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REBECCA YARROS

GREAT  
AND  
PRECIOUS  
THINGS

A NOVEL





EXCERPT FROM

**GREAT  
AND  
PRECIOUS  
THINGS**



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**AMARA**  
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*To my father,  
whose hands never let me fall.  
I love you, Daddy.*



## CHAPTER THREE

### Camden

It had been naive of me to think I might make it a day, or even two, before someone mentioned Sullivan's death—or my role in it.

I'd made it roughly twenty minutes in my father's company, and he'd already shot me and accused me of fratricide. Welcome home.

Silence kept me company as we hiked back down to the house, our flashlights and headlamps bobbing along the way. There were eleven of us, since Acosta had walked Willow home.

Willow. I shut that shit down in my head. Nope, not going there.

God, but the relief in her voice when she'd whispered my name and leaned closer... She didn't hate me. I deserved her hatred, her absolute loathing, and instead she'd trusted me like the last six years had never happened.

"I think he's pretty close to lucid right now," Gideon said as he fell into step next to me. "You could go talk to him."

"I think he was pretty close to lucid up by the ravine, and no, thank you. He's doing just fine with Xander up there." I jumped the three-foot ditch that currently housed a stream of spring runoff. How easily it all came back, muscle memory

guiding me where the light failed. Now if only I'd remembered to exchange my Avs hat for one that covered my ears before heading out after Dad.

"You honestly think he would have shot—" Gideon grunted, then scrambled by the sound of it. "Jesus, hold on. Still part mountain goat, aren't you?" He huffed, jogging to catch up.

"No, I don't think he would have shot me if he'd recognized me in that moment," I answered his question—and mine. "He definitely would have considered it, though. Hell, I bet he's pictured it in his head a few times while he's been perfectly lucid."

"Some homecoming," Gideon muttered as the house came into view across the clearing.

"Why do you think I stayed away so long?"

"Because you knew he'd shoot you on sight?" He rammed his shoulder into me, and I tensed for a millisecond. It was a familiar enough move from Gid, but no one got that close to me anymore without a direct invitation.

"Something like that." My eyes drifted north, as if they could cut through the dark and forested ridge to the little grove of aspens where Sullivan lay at rest next to Mom and Uncle Cal.

"You'll settle in. Hey, you can always come work with me at APD!" His teeth flashed in the dim lighting.

"Last time I checked, there are already five of you for our little town, and my name isn't Hall, so the chances of me advancing are pretty much zero."

"Dick," Gideon muttered between fake coughs.

"Never pretended to be anything else." Maybe I wasn't popular. Maybe I was the unlikable son. The bad penny. The black sheep. Every fucking cliché there was when compared to Xander's annoying perfection. I'd stopped caring about



that twenty years ago and simply decided to embrace it. There was power in not giving a fuck.

The lights of the house shone from the windows as we came to what used to be the gardens Mom spent her mornings in. The once-lush plants were all but gone—surviving only as volunteers that grew from the seeds in the leftover rot of the previous year—or had been overrun by the mountain grass.

Dad had called it folly to garden this close to the tree line. Mom had rolled her eyes and done it anyway.

We rounded the side of the house, and I made note of the places where the siding had peeled back. The gutters drooped, and the drainage system was in shambles, if the small canyons that began at the drain spouts were any indication.

Dorothy met Dad on the front porch, and the two disappeared into the house while Captain Hall and Xander spoke at the base of the steps.

“That doesn’t look pleasant,” Gideon noted as we approached my Jeep.

I opened the passenger side and stripped down to my T-shirt, ignoring the bite of temperature as I threw the armored vest onto the seat. When I’d decided to keep my personal gear, it had been out of an unexplainable sense of attachment, not because I thought I’d still need to use the damn thing.

I put on my ruined coat as we headed for Xander.

“This can’t happen again,” Captain Hall lectured my brother, which immediately set me on edge.

“It won’t. I never thought he’d locate the key. You have my most sincere apology.” Xander’s mouth was set in a firm line, which was pretty much as upset as he’d ever get in front of an authority figure.

I took my place next to him as Gideon took his by his father.

“I respect what you’ve done, Alexander. I really do.” His forehead puckered in what would have been a worried expression had the porch light not thrown half his face into shadows that painted him an old-west villain.

Guy seriously needed to lose the cowboy hat.

“Thank you,” Xander replied. “Now, we’re going to go check on our—”

“But the time has come for you to put him in that assisted living facility in Buena Vista,” Captain Hall interrupted in that morally superior voice that had always led me to the opposite of what he demanded.

“That’s why I’m here.” I folded my arms over my chest.

“And it’s nice to see you, Camden. Really, it is. Been boring around here without you destroying everything. What do you know about caring for your father? How long are you here on leave? What’s going to happen when you go back to wherever it is you live?”

Gideon swallowed, his gaze darting between his dad and me, but he didn’t move or respond like he once would have. Guess some things had changed.

“I’m not on leave. I’m here for good. Xander called, and I came.” *Hence my packed-to-the-hilt Jeep, jackass.*

“Okay, you’ve been back all of five minutes and your father shot you. Does that sound like he should be living on his own?” His eyebrows rose, and he leaned forward a little.

That intimidation shit hadn’t worked on me in a good decade and sure as hell wasn’t doing it now. But I wasn’t going to let him taunt me into a reaction, either.

