen and wet, and

then he kissed her, an all-consuming declaration that she was *his*, no more hedging around it. She opened her mouth like she'd opened her heart, consequences be damned, and he poured himself into her in every possible way, carrying her with him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FOR THE FIRST time in two years, Olivia woke up to smells and sounds of someone in her kitchen. She cracked an eyelid. It was still dark out. Rafe was whistling.

Oh god. This was what pure happiness felt like. She closed her eyes and let herself drift back into quasi-sleep as memories from the night before warmed her from the inside out. They'd been insatiable, both of them. When she tried to picture it, all she saw was a tumble of limbs, sliding back and forth, skin-on-skin. Two people completely entwined, rolling from one position to the next, hungry for so much more.

"You're blushing," His voice in the doorway made her smile.

"You can't know that, it's dark." She peeked through her eye lashes to confirm that was still the case.

"You blushed for most of the night, every time your leg touched my hard-on. It's an easy bet you're pink all over now that you're awake and remembering what we did."

She laughed, then sobered up. "You had a hard-on all night long?" And did they have time to do something about it before she went to work?

He came closer and she smelled the coffee as he set two mugs on the side table. "Want to take a shower with me and get reacquainted with him?"

She tossed off the blankets. Heck ya.

He washed her hair, his erection bobbing against her back the whole time, but when she reached for him, he shook his head. He pressed her against the tile

wall and kissed her instead, a proper good morning kiss like the day before at the diner. “I was kidding about that.”

“I wasn’t,” she said, wrapping her hand around his shaft. “I didn’t get to taste you last night.”

She dropped to her knees and kissed the very tip of him, then licked her lips, easing the way for the head to slide into her mouth. She fisted her hand right behind his foreskin, relishing the way he throbbed under her touch. As one, she moved her hand and her mouth down his shaft until her pinky finger hit the firm flat of his lower abdomen. He grunted and leaned forward, bracing himself against the wall as she cupped his balls with her other hand.

Power sizzled through her veins as she looked up at him. His eyes, half-hooded with desire, tracked her every movement. In and out, lick and suck. She ducked her head and concentrated on her task. It didn’t take long before his legs were shaking and his shaft swelled in her mouth. She swallowed hard, pulling him into her throat and he started swearing. One of his hands cupped the back of her head and she pulsed her tongue along the underside of his cock, urging him to spill himself in her mouth.

He hissed her name, a long, drawn out warning she didn’t need. She knew she had him as his sac tightened in her hand. She stroked her fingertips right there, along the seam, and that did it. He thudded his hips against her face, his hand cushioning the thump of her head against the wall, and came hard right where she wanted him.

She slid between his legs and stood behind him, pressing a kiss to the middle of his back before leaving him leaning against the wall to recover. She dried off, went to the larger closet in the hall to find a Rafe-sized bath sheet, then the bedroom for the coffee he’d made her. A quick glance at the clock told her she still had an hour before work. Her husband was a freak of nature, waking up so early on his day off.

He was still leaning against the tile, water sluicing down his back, when she returned.

“Can I dry you off, mister?”

He glanced over his shoulder and shook his head at her. “Come any closer,

woman, and you're going to drain the very last of my reserves."

She perched on the toilet seat and sipped her coffee while he slowly returned to full function.

"What do you have going on today?" He asked as he padded down the hall in search of his own cup. She followed.

"Diner first, but just a half-day today because I worked a full-day yesterday and the new girl is doing well. Did I tell you that Frank wants me to keep working there on Wednesdays until the filming actually begins? It's okay with Greg, because I'm going to end up working evenings and weekends a bit, like next week's community meeting…" She trailed off as she realized he was staring at her with a strange look on his face. Good, but strange. "What?"

"You're telling me about your day. You love me, we're both naked from the shower, and you're telling me—" He reached out and hauled her toward him. She just barely managed to perch her coffee mug on the side table again before he'd pulled her onto the bed. "This is good," he said, kissing her forehead.

She pressed her hand to his chest. His heart thumped against her palm. *No*, she thought. *This is great*.

— —

IT REMAINED great for exactly one week.

Greg and Ashley arrived bright and early the following Thursday, a cold, clear day, and she met them at the Blue Heron Lane cottages. She didn't have a shift at the diner until the following week, so she was in total movie-mode. She'd woken up when Rafe left for his shift at dark o'clock, and spent the next hour in front of her closet trying to decide what to wear. She'd already settled on dark jeans, a white t-shirt and a corduroy blazer for the community meeting that night, but she wanted that outfit to be fresh in the evening.

Every single pair of pants she owned ended up tossed on the bed before she

settled on black pants and a red long-sleeve cashmere blend sweater she'd only worn once the previous Christmas when she'd gone to her sister's. She set them aside and returned everything else to some semblance of normal before ducking into the bathroom to brush her hair. She stared at herself in the mirror. Maybe it was time to ditch the ponytail. She hated the randomness of her waves when she left it down, but she had enough time today that she could blow dry her hair straight. And then it would still look good for the meeting.

An hour later, she stopped at the diner and ordered herself a coffee to go. Frank made noises about her never looking so fancy when she worked for him, but his eyes promised he was still proud of her. She blew him a kiss and promised she'd be back later with her new boss, which only made him grumble even more, although the last bit was something about the man being a good tipper.

They had a tight itinerary, but Ashley kept them on track. The other woman was probably a few years younger than Olivia, but she seemed like a total professional.

"The trick is to remember that they're helpless without you," she whispered as Greg went through his spiel for the fourth time that morning, outlining the compensation offered to property owners and what temporary changes they might expect to see. Olivia couldn't hold back a laugh, and had to hide it behind her hand when Greg glanced in their direction. Ashley rolled her eyes. "The next trick is to learn to laugh on the inside."

By the time they arrived at the diner for an early dinner, Olivia's head was swimming with details. She'd taken pages of notes, asked dozens of questions, and was super glad that Greg was going to do all the talking at the event that night. Ashley and Greg slid into the booth first, on opposite sides, while Olivia ducked into the kitchen to say hi to Lily Gill. On the way back to their table she grabbed the menus from Deena, who promised to be over in a minute with coffee.

"Do I look that tired?" she asked, pausing at the counter.

Deena smirked. "No, but rumour has it Rafe's truck has been parked outside your place every night for near on two weeks now. I assume you're not getting

much sleep.”

“Oh my god, seriously?” Life in a small town still made her head spin sometimes. “Do people have nothing better to talk about?”

Deena shrugged. “Rafe is cute. Everyone is sad he’s off the market again.”

Olivia gave up. Even though she was blushing, she pointed a stern finger at the other waitress. “Hands off my man.”

That earned her a few chuckles from the people sitting at the counter. She puffed out her still flaming cheeks and finally made her way back to Ashley and Greg, who were deep in conversation. Their coats were piled on the bench beside Ashley, so she slid in next to Greg.

When Deena came by they all shoved their mugs greedily toward her carafe of coffee, and before she left they’d ordered as well. Olivia sighed and thunked her head back against the padded booth. Greg patted her hand on the table. “There, there, new girl.”

“I need a nap before the meeting. Will you fire me for saying that?”

Ashley laughed. “Wait until we have fifteen hour filming days.”

Olivia reached for her mug. “I need to stock up on energy drinks, clearly.”

Greg pointed at Ashley. “This one goes running every morning, it’s amazing.”

Maybe Ashley wasn’t younger than her—just healthier and fitter. “That’s awesome. I…walk. And pretend to jog. Once or twice a week.”

Greg laughed. “I only work out because I pay my personal trainer something akin to a mortgage payment every month.”

Ashley kicked him under the table. “That’s not true.”

He looked at her fondly and shook his head. “Only because of your good influence.”

Olivia looked at the bottom of her empty mug. “I need more coffee if I’m going to keep up with both of you. I’ll just go help myself.”

She stood up and turned toward the counter—and her husband.

Who looked pissed.

She frowned and walked over. “Hey, sweetie, I didn’t know you were here.” He was still in his uniform, which made sense given that his shift didn’t end for

another two hours. “Is everything okay?”

“You think we can use the office?”

“What?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” His words were clipped even more than his usual cop voice.

She glanced back at Greg and Ashley. They were looking over the maps she’d made notes on over the course of the day. She nodded and followed him to the office.

“We haven’t done this in a while,” she joked, but it landed flat.

He paced back and forth for a minute.

“Rafe, what is going on?”

“Come here.” His tone wasn’t exactly inviting, but he was clearly *trying*. She went, reluctantly. He let out a deep sigh and pulled her in close. He was wound so tight, the tendons in his neck were hard under her hands. He wove his fingers into her hair, tugging hard enough to make her gasp. “Tonight’s a big deal for you.”

He said it like a statement, but it felt like a question. She searched his face for a clue but found nothing. “Yes.”

He shook his head and swore softly under his breath before lowering his mouth to kiss her. Soft and persistent, this was a kiss to remind her of something and that thought pissed her off. She pulled back even though she wanted to sink in deeper.

“Is that a problem?” She blinked at the awful thought that Rafe might not want her to have that kind of a job, something bigger than a 7-3 shift. Something that wove into the fabric of her being, like his work did.

Again he swore, and this time he was the one that stepped back. “No, jeez, of course not. It’s just…I didn’t realize. So when I saw you…”

She waited. Guessing wouldn’t help. Neither would filling the silence. If this was hard for him, let it be hard. Figuring out a new normal might take a few fights like this, if this could even be called a fight.

“Your hair is down.”

She did a double take. “I’m sorry?”

“You never do that. And for a second, I thought it was for him.”

“Him who?” She shook her head in confusion.

“Him. Your boss, I guess. The guy you were so cozy with in the booth.”

She blinked in disbelief. *What the hell?* “Rafe, honey, you have completely the wrong idea—“ He was pissed at her for her *hair*? Well, two could play the irrational game. “This is ridiculous. You think I’m *cheating* on you? After watching you bring a woman here for breakfast after a damn *sleepover*? You’ve slept in my bed every single night for weeks now. How can you doubt that I’m yours?”

“Keep your voice down. I didn’t accuse you of anything.”

“You keep your damn voice down, Rafe Minelli! This is stupid!”

He had the good grace to at least look chagrined, but he didn’t apologize.

“You’ve never been a jealous person, what the hell is going on?”

He twisted his lips into a flat line. It was better than a scowl, but not by much. “I don’t know.”

The last thing she wanted to do was placate him, but she had to get back to work and she didn’t want their first fight to linger, unresolved, because she’d walked away from him. “Well, I don’t know either. But I don’t like it.”

His jaw clenched and he stared at a point high above her head for a minute. “Today was a shitty day at work. The kind of day that makes me wish we had a hot tub and a beer fridge on the deck.”

And no drama from the wife. She could read between the lines and it made her sad.

“No. Liv, I can see where you’re going in your head and that’s not it, I promise. It’s just that I forgot for a minute. Even when we got divorced, you were always…”

She stepped forward. It was her turn to use a kiss to stave off a fight. She grabbed the front of his uniform and tugged him down to her level. “Shut up.”

“I thought you told me that wasn’t a nice thing to say,” he whispered.

“It’s not, but drastic times…” She licked her way inside his mouth, making him groan. Good. He needed to remember she was his, and he was hers, and drama was stupid. Maybe she needed to remember that, too. “Come on. Can I

introduce you to them?" She extended her hand and wiggled her fingers.

They both gave sighs of relief when he took her hand. He tugged her close and she tipped her face up to his. "I love you, you idiot."

"I don't want to lose you, Liv."

She shook her head. "If you do, it won't be over another man, I promise. But it might be because you're a lunkhead."

"Got it." He kissed her again, this time a sweet brush of his lips against hers.

"Why are you here, anyway?" she asked quietly as they walked back into the dining room.

"Your meeting. The commander wanted to send a community officer. I volunteered."

That helped. A lot. She grinned up at him. "Really?"

He nodded. "I'm proud of you, Liv."

But would he continue to be when the filming started and she was gone more than she was home, and their schedules rivalled each other for work hours each week? Could he handle that? Or did he need her to just be his Liv, waiting for him to take down her ponytail at the end of the day?

At the booth, Greg noticed them before she could start the introductions, and he slid out of the booth to stand. "This must be Rafe," he said, extending his hand.

Rafe glanced at her as he returned the handshake and Olivia blushed. "I don't think I talk about you all that much."

Ashley laughed. "No, but when you do mention him, you do that—" she gestured at Olivia's pink cheeks. "It's cute."

"Rafe, this is Greg DeCecco and Ashley Patterson."

"Nice to meet you both. Liv has done a great job of selling your movie here, we're all excited."

"She's something else. It's too bad we can't steal her away to come work with us full-time." Greg shrugged. "Glad we have her on our team for this project, anyway."

Rafe didn't say anything, but from the way his hand tightened around her waist, Olivia knew he'd heard exactly what had just been said.

Her heart pounded in her chest. “Well, we should finish up…”

Greg sat again, and Rafe tugged her hand. “Walk me out.”

On the steps outside, she propped one hand on her hip and gave him a sassy smile. “Back to the office, walk me out…you’re getting bossy.”

He shook his head slowly, his eyes full of heat and his lips curling into a smile. “Nope, you’re not going to change the subject.”

“Change it from what? We weren’t talking about anything.”

“Did they offer you a full-time job in the city?”

“No.” Not exactly. “It didn’t get that far in the conversation.”

“Good.” Her eyes flared wide at that and he grinned. “I’m a selfish man, Liv. This isn’t news. I want you, and I want to stay here.”

She wanted to ask him what he’d do if she actually did take a job in the city. Had anything changed? But she wasn’t that strong. There was only one answer she wanted to hear, and she wasn’t sure it would be what he would offer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PINE HARBOUR RESPONDED to the town meeting with the enthusiasm of school children at a birthday party. She'd even seen her in-laws in the crowd, and Rafe's dad had given her a nice wave. Anne studiously read the flyer Ashley had handed out at the door and avoided making eye contact.

So it was a big surprise the following Tuesday when she ran into Rafe's mother at the bank and she stopped to talk. Olivia had just run in to the use the bank machine, and Anne had been inside. For a moment, Olivia wondered if she could just crawl into a deposit envelope and hide, but then her mother-in-law said her name and all pretence of ignorance was lost.

"Anne, how are you?"

"Fine, dear. Just done work?"

No, but it didn't matter. She nodded because that was easier than explaining she was heading out to take pictures of a parking lot off the highway halfway to Tobermory. Anne wouldn't think that was real work, let alone *better* work than the diner. "Nice warm snap we're having, eh?"

"Indeed. Gianni and Tom have gone hunting for a few days."

"Right. Shame that Rafe couldn't get the time off, it sounded like a good trip." Olivia winced as soon as the words were out of her mouth. She'd violated the first rule of daughter-in-law conversation following: never offer extraneous information.

"You and Rafe are spending a lot of time together again."

Well, in for a penny… "Yes."

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

Olivia shrugged.

Anne pursed her lips together as if she was tossing up the merits of saying anything further. Luck was not on Olivia’s side, because her mother-in-law decided to weigh in. “You don’t want your heart broken again, dear.”

Duh. But that wasn’t a given. “None of us know how anything will go.” *Parse that, witch*.

“You’ve always been keen to leave our town.”

Not true. Olivia bristled. “No more than you’ve been keen to see me go.” Anne gasped and Olivia closed her eyes. Why, why, why was she such an idiot? No good would come of a public fight. “Sorry, that was…snarky.”

Anne stared at her for a minute, her face softening. “He’ll never leave, you know.”

She did, and it hurt.

“Unless you gave him children,” Anne continued, the unexpected and twisted suggestion slamming into Olivia like a silent freight train. “Then he’d follow you wherever you wanted to go.”

“God,” Olivia gasped. “I’d never do that.”

“Well, that’s foolish.”

“If Rafe wants to live in Pine Harbour forever, then this is where we’ll be. You’re stuck with me, I’m afraid.” Olivia shook her head in amazement. “If you think that I’d try to trick him—” She cut herself when she realized her mother-in-law was quietly laughing. “What?”

“Good.” Anne lifted her silk scarf from around her neck and tucked it over her head to protect her straightened hair from the brisk November wind. “This is good. You’ll come to dinner on Sunday.”

And then she was gone before Olivia realized that the last statement had been an order, not a question.

— —

"I RAN INTO YOUR MOM TODAY." Olivia had watched Rafe polishing his boots for a few minutes before finally telling him.

Rafe set down his blackened shammy rag and turned to face her. "Oh yeah?"

"We had words."

His lips quirked. "I didn't get a lambasting phone call, so I'm guessing they weren't bad words."

"First some bad words, then good ones." She shrugged. "I'd call it a modest victory."

"Well, that's…good."

"She wants us to come to dinner on Sunday."

He winced. "I have to work this weekend."

"You've worked all week!" She dialled her tone back a bit. "Army?"

"They're short on instructors for a range. I might be back in time for dinner, though."

"No, I'm not going without you."

"I'd meet you there."

It was an innocuous offer, probably fair—it had been a while, but Liv seemed to remember range weekends ending early enough that, yeah, he might make it back. But for her first Minelli family dinner in two years? Maybe wasn't good enough. "Probably best to reschedule for the next weekend you have free. Can you call her and tell her it won't work out?"

"I know I'm working nights next weekend, and the following weekend is the regimental Christmas dinner. Maybe you could just go without me and I'll meet you there." He was looking straight at her, how could he not see that wasn't the answer she was looking for? "Liv, what's the big deal?"

"Nothing. But I think I'm actually busy on Sunday too, so if you could just call your mom, that would be great." She spun on her heel and went to the bedroom. Their bedroom. He'd practically moved back in, and a laundry basket overflowing with basketball shorts and stupid man-sized t-shirts reinforced that point. This was all too familiar and painful. She started folding shirts with harsh,

jerky motions, only partially aware of him moving around the living room. The sound of running water as he washed his hands make her pulse pick up and her face flush. *Great, let's fight*.

She felt him in the doorway long before he said anything. God, she was so *mad* at him. Still. This wasn't about dinner, this was about all the dinners and the weekends and the late nights and early mornings. Six years of resentment burbled up inside her until hot, angry tears spilled down her face and still he stood there.

He's not running away, the hopeful part of her heart said. *He's not magically making it better*, the larger, more cynical part retorted.

"Liv, look at me." His voice was rough, angry and insistent.

"Go away."

"Can't do that, I'm afraid."

She shot a sharp look at him over her shoulder. "Really? I think you can and do go away all the time."

He caught his upper lip between his teeth, like he was holding himself back from saying something nasty.

Maybe he was. Nausea pitched in her stomach.

"No," he ground out. "We're not doing this."

Olivia didn't know if she wanted to puke or cry or both. "Doing what?" she asked, the words teetering on the edge of being incomprehensible. She needed to pull herself together before she completely fell apart.

He stared at her, a hard, determined look that she couldn't decipher. "Hurting each other."

"That's what we do."

"We're going to do things differently. *I'm* going to do this differently." He flexed his jaw. "We're just having a fight. Couples do that. We can do that, but not the way we used to."

She laughed. "Sure, we'll just completely change who we are."

"We'll go to counselling. Figure out how to talk without name-calling and blame."

The words were right, but his tone…it was hard to believe that Rafe would

sit there and listen to someone tell him how to be. And he still sounded so angry. “Just like that.” She couldn’t keep the disbelief out of her voice. She didn’t really try. He needed to know her doubts and fears.

“No, not just like that.” His voice could have cut glass. “It took being divorced for two years, getting back together, and then almost losing you again for me to realize I might need help being a better husband.”

Her breath caught in her throat as he stepped into the room, his hand outstretched. Shaking like a leaf, she met him halfway. He laced their hands together and she felt the tremor under his skin. He *was* mad, but not just with her.

“Counselling doesn’t feel like something one does at the start of a relationship,” she admitted, her voice still small, but not as watery now as before.

He curved his other hand around her waist and brought her tight to his body. He lifted their connected fingers, nudging her chin with his knuckle, lifting her gaze to his. “Baby.”

“What?”

“This is hardly the start of a relationship. This is the messy middle.”

“The middle,” she breathed, relief pulsing through her veins. Meaning *not the end*. “Yeah, messy is the word for it.”

“I love you.” He lowered his face until their noses touched and he repeated his words until she smiled. “See? That’s all that matters. We won’t give up this time.”

Her gut spasmed with guilt. He was the only reason they weren’t throwing things right now. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Shut it. Next time it’ll be your turn to be the voice of reason.”

His lips brushed hers, lightly at first, then harder as he cupped her face in his hands. Her hands restlessly bounced up his chest and across his strong shoulders. He murmured sweet, calming sounds as he kissed that spot on her neck that drove her crazy, then found his way back to her hungry, wanting mouth.

“Rafe?” She nibbled on his lower lip. “Can we have make-up sex now?” *Can I make this up to you the only way I know how?*

He grinned. “Does this do it for you, rational conversation?”

“Oh, yeah.” She slid her hands under his t-shirt, over the hard planes of his abdomen to the narrow band of fur running south from the middle of his chest. She followed it to where it widened at his waistband and tucked her fingers under his belt. “Take your shirt off,” she whispered as she pulled the leather strap from the loops. She took her time with the button, knowing that just beneath her fingertips his erection was rapidly rising to attention. She gripped the zipper and painstakingly tugged his fly open halfway before pausing to admire the bulge of black cotton covered maleness in front of her.

“Stop teasing.” He groaned and jerked his hips against her hands.

She turned and yanked the laundry basket out of the way, then whipped off her clothes and crawled to the middle of the bed on all fours. “Who’s teasing?” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

With a chuckle, he shoved his pants to the ground and climbed up to join her. He smoothed one hand over her ass and she pressed into his touch. He made her feel so beautiful, the way he stared at her body. The rest of it was important too, but this elemental recognition of his mate…she loved how magical it felt. And hated it, too, because the thought of losing that connection…no. They weren’t going to lose each other again. She lowered her cheek to the bed and arched her back. He teased her with his fingers until she was rocking against him, and then he slid home, curving over her back. He whispered filthy, beautiful things in her ear until she exploded, then he flipped her over and they made it happen all over again.

They lay together spooning on the bed for quite a while before either said anything. She didn’t really want to talk. Fear was a powerful motivator. It had motivated her into using awesome sex as a distraction device.

“I’m not complaining,” Rafe said quietly, as if he could read her mind. “That was great. But we need to—“

“No, we don’t.” She closed her eyes. “Not all at once, anyway.”

“I meant it when I said that love is all that matters.” He kissed behind her ear. “That doesn’t mean we’re not going to have competing interests. But you’re always in my heart. I can’t change who I am, Liv. I’m a cop and a soldier, and

my duty is going to take me away from you far too often. But while I’m gone, I never forget that you’re right here. And when I come home, I’m all the way home. I’m all the way yours.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT.

Rafe stood beside the long line of cruisers, reinforced SUVs and forensic vehicles while the tactical officers ran up to the door, loudly announcing their execution of a search warrant. He turned in a circle, looking for whatever it was that pinged in the back of his brain.

Something didn't belong here.

His eyes narrowed in on a navy blue minivan parked over by the barn. *Shit*. Even at a bit of a distance he recognized the yellow bumper sticker and parade of stick figure decals on the rear window. He stabbed the button on his radio at the same time as he took off at a run to intercept Dean and the team approaching the out buildings. His heart thudded in his chest at the unexpected complication.

"Be advised—probable civilian presence in the barn."

Dean's voice crackled back immediately. "We can sort that out back at the detachment."

"I think it's Lynn Howard."

The other man cursed. "Well, sucks to be her, then." That was the truth, but they didn't need her screaming at them like a fucking banshee, either. Growers knew the drill, understood the risk they'd assumed with their illegal business.

Rafe reached them just as the door swung open with a loud bang. The four officers in front of him snapped their weapons up, training them on the couple now framed in the open doorway. A man in his thirties with long, dirty hair held the struggling woman tightly in front him.

Lynn Howard was his shield, and she knew it by the look of panic on her face.

“Back up, or I’ll put a bullet in her gut.”

She blanched at the wall of police in front of her and Rafe stepped forward to placate both his friend’s wife and the asshole holding a gun to her back. He heard a growl from one of the tactical officers, a reminder this was pretty far outside his role and they had a negotiator on scene, somewhere, but he wasn’t *here*, was he?

He pressed calm and reassurance into his voice. Both fucking lies. “It’s going to be okay.” He addressed the blond man with the ponytail, hoping Lynn had the good sense to keep quiet. He could feel her gaze on him.

She had three little kids and a husband who loved her. What the fuck was she doing at a grow-op? He couldn’t look at her and stay calm. So he didn’t. He looked at the grower and drew him into a conversation. A minute, maybe two, passed, and then Dean’s voice quietly alerted him to the negotiator’s arrival from the far side of the house. John Hooper. Rafe had met him once or twice at training courses. Good guy. Loads of experience. Likely super pissed at Rafe right now. A problem for another time.

“Someone else is here, Wes. His name is John.”

“You don’t fucking move, cop.” Wes darted his eyes from left to right, his anxiety level rising again.

Rafe held out his hands, palms wide open, and reassured the other man he wasn’t going anywhere. “But if you want me to stay, how about you take me as your hostage instead of this woman, eh?”

Behind him, Dean swore a blue streak and John cleared his throat. “I can’t let you do that.”

Wes shoved Lynn forward and she stumbled, hitting the frozen, snow drifted laneway with a thud. She crawled on her hands and knees and Rafe moved to help her up. He kept his eyes on Wes, though, and when he saw his trigger finger tighten he knew it was all about to go tits up.

Rafe dove forward, covering Lynn with his body, but it was too late. Shots rang out, familiar noises in an unfamiliar context, and Wes hit the ground a few

feet away from them, his face frozen in a death mask Rafe would see in his nightmares for weeks to come. Heavy boots thudded the ground around him—the freezing fucking cold ground, now that he was aware of it—and as soon as he was given a hand up, he took it. Someone else pulled Lynn off the ground. She'd get taken to a cruiser in a minute, but dealing with the aftermath of the shooting took precedence.

He looked down at the body at his feet then turned to Dean to confirm no one else got hit. His friend shook his head in silent confirmation. Sucker had it coming then. Rafe had no doubt the dealer shot first. The investigation would probably be pretty straight—

Whack.

The snap of a bullet smacking into the barn five feet in front of him had everyone scrambling. The officer who'd been quietly guarding Lynn dropped to one knee and spun around, looking for the shooter. Rafe swore and grabbed her hand, dragging her behind a useless pile of wood as a faster spray of bullets chewed up the ground around them. Someone in an outbuilding had a semi-automatic weapon and Rafe's pulse pounded in his ears as he tried to orient himself. The woodpile wouldn't stop anything but might make for some visual confusion. Lynn jerked hard against him and he hit the ground hard for the second time in as many minutes. This time it hurt a hell of a lot more. He'd landed on his shoulder and it felt like it was on fucking fire. "Shots fired, shots fired," people yelled unnecessarily into radios, followed by, "Motherfuckers, officer down."

Rafe couldn't catch his breath. Fuck. That was *him*. His fucking shoulder. He swore out loud. Shots rang out again over head, and orders were yelled back and forth at a furious clip. He ground his jaw and tried to pull himself up onto his other arm but Lynn was a heavy weight right against him.

"All clear, get a fucking ambulance down here. Right the fuck now. Jesus Christ, Rafe, you fucking hero, you better be okay." Dean thundered to a stop next to him and started swearing again.

"Yeah, it's a lot of blood for a shoulder wound, eh?" Rafe laughed. He was hurt, but he knew it wasn't fatal.

“Shut up,” Dean muttered, sliding his hand over Lynn’s neck. And that’s when Rafe realized why she was so fucking heavy. *Oh fuck. Oh no. Oh fuck.*

Dean shook his head and lifted her body out of the way. Rafe tried to grab for his radio but his fucking arm wouldn’t work. “Dean,” he spit out. “Ryan can’t be one of the first responders.”

His friend dropped to the ground a few feet away and laid Lynn out on the snow. Rafe watched helplessly as Dean leaned over her. His actions slowed as he opened her coat, then sank back on his heels.

“Get the fuck off me, man, I’m fine.” Rafe tried to push himself up as one of the tactical officers started to look at his shoulder.

Dean shook his head and came closer. “You need to lie still until EMS arrives.”

“Lynn—“

Another shake, this one slow, each swivel worse than a physical blow. “She’s gone.” Dean hesitated, his face pale and drawn. “She took a couple to the chest.”

The other officer had jammed something underneath his shoulder and was holding him together on top. Dean shooed him out of the way with the instruction to find out where the fuck Ryan Howard was and keep him away from the farm if need be.

Jesus Christ. Panic swelled in him at the thought of Liv hearing about this from a uniform she didn’t know.

Dean’s face swam in front of him. He needed a favour. He needed his friend to know he was okay, well enough to do this first before anything else. He cracked a joke. “Stop moving, man.”

“Hang in there, Rafe, the bus is almost here.” Dean’s tone promised he didn’t find it funny.

“My phone.” He licked his lips, trying to focus. He really wanted to close his eyes for just a minute, but he needed to do this first. “Does it work?”

Dean hesitated.

Desperate need clawed at his insides. “I need to call. Just in case.”

His friend shifted, keeping pressure on his shoulder as he lifted one blood soaked hand—fuck, was that all his blood?—and found Rafe’s phone in a pocket

on the opposite side of his body.

“Password is 5489.” *LIVY*. “Her number is—” He coughed, and oh motherfucker did that hurt. But it wasn’t wet. Small miracles.

“Got it.” Dean held the phone to Rafe’s ear and looked at him sternly. “Keep it short. We’ll get someone to pick her up.”

It took three rings for her to answer. “Hey, sweetie.” Jesus, he’d gone too long without hearing her say that. “I’m at Mac’s helping out. We’re about to be swamped for lunch, how’s work going?”

Diner noises filled his ear and he closed his eyes. Dean poked him, thinking he’d drifted off. No fucking way was he going to pass out before he’d said what he needed to say. “Liv?” Damnit, his voice sounded weak.

“Yeah?” He was glad she was distracted. Hated that in a few minutes, two uniforms would walk through the door and make her cry.

“I love you.”

She laughed. “I love you, too. That’s all you wanted?”

“I love my job, too, baby.”

“Are you picking a fight, Rafe?” She laughed again. “Now’s not really the time. If this is about the weekend, it’s okay. Dani and I are going up to Tobermory—”

“Liv.” This time she stopped talking and he heard her walk away from the noise. Maybe to the office. Then it was quiet, and he wanted to throw up. “Listen, baby, something’s happened, but I’m okay.” *Please, God, let that be true.*

She started crying, soft sniffling that broke his heart, but when he opened his mouth to reassure her, he couldn’t find the words. It was getting hard to think. He groaned, and Dean took the phone, stabbing at the screen to activate the speaker phone before he returned both hands to Rafe’s shoulder.

“Olivia, it’s Dean Foster. We’re going to the hospital in Wiarton. A car will come and pick you up.”

“Oh my god. Ohmygod, ohmygod…” Her voice wavered in the air around him and he lifted his left hand, trying to catch it. “Tell Rafe I love him. Tell him __”

“He can hear you. Keep talking to him, okay?” Dean looked up as someone shouted in the distance.

There was music in the air, and then Rafe realized it was a siren. Sirens. The ambulances had arrived. And then his sister’s face was hovering over him. “Dani, tell Liv I’m going to be okay.”

She gave him a seriously pissed off look, then glanced at the phone lying on his chest. “Olivia, honey, we gotta hang up now. I’ll find you at the hospital, okay?”

“No, don’t hang up,” he protested, but it was already done.

“You’re going to cry like a little girl when we transfer you to the back board, Rafe. She doesn’t need to hear that.”

He laughed, but it sounded weak even to his own ears.

“Don’t close your eyes, Rafe. Stay with me…”

But he couldn’t. It hurt too damn much. And the light—and then the dark—was a welcome relief.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CAR they sent for her wasn't designed for detainee transfer, so as soon as they pulled up to the emergency room entrance she had the door open and was flying. Inside, she looked for anyone in uniform that she recognized. The waiting room was a sea of navy blue and staring faces she couldn't name if her life depended on it. Finally she landed on Dean, standing at the triage desk looking grim.

He turned just in time to catch her as she ran smack into him.

"Where is he?" She sucked in big gasping breaths and jerked her head to the nurse sitting in front of a computer. "I'm Rafe Minelli's wife, where is he?"

The other woman didn't respond right away, clicking on something on her screen, and Olivia wanted to rip the monitor off the desk and whip it across the room. Dean rubbed her arm. "Olivia, Rafe was shot in the shoulder. You heard him, he was conscious—"

"Was? What do you mean, was? Where's Dani?" She started crying again, great heaving sobs that wracked her entire body.

"I'm here, honey." Her friend wrapped her long, slim arms around her from behind and she turned on the spot, returning the embrace. "He's going to be okay, really. But he's a bit messed up right now, and he needs surgery, so they're going to airlift him to London."

"I want to go with him."

"You can't, but we'll drive you." A silent conversation was taking place over her head between Dani and Dean, she could feel it, but she didn't care. "Come

on, you can see him for a minute before they load him up."

Dani squeezed her hand, both reassuring and prompting. Olivia followed, the noise and bright lights of the hospital swirling around her in a surreal tapestry. Through one door, then the next, and when they got to a closed curtain, she heard him groan and started crying all over again.

"Rafe—!" She cut herself off, not trusting herself to hold it together. He couldn't see her like this. *Pretend you're strong for thirty seconds*, she ordered her heart. Dani gave her a questioning look and she nodded and blew out her cheeks. "I'm okay."

On the other side of the curtain, five people in scrubs had their hands on him. *Oh my god*. In him, it looked like as well, from the amount of blood on their gloves. Pieces of his uniform lay on the floor, cut off in chunks, and large medical packs lay open on his chest. He was moaning as the man touching his shoulder barked orders to the others. Dani silently guided her around the gurney so she could see his profile. Eyes squeezed shut, jaw clenched and teeth bared, he looked gloriously alive—a true fighter.

"Sweetie," she breathed, and his eyes popped open.

"Baby," he groaned. "You're here."

"I hear you're going to take a helicopter ride."

He grunted.

"I'm going to follow."

"Dani—" He swore as one of the nurses did something to his hand.

"What did that feel like, Rafaelo?" the doctor asked.

"Fucking cold," Rafe muttered, and the nurses laughed.

"Okay, we're good to go whenever the chopper gets here," the doctor announced. "I'll give you a minute, but then we need the room."

She moved closer, hands shaking, not knowing if she should touch him. Thankfully he didn't have that same fear. He reached out with his left hand and she squeezed his fingers. "Be brave."

"I always am."

"I was talking more to myself there, sweetie."

He groaned. "Don't you dare make me laugh."

“I love you.”

“Never get tired of hearing that.”

“I’m never going to stop saying it.”

“Is that a promise?” He flicked his eyes over to his sister. “Dani, you’re my witness.”

“I’m right behind you, we’ll find you in London.”

A tortured look twisted on his face. “Listen, Liv…”

Behind her, Dani cleared her throat. “I’ll tell her, Rafe.”

The team moved in around them again, and Dani tugged her back out in the hall.

“Tell me what?”

“Three other people were also shot. One of them was Lynn Howard. She didn’t make it.”

Olivia heard the words her sister-in-law said, but they didn’t make any sense. “What? How?”

Dani shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know.”

Lynn was dead. Panic swelled inside Olivia’s chest and she started crying again. Would she eventually run out of tears? Was that possible? “Where were they?”

Dani looked at the ground. “Rafe’s team executed warrants at a grow-op today. Lynn was there. We don’t know why.”

“Who…” She couldn’t ask the question—she didn’t want to know the answer.

Dani shook her head. “That’s all I know.”

Her kids. Olivia’s stomach heaved and she pressed her lips together, willing herself not to hurl in a hospital corridor. She lurched across the hall to an empty bathroom, barely shoving the door closed behind her before she lost her lunch.

When she came back out, Dani and Dean were waiting together, arguing quietly.

“Look, Dani, I’ve got to stick around for the SIU investigation. But I don’t want you driving down by yourself.”

“The last thing Olivia needs is a crowd of people—”

“Jake’s not a crowd, he’s her friend. He’s Rafe’s best friend. He’s going.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. She so did not have time for this. She stomped across the hall. “Dani, suck it up for one day. Dean…where’s Ryan?”

Pain lanced across her friend’s face. Ryan was his best friend. There’d been no love lost between Dean and Lynn, but that felt petty to remember in this moment. “In a quiet room, uhm…” He pointed vaguely in a direction away from the Emergency ward. “He’s with Lynn’s parents right now.”

“And the others?”

Dean shook his head. “Don’t know. Both guys are from the tactical unit. You probably don’t know them. One got hit in the thigh, but it missed the bone. He’s staying here. The other guy…” He looked at Dani.

“No news yet. He took the first chopper out.”

Olivia shuddered. She needed to sit down. This was just all too much to process. She turned in a small circle, but there weren’t any chairs. *No*. She needed to be strong. “Okay, let’s go to London.” She gave Dean a quick hug and headed in search of Jake.

— —

THE CAR ROLLED to a stop and a drive-thru intercom crackled to life. From the passenger seat, Jake glanced back to where Olivia was pretending to sleep. “You want anything?”

She shook her head, but then her stomach gurgled. “Maybe a bagel and tea.”

She pressed herself up and glanced through the window. She recognized Listowel immediately. Another hour to London.

They ate in silence as Dani accelerated out of town. Olivia had expected… not fighting, exactly, but there was always a crackling tension between Jake and Dani. Not today. Somber worry and grief wrapped around all of them. Jake hadn’t even complained about Dani driving. Her car had been the obvious

choice. The back seat was more comfortable and Jake's truck was full of lumber—a stupid load to haul south for no reason.

But it wasn't like a Foster boy to ride shotgun and not bitch about it.

As they neared London, Jake's phone rang. "It's Dean," he explained, glancing at the display quickly before answering.

His end of the conversation was mostly listening noises. Grunts and affirmative hums. Olivia's pulse ratcheted up. She leaned forward between the front bucket seats, her hand squeezing Jake's upper arm. He hung up and quickly reassured her that all was fine. Dean had arranged for a London city police officer to meet them at the hospital entrance and help them find the surgery waiting room.

"So he's gone in, then? Any update on how long it might take?"

Jake shook his head. They'd find out soon enough.

Their destination was the level 1 trauma hospital in the south end of town and Olivia thought that drive through the city took almost as long as the rest of the journey from Pine Harbour. They parked not far from the helipad where Rafe would have landed and the thought sent shivers down her spine. *Please let him get through this alive.* So much could still go wrong in surgery and they really didn't know anything about his condition. She tried to take comfort in the fact that she'd seen him. Talked to him. Touched him.

At some point on the drive, night had fallen and she'd missed it. Now it was dark and cold, that biting early winter temperature drop that annually surprised everyone. Jake and Dani introduced themselves to the waiting officer, but Olivia had tunnel visioned on the sliding glass doors in front of her. Somewhere on the other side, Rafe was in an operating room.

She was done sobbing, but a few quiet tears slid down her cheeks as they headed inside. In the waiting room, case numbers were displayed on small TV screens mounted around the room. The officer who'd met them had Rafe's case number and handed it over before leaving to find someone to talk to them. A resident came and introduced himself, explaining that they expected the surgery to wrap up within the hour, and that Rafe would probably spend the night in the ICU before moving to a private room.

Dani asked a few questions about that, knowing more about the details than either Jake or Olivia, and Olivia pretended to listen like she understood. Really, she was just looking for the key words. *As expected. No complications. Physical therapy. Additional surgery. Follow up in clinic. Anticipate six months recovery.*

"He's going to hate that," she whispered.

Once they were alone again, Dani pulled her in for a hug. "He's going to be thankful he's alive. And I'll kick his ass if he forgets."

Dani's shoulder was just the right height for Olivia to rest her head. "You should call your mom," she said after a minute.

Jake laughed. "I'm texting Tom, he's practically sitting on her and Mr. M to keep them from getting in their car and driving here."

Dani sighed. "We won't get to see him tonight, so we might as well get a hotel room." She quickly corrected herself when Olivia tensed against her. "Not you, honey. You'll be able to sit with him for a bit, and stay here…and then you can sleep tomorrow. I know I won't be able to drag you off. But Jake and I might as well take shifts. And then you'll have a quick place to shower and change tomorrow."

"I didn't even think of a change of clothes," Olivia said quietly.

"I brought my gym bag from my locker, and I can probably hit an open-late Wal-Mart tonight too. Don't worry about that."

Jake disappeared for a few minutes, returning with a cardboard tray of takeout coffee cups and a couple cookies. They munched and flipped unseeingly through magazines. At some point Jake noticed that Rafe's case number now read out that he was in recovery, and then Olivia's heart rate took off. How long until she could see him?

Too damn long, she decided by the time a nurse called out her name. She jumped up.

"Rafaelo Minelli is your husband?" She nodded. Minor technicalities didn't matter. "He's still in recovery, but he's the only person in there right now, and he's asking for you."

Olivia whispered her thanks and followed along meekly, as if the gift of seeing him might be yanked away at any second.

The nurse led her into a large room, empty save for a single gurney partially obstructed by two curtains pulled shut to the patient's toes.

Rafe. Olivia's heart leapt into her throat. She edged forward, nervous at what she might find.

The first thing she noticed was how pale he looked. Dark stubble and harsh, bruising circles under his eyes made the white of his face even starker. His eyes were closed, and she held her breath for a minute, wanting to collect herself fully before she had his attention. Her gaze raked over the huge white bandage and cast contraption covering his right arm and much of his chest. He had an IV in his left hand, but he didn't look like someone on his way to intensive care.

For the second time that day, she was scared to touch him, but it was her turn to be strong. She pulled up tight against the gurney and leaned in close. "Hey, sweetie. I'm here."

He slowly blinked his eyes open and offered a weak smile. "They keep taking me away from you. That has to stop." His words were slow and slightly slurred.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight."

"I'm going to marry you again, Liv. And I want to have babies."

She tried to tell herself the words were driven by drugs and life-altering trauma, but they still took her breath away. She wanted that more than anything. "Whatever you want, sweetie."

"Four kids. And a dog."

"That's sneaky, adding the dog on after I've said yes."

"Did you?" he murmured, his eyes drifting closed again. "Did you say yes?"

The silent tears returned and she nodded, but he couldn't see her.

— —

HE WAS sick of the beeping. And even though Liv was a constant visitor,

between his temporary cast and the drain and the damn pain medication, he felt like it had been weeks since he'd properly held her. Not to mention the stream of doctors, nurses, medical students. And earlier that day, he'd had to put up with an SIU investigator as well. Forty-eight hours had somehow stretched into an eternity. He was being released in the morning, but they weren't going far. He needed to stay close to the hospital for a week of outpatient care before transferring his care back up north, so the police association had arranged for a short-term furnished condo rental. Dani and Jake had driven home the day before, and his parents arrived today. He would have insisted they stay in Pine Harbour, but they drove down separately, his mom bringing Liv's car so they'd have a vehicle in London.

And they'd promised not to stay long.

The door to his private room swung open and the glorious scent of deluxe pizza made him drool.

"How's my boy?"

Rafe grinned at his dad's booming voice. Probably wanted a pretty nurse to come and tell him to keep it down. "Hungry."

"We brought you pizza and salad, I can only imagine what blech the hospital served you for dinner." His mom moved the pile of papers and oversized water cup from the moveable table and plunked down his food.

The Jello had actually been pretty good, but Rafe wasn't about to tell her that. He took as deep a breath as he could manage without jarring his shoulder. His parents stood side-by-side at the foot of his bed trying really hard not to look worried. He smiled. "Thanks."

"Alessandro, go ask one of the nurses for another chair." His mom offered him a polite smile. "Olivia will be here in a minute. She drove herself."

Shit. "Did she tell you I asked her to?" No, of course she hadn't. That silly ninny. "Ma, I appreciate you guys offering to drive her back and forth from the hotel yesterday and helping her get settled at the condo today, but we haven't had any time alone since this happened. She's going to stay here for a bit tonight after you go."

"Visiting hours—"

“Don’t apply to my wife.” He made sure his tone left no room for negotiation. He might be a temporary invalid, but he didn’t need Liv to put up with any flack on his behalf. “Got it?”

His dad pulled Anne in for a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “We got it.”

“Go, chair, now,” she shooed him away, but she was smiling for real now.

Liv slid in just as his dad returned and after a quick hand squeeze and a kiss to the forehead, they dug in to dinner. While they were eating, his evening nurse came in and introduced herself, took his vitals, had a quick look at his incisions, and left them alone again. Now that he’d mastered getting in and out of bed pretty much on his own, she’d have no reason to bother him for another four hours when his next vitals check would happen. He’d offered to take his own damn temperature but that didn’t get any traction.

As soon as he politely could, he started yawning. *Get out*, *get out*, *get out*, he wanted to tell his parents. His mom studiously ignored the cue, but his dad gave him a broad wink and started packing up. “We’ll take the leftovers back to the condo. What time do you think you’ll be busting out of this place tomorrow?”

He repeated what the resident had told him earlier, that it would be after rounds, but the paperwork could take a while. Probably mid-morning.

While his parents were bundling up in their winter coats, Liv yawned for real and he felt a pang of guilt for asking her to stay. *You want to go?* he asked with a wrinkle of his brow. She shook her head and traced her index finger over the back of his hand with a little smile.

As soon as they were alone, he shoved away the table stretched over his hospital bed. “Come here, baby.”

She stood gingerly and looked at the narrow strip of bed between his left side and the railing. “Uhm…”

“We’ll make it work.” His voice caught on a weird note and he felt hot, prickly tears well up in his eyes. *Oh, hell no*. He gruffed up his voice. “Damnit, Liv, here, now.”

She laughed and moved the table fully out of the way, then slid onto the foot of the bed.

He awkwardly patted his hip. “I won’t bite.”

“How disappointing,” she whispered, and slowly crawled toward him, carefully avoiding putting any pressure on his body. He wanted to tell her it was fine, but it probably wasn’t. Even the sophisticated pain management schedule he was on didn’t keep him fully comfortable. He’d been warned it would get worse before it got better, as he figured out his limits.

She settled in the crook of his arm, her head on his chest and her hand on his abdomen. He wiggled his left leg and she made a contented noise as she finished entwining their bodies. He said a quiet prayer of thanks as they lay there, just breathing together.

Fuck me, I could be dead right now. A hard knot formed in his throat and he closed his eyes.

“Rafe?” Her voice was shaky and small. He squeezed his arm around her as best he could. “I talked to Dani this afternoon. Lynn’s funeral will be the weekend after next. After we get home.”

He grunted. It was the best he could do without crying and he sure as shit wasn’t going to do *that*. He needed to talk to Ryan. No, first he needed to talk to Dean. Find out what he needed to know about why Lynn had been there. How it all had gone so terribly wrong.

And then he needed to man up and call his friend. There weren’t any words to properly express his grief at not being able to save her life. *Fuck.*

“It’s okay,” Liv whispered, and he realized he’d lost his fight against the tears. *Motherfucker*.

She held him as he composed himself, and then they talked quietly into the night. He told her all of the things he’d been thinking in the weeks before the shooting. That he couldn’t change his work habits in big ways, but he’d make whatever shifts he could to prioritize their relationship. She told him it didn’t matter, but it did. It mattered more than anything else, especially now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT," Olivia warned as Rafe reached for his keys on the hook by the door.

"You're seriously bossy, you know that?"

She'd never been in the past, but almost losing Rafe had changed that. She never wanted to let him out of her sight. "I'll drive you to your physio appointment."

"You've got work to do."

"And I'll do it when we get back." Dancelight had been really good about letting her cut her hours back until after Christmas. The temporary loss of income had been mitigated nicely by the fact that she wasn't carrying the mortgage on her own anymore. While they were in London, Rafe's family had packed up his apartment and moved him back into their house, at her request.

They'd been home for two weeks. Rafe was cut out of the plaster cast before they left London, and at first blush he looked like his old self.

But there was no way he'd be able to brace his arm against the wheel if he hit black ice or quickly shift the truck between reverse and drive if he needed to rock his way out of a ditch. They'd had four days of snow and freezing rain. There was no way he was driving himself all the way to Owen Sound and back. The distance alone would be tiring for him.

"I'm driving. End of story."

He lifted his eyebrows, obviously choosing to be amused instead of annoyed. But as she got closer, he flipped the keys to his left hand and raised them over

his head. “Sure thing, short stuff.”

She batted at his arm, but she wasn’t going to haul on him. What was he thinking?

“Come and get them, Liv,” he repeated, his eyes darkening as he looked down at her. “Tackle me to the ground if you can’t climb me.”

“I’m not going to *hurt* you, sweetie. Come on, we have to get going.”

“We’ve got a couple of minutes. This is important.” He slid his right hand around her waist and brought her in close enough so she could feel the beginning of an erection. He lowered his voice to a husky whisper. “You need to stop thinking of me as an invalid.”

“I don’t—“ She cut herself off. Yeah, maybe she had been. But he’d been *shot*. “I’m just being careful.” *You’re too important to me*. God, just the thought of losing him made her teary.

“It’s going to be a long time before I can shoot a gun or play basketball, but I can drive. And Liv…” He nudged her cheek with his lips on his way to her ear. “I can accept blow jobs like a champ. Just sayin’.” She growled as he pressed the keys into her palm. “Come on. I’ll nap while you work up a good rage, and then I can drive back while you blow me.” He was good. Her lips twitched as he gazed down at her. “I’m. Not. Broken.”

“Are you sure you didn’t hit your head at some point?”

He shrugged. “It’s possible.”

They held hands for much of the drive. She dropped him at the clinic and went grocery shopping, and on the way back he actually did fall asleep. *See?* She wanted to tell him. *You’re not one hundred percent*. But he wasn’t an invalid, either. She thought about that box of lingerie she’d ordered and never had a chance to wear before their lives were disrupted. She’d been thinking of bringing one of the outfits out at Christmas, now just ten days away. A formal reintroduction of intimacy to their relationship. She’d read articles on range of motion and the best positions, but still…it had seemed scary. And now Rafe had just ripped off that bandage with ease.

Or at least peeled up the edge.

She glanced across the car to her sleeping man. She did have work to do, a

couple of hours of proofreading location schedules, and that needed to get done today. But as soon as she'd sent that off, she was going to shave her legs and put on something silky.

——

WHEN THEY GOT BACK to Pine Harbour, Rafe convinced Olivia he could safely drive across the village to his parents' house while she did her work. He ignored the deep tug as he looked over his shoulder reversing out of the drive. *You're fine. Just park on the street in front of their house.*

One of the first things he'd done when they came back from London was dig through Liv's jewelry box. He didn't want to give her a different ring. When he held that band he chose at a mall store six years ago, he was reminded of all the hope that younger man had had for the future. He didn't want to give up on those dreams. But he also wanted to mark this renewed commitment to their relationship—a stronger, more understanding, more patient commitment. One that would never end.

He'd slid her engagement and wedding band set to Dani the next day with a pencil sketch of what he wanted. She'd driven to the jewellers in Owen Sound that same day. They'd called yesterday to confirm the rings were ready for pick-up, but he couldn't very well ask Olivia to stop there with him.

He gave his sister a sheepish grin as he climbed the front stairs. She glowered at him. "It's a good thing I love Olivia." It had only been a bit out of her way since she'd had an early shift today and was already in Wiarton when he called, but still…he'd been relying on all of them for a lot this past month.

"Much appreciated, and I'll happily return the favour some day."

"If I have to send you to pick up my engagement ring at some point, I don't want it." She handed over a square velvet box. "Here."

He flipped the box open. He already knew what they looked like, the

jeweller had sent him a couple of photos via email, but seeing the delicate infinity band wrap around her engagement ring, the opposite side to her original wedding band…it was better than he imagined. “Shit. They’re…perfect.”

“You going to wait for Christmas?”

He shook his head. “That was the plan. But I think I’m going to do it tonight.” And then he was going to make love to his wife, even if it crippled him tomorrow.

A shadow crossed his sister’s face, and he tipped his head to the side. “You think that’s a mistake?”

“No. No! Ignore me, I’m just grumpy about being single for yet another holiday.” Rafe winced and Dani was halfway to punching him in the arm before she pulled her hand back. “Sorry, usual reaction to stupid brothers being stupid.”

“Come on, I don’t want to think of you being violated by a dirty boy, I can’t help it.”

“Oh yeah? And what are you going to do to Olivia if she says yes?”

Violate the heck out of her. Probably best to move on. “What do you mean *if*?”

“Seriously, I’m the wrong person to talk to about this. Let’s go inside where it’s not flippin’ freezing.”

“Not a word to Ma.”

He made it through an hour of coffee and cookies before he realized he needed a nap if he was going to make it through a special night. *Damn*. There was no pretending inside his head that he was *fine*. Lots of bargaining with a higher power, though. That desperation was an unpleasant feeling that he’d be happy to soon be rid of.

As if his ears were burning, Dean chose that moment to call and Rafe excused himself with a quick kiss on his mother’s cheek.

“Hey man, what’s up?” He took the steps down the front of the house carefully. Speed—or lack thereof—made all the difference. Gravity was a fucking bitch.

“Listen, sunshine, you need to keep your appointments with the shrink.”

“I only missed one.”

“All of them. You need to go to all of them, or you can’t come back to work.”

I’m not ready. He could admit it to himself, even if he didn’t want to tell anyone else—not Dean, and definitely not a doctor he didn’t know and couldn’t trust. His career hung in the balance. “I’m on sick leave until February. There are plenty of appointments that I *will* keep between now and then.”

Dean made a doubtful noise, then changed the subject, although that didn’t make the conversation any easier. “Ryan’s taken a leave of absence from work.”

“Yeah, he told me.” They’d had one awkward-as-fuck conversation at the funeral, and another equally painful talk two days ago while Olivia took the Howard kids tobogganing in their yard. Rafe didn’t share any more—didn’t tell Dean about the tears, his or Ryan’s. Dean might have been there when Lynn died, but it wasn’t the same. “It’s a good move.”

“I’m worried about him.”

“You know what? He’s worried about himself, too. And that’s a good thing. Listen, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you soon.”

He clicked out of the call before Dean could interject. That wasn’t what he wanted to focus on.

It mattered. It really did. But he wouldn’t let the tragedy consume him.

Besides, he still needed that fucking nap.

Olivia was still reading away at the computer when he returned. He kissed her, long and deep, the type of kiss that he’d promised her daily and that had been missing over the last few weeks. Then he took two pills and put his head down.

He woke hours later with a jerk. Before he could wrench himself out of bed, Liv rolled herself into his side and murmured a gentle reminder to take it easy.

“Shit, I didn’t mean to sleep that long.” He huffed out a long breath, then scrubbed his face.

“I made a pot roast for dinner, if you’re hungry.” Her beautiful face drifted into better view as she lifted herself above him. He blinked, doing a double-take at the fancy lace and ribbon slip she was wearing. *Holy—*

Words failed him as all the blood in his body rushed painfully to his groin.

“Yeah, I’m hungry,” he finally ground out. He licked his lips. He couldn’t lift up, not like this, but maybe if she lowered…

Like a gorgeous mind-reader, Liv brought her barely covered cleavage to his face and wiggled back and forth. He groaned, happily, as he breathed in the fragrance of her bare skin. “I thought I was going to have to seduce you.”

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered, sliding down his body until her mouth hovered above his. She pressed a hot, needy kiss to his lips. “Tell me what I can do. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can feed me,” he said, cupping her breast with one hand and squeezing her ass with the other when she gave him a disappointed look. All in good time. He pulled her flat against his body and rocked their cores together. *Damn tugging*. Okay, they’d try something else when they returned to this. “I want to have a shower, eat dinner, talk…the whole time with you wearing this. I like this.” He slid his fingers under the ribbon strap running over her shoulder and grinned as she shivered. “I like this a lot.”

“Do you want to split a beer?”

He’d cut out the narcotics a week before, but he’d been avoiding alcohol anyway. He nodded. “That sounds great.”

After the world’s fastest shower for a guy who couldn’t lift his arm over his head, he padded back to their room. Liv was setting the table with candles and fancy beer glasses, and that gave him an idea.

His suit from the funeral was still draped over the back of the occasional chair in the corner of their bedroom. He pulled on the pants and managed the shirt on his own, but there was no way he could get the fitted jacket on without her help. Barefoot, he stepped back into the main room. The dining nook was off of the living room, and Liv stood in the archway, a vision in black lace. From the look on her face, she liked the suit. A lot.

“Wow, now I feel under-dressed.”

He shook his head. “You’re perfect.”

“Want some help?”

He nodded and made as if to hand over his jacket, but he dropped it on the floor between them. He lowered himself to one knee, keeping his face ducked so

she wouldn’t see his smile. The last time he did this they’d been in bed. This time it was going to be different. Deliberate and important.

She moved to join him on the floor and he reached out and wrapped his left hand around her calf, stilling her. “It’s okay, leave it.”

“What are you…” She stared down at him, eyes wide, and he smiled.

“Baby, I should have done this before.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered.

“I didn’t know.” He slid his hand higher, curving around her thigh. Her leg shook under his touch and he gave her a reassuring squeeze. He lifted his right hand, and as if she knew he needed her to meet him halfway, she extended her left hand and slid her small palm over his larger one. “I didn’t know you were my everything. I didn’t know I could have the worst day possible on the job and my only thought be of you. You deserve someone else, someone who’s smart enough to know all of that from day one, but I’m selfish. I want you all to myself, forever. And I’ll do whatever it takes to show you every single day that I love you more than anything else in the world. More than my job. More than my pride.”

“Don’t say that.” She shook her head slowly, her gaze never leaving his. “You’re the best man I’ve ever known. Brave and strong. You’re perfect just as you are.”

“Not quite. Something’s missing.” He fumbled for the ring box in his left pocket. “I need my wife back. Say you’ll marry me again, Liv. Say you’ll be mine, officially.” He flipped open the box and she sank to her knees, tears welling in her eyes. *Damn. So much for doing this without waterworks.* He grinned again as she realized just exactly what she was looking at.

“These are my rings…and a new one.”

“I don’t want to forget our first marriage, baby. Marrying you was the best thing I ever did. Maybe we were too young. I was definitely too stupid to keep from fucking up. But it brought us to this point, so those rings…I want them to be a part of our promise again. I’ve still got mine. I’ll wear it if you want.”

She nodded. “I want.” She pressed her cheek against his hand as he dried her tears. “I want to inscribe something inside it…*for the rest of forever*. That’s my

promise to you.”

He drew her face to his and kissed her. He wanted to pull her into his lap or press her back against the floor, but his damn shoulder wouldn’t allow him to do either of those things. She knew, though, and rose above him, holding her hand to help him up. He didn’t need it, but that wasn’t the point. He took her hand and silently promised that he always would.

He kissed her again. There was nothing wrong with his feet, so he planted them wide and held her tight with his left arm as he made her breathless and giggly. Reluctantly he let her go, but her dinner had waited long enough. And they’d need their strength for what he planned next.

Over dinner they talked about the options for getting hitched again. Rafe wanted a wedding, but it didn’t seem appropriate given the proximity to Lynn’s death. Waiting wasn’t an option. So they agreed to invite his parents, siblings and Liv’s sister to join them at a civil service and dinner on New Year’s Eve before Zander headed back out west.

“Sixteen days until our wedding night, eh?” Her eyes danced as she looked at him over the rim of her glass.

“Sixteen nights of living in sin.” He winked.

She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and dropped her gaze to his chest, then lower.

“Liv?”

“Hmm?” Her eyes jumped back to his.

“Have you missed me? Because baby, I’ve missed you so much.” He leaned back in his chair, enjoying the way her pupils dilated and her lips parted. She nodded, and he crooked his finger. She stood, her breasts bouncing slightly as she did, and he changed his mind. He’d thought of having her come around to his side of the table. Touch and tease her for a bit, then have her drop to her knees and take him into her gorgeous mouth, all hot and slick and wet. But he needed those tits in his face. Needed to be inside her. And he had a crystal-clear image of how to accomplish both.

He stood and pressed himself against her back, kissing her neck for a minute before nudging her into the living room. “Undress me,” he told her, hunger

roughing up his voice in a way she obviously liked. She twisted and her fingers flew down the front of his shirt, and then she slowed, pressing her palms back up his torso. She steered clear of his shoulder and the tender tissue down his side and on his arm, and when she moved to take the shirt off entirely he stopped her. Open was good enough. “The pants.”

Again her fingers teased him, knuckles brushing against aching skin, fingertips grazing his pubic hair. He gripped her hips, then curved his left hand back over her ass and between her legs. Hot, wet proof that she was ready. He settled on the couch, lust clouding his vision as he whispered for her to climb on top. He pulled her breasts free of their pretty trappings and sucked first one nipple then the other into his mouth. He kissed the skin between them, in that shadowy valley that only he got to explore, then tipped his head back as she sank onto him.

This wasn’t actually everything. At some point he’d need to figure out the work shit. But making love to Liv on the couch? It made him feel whole again.

He gripped her hips. He couldn’t fuck her, but he could tell her what to do. “Touch yourself,” he whispered. She brought both hands up to her naked breasts. She wore her engagement ring on her left hand and the infinity ring on her right, and the diamonds sparkled in the lamplight as she rode him. “Lower. Your clit. Make yourself come.”

She smiled and her eyelashes fluttered against her cheek for a moment before she looked at him again. “I love you.”

He said it too, over and over again, each refrain spurring her on. She touched them both, and then just herself as her legs started to shake on either side of his thighs. He forced himself to keep breathing. Her sex began to clench around him, she gasped his name, and he tugged her forward, bracing his feet on the ground. It didn’t take long to find the sweet spot. His face buried in the world’s best pillows, he nearly passed out as he spilled himself deep inside his Liv. Hot. Wet. Perfect. Forever.

EPILOGUE

OF ALL THE days to be out of cell range…Olivia yanked her phone out of her pocket and nudged at the screen to see if she had any bars. Nothing. She stared out the window of the minivan they were using to shuttle the advance crew around the filming sites today. It was dark. He was probably home already. His first day back at work had gone just fine, she was sure of it.

But that wasn't the only reason she was dying to talk to her husband today.

She'd had a positive pregnancy test this morning, a wonderful secret she'd kept to herself for thirteen hours and twenty-seven minutes. Rafe had left while she was still sleeping, and then she didn't want to just call or text him. She wanted to see his face when he found out. They'd been married for two months—this time around. But neither of them had wanted to wait and she'd gone off the pill the night Rafe proposed. He wanted four, five, six kids, it kept changing, which made her laugh. They'd start with one and see how they managed. After her year of maternity leave, she wanted to build her own business. She might need to work part-time at the diner until it took off, but the last five months had showed her that there was a market for executive-level local support. Maybe a concierge service for celebrities vacationing at the islands and fancier cottage compounds on the peninsula. Maybe something specific to the entertainment industry. She had time to figure that out while she was falling in love with her baby.

She glanced around the van at her travel companions. How had they not noticed that she'd been vibrating with excitement all day? Maybe they thought it

was the countdown to the start of filming. Her lips twisted in a secret smile. The job was awesome. But a baby was magical.

They'd all met at the Blue Heron Lane cottages, but as they drove out of the park and got on the highway heading south, her phone chimed. **I'm home. Soup for dinner?** She leaned forward and asked the driver if he could drop her off at home instead. No sense in backtracking. Rafe was off tomorrow, he could drive her to her car. Twenty minutes later, she hopped out of the van and bid everyone a distracted goodbye.

Inside, the smell of ginger and garlic swirled through the air. They'd made a giant batch of dinners on the weekend in anticipation of their first week of duelling schedules from hell, and had agreed whomever got home first would do the re-heating. She found her husband in the kitchen. He was slicing a baguette and a round of herbed soft cheese sat on a plate.

"You want some wine?" Rafe asked after she kissed him soundly.

She shook her head and smiled. "How was your day?"

He returned the smile, and his stretched all the way to his eyes. "Really good. For me. Not so much for the guy I arrested after a traffic stop turned into a seizure."

"Drugs?" She scanned his face, looking for any sign that it had been difficult.

He nodded and leaned in to nuzzle her nose. "And it was fine. I did my job, all went well."

"Any worry that it might not?"

He shrugged. "No more than I had in the past."

"Well…yay!" She laughed. "Except for the guy who got arrested, I mean."

"How about you?"

"Good. I've got pages of questions that I need to answer tomorrow, but we'll be inside the whole day. And in cell range."

"Yeah, I tried to call you at lunch time." He mock-pouted and she kissed his lower lip. "Your phone's going to blow up with sad, lonely text messages from me any minute now."

"Awww, poor muffin." She slid her hands under his shirt and let out a happy sigh at the warm flesh stretched over hard muscles. Rafe responded with a yelp.

“What, are my hands cold?”

“Jesus, baby!” Muscles corded under her hands but he didn’t pull away. His warmth transferred to her as she snuggled close.

“So I wanted to talk to you about something…” She smiled against the soft cotton of his t-shirt.

“Can it wait until after we eat?”

She bit her lip to hold back a laugh as his stomach rumbled. “Yep. It’s not urgent.”

Rafe cracked a beer and they tucked into the soup and bread. She waved off the bottle each time he offered it until he finally stopped and looked at her carefully. “You feeling okay?”

“Yes.” Bliss filled her entire body as she grinned and repeated her answer.

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Good.”

After they ate, Olivia quickly washed the dishes while Rafe stood at their DVD shelf and called out movie suggestions. She giggled to herself. They weren’t going to watch a movie. She was going to take her husband to bed in forty-five seconds. She lifted her voice so he would hear her. “So I was thinking about work. After the movie ends, Frank will be able to give me full-time hours to the end of the summer. After that…”

She felt him fill the doorway to the kitchen as she dried the second bowl and set it on the shelf. He didn’t say anything, just stood there. Big and strong and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that he’d go anywhere she asked him to—but she’d found everything she’d ever need in Pine Harbour.

“After that,” she said, patting her tummy. “I thought I’d get to work on the nursery.” She made sure she’d turned fully as she said the second part, because there was no way she would miss the massive grin that spread across her husband’s face.

“Yeah?” He jumped up, slapping the top of the door frame as he let out a yell, then he picked her up and spun her in a circle. She shrieked and wrapped her arms tight around his neck. He slowly lowered her back to the floor, but he kept her close. “Thank you,” he whispered just before he covered her mouth with his.

THE END

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Contractor and army reservist Jake Foster fell in love with Dani Minelli when she was a colt-legged high school senior. He knew he was too old to even look at her, let alone touch.

Dani's been trying to get his attention since returning to Pine Harbour a grown woman—and failing miserably at every turn.

This winter, everything is going to change. And when the snow stops falling, Jake and Dani won't be able to hide from their attraction any longer.

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SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

Pine Harbour

Wardham

Camp Firefly Falls

MILITARY ROMANCE

Pine Harbour

Camp Firefly Falls

SEALs Undone

ASSIGNMENT: Caribbean Night

Vikings in Space (yes, I write sci-fi sometimes, too!)

www.zoeyork.com

EROTIC ROMANCE (written as ainsley booth)

Forbidden Bodyguards

Frisky Beavers

Billionaire Secrets

www.ainsleybooth.com

www.friskybeavers.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

aka The People Who Have All the Faith In Me

In May I made the decision to try writing full-time. A leap of faith that I couldn't have made without the love and support of some amazing people.

Natalie, you're the best friend a girl could ever ask for. Thank you for driving me to Best Buy to pick up my MacBook Air even if you thought I was a little crazy.

My Viking…I know how scary this change was for you. Goodbye, security. Hello, dreams. Your support means the world to me. All my heroes have a piece of you in them.

Cate, Cora, Molly and Anne, who read my books first and tell me where to make them better.

Mary and Shelly, for catching my mistakes.

The Ink Heart Authors, a brilliant group of women whom I am blessed to just orbit around. A special thanks to Lauren Hawkeye, Melanie Shawn, Carly Phillips and Nina Lane.

Romance Divas.

The Self-Publishing Roundtable crew, both official and unofficial.

My mother-in-law, who makes me coffee and picks up her red pen every time I ask.

All the baristas at the Byron Starbucks. I've missed you over the summer holidays, but trust me, you don't want the little Vikings hanging around.

My street team. The Wardham Ambassadors embraced Pine Harbour, Rafe and Olivia and were the best cheerleading squad ever!

Lori, for letting me ignore you while I type at your kitchen table.

Rachel, Hannah, Andraena, Mandie…the original street team. Sorry it took me so long to organize a book signing.

All the readers who have signed up for my mailing list, liked me on Facebook, followed me on Twitter. There are literally thousands of you now, and that just blows my mind. Thank you for believing in second chances, and picking up a book about love in small town Ontario.

I love you all,
Zoe

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe York lives in London, Ontario with her young family. She’s currently chugging Americanos, wiping sticky fingers, and dreaming of heroes in and out of uniform.

www.zoeyork.com