“It sounded like Xander needed me to come home, and I did. We’re going to make some changes that make it safer for Dad, and we’ll do it as a family. We appreciate the search

party more than you know. Thank you for helping us bring him home. We can take it from here.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Listen here, son. You have no clue what it’s been like—”

“I’m not your son.” My voice dropped into that deadly, calm little space I reserved for moments I needed to keep my finger off the trigger. “And you’re right. I don’t know, but Xander does. So if you’ll excuse us, we’re going to head inside. Gid, are you good to catch a ride?”

“Yeah, no problem. Captain, let’s get out of here.”

Making sure Xander was with me, I started up the porch steps.

“Camden,” Captain Hall called out.

We both turned.

“Do me a favor and keep yourself out of trouble while you’re here? Hate to see anyone else get thrown through a window.”

Xander stiffened beside me.

I’d killed lesser men in my career. Better ones, too. His comment had his intended effect—rage coiled in my muscles, ready to spring.

“You have yourself a good night, Captain,” Xander said as he rested one hand on my shoulder, the shotgun still gripped by the other.

Of course he appeased the asshole. Of course he backed down to the place he was supposed to be, the place where everything was safe and everyone knew their roles.

Xander’s place was to make peace. Mine had always been to bring war.

“Will do, Mayor Daniels,” Hall responded.

I clenched my jaw to keep it from dropping.

The two Halls gave us nods that meant different things

and climbed into their SUV.

We stood there in silence, shoulder to shoulder, like the unwilling sentinels we'd become, guarding the man who'd never done the same for us. A few moments later, with the searchers and police dispersed, there was only one car I didn't recognize in the driveway.

"So, Mayor Daniels, huh?" I asked my brother as we turned to climb the rest of the steps.

He shrugged.

"Seriously? You're not dishonest or power hungry enough to be a politician. Trust me—I've met my share."

"It's possible to serve without presidential ambition, you know. I'm happy where I'm at. And it's not like we're a bustling metropolis." He rolled his eyes and opened the front door.

"Until summer." I paused, my gaze drawn to the mat under my feet. I'd sworn never to cross it again.

"Yeah, those extra fifty thousand people who pop up tend to complicate things, but that income keeps the town running the rest of the year, so I'd call it an even trade. Now, were you thinking of coming in, or were you going to sleep on the porch?"

*I'll never go back to Alba.*

*I'll never get out of the service.*

*I'll never listen to Dad blame me again.*

*I'll never again lay eyes on Willow Bradley.*

Compared to breaking that last promise I'd made to myself, the act of stepping over this threshold was cake.

I walked in before my common sense could stop me. After all, how the hell was I supposed to help Dad if I wouldn't go in the house?

Xander shut the door behind me as I stood in the entryway, taking in the changes around the house I'd grown

up in. Home. It had been one while Mom was alive. Little by little, the feeling had drained from the house in the way water dripped from that slow leak in the upstairs bathroom. We'd all been too distracted by other things to grab a wrench. The love had bled out in a steady trickle that we'd left unchecked out of sheer apathy.

Sullivan had cared.

Sullivan had died and taken the last sluggish heartbeats of this corpse of a house with him.

"I'm going to put this back in the safe." Xander motioned to the shotgun.

"Does he still have the key?"

"He handed it over after we left the clearing. You know, he's only lucid about fifty percent of the time anymore. You should go talk to him while he's really...him."

"Right." Because the real him was a peach.

Xander bounded up the stairs, disappearing at the landing.

I kicked off my shoes out of habit and put them against the wall.

*How can I keep these floors clean when you boys insist on tracking in half the mountain?*

I smiled at the memory before my eyes caught on the rug just down the hall that hid the bloodstain we'd never been able to scrub out of the hardwood. The place Dad sat, holding Mom as she'd bled out after the cougar had gotten the best of her. She'd begged him to stay with her, to let her die where they'd made a life.

He'd respected her wishes and said it was a miracle she'd lasted while he'd carried her home, that she'd never make it down the mountain to the hospital.

He'd been right.

"Oh my. Camden? Is that really you?"

I stood and faced the hallway to see Hope Bradley, Willow's mom, gawking at me.

Yet another person with a permit to loathe me. Fucking awesome.

Her lip trembled, her eyes watered, and then it took everything I had in me not to put the front door between us as she quickly walked my way.

"You..." She shook her head and gave me a watery smile. "You look exactly how I remember you. I didn't know you were in town!"

"Just got in today," I told her, stuffing my hands in my pockets.

"Oh wow! Does Willow know? I bet she'd love to see you."

That kindness in her hazel eyes—so like Willow's—was almost my undoing. There was a reason she'd been Mom's best friend.

"Yeah, I actually saw her about an hour ago." What the hell was taking Xander so long upstairs?

"Oh good! She's always the first to jump and help when Art takes one of his walks." The skin between her eyebrows furrowed as she examined my coat. White feathers poked out of the holes the buckshot left. "What on earth have you gotten into, Cam?"

"Hope, I'll be ready to go in just a second," Dorothy called as she crossed the hallway, headed for the kitchen.

"I drive her home," Mrs. Bradley explained. "Plus, it lets me check in and make sure Art has everything he needs or give Xander a little break. I'm so glad you're here! How long are you in for?"

"I'm back for good." The words tasted like bitter lemon on my tongue.

She clasped her hands. "Really? Well, that's the best

thing I've heard all week!" Her eyes dropped to my coat again, and she shook her head. "You might need to get a new coat, though."

"I'm ready," Dorothy said, coming out of the kitchen. "Now, Cam, I've given your father his evening meds. Maybe you could take a shift sleeping in Art's room so Xander can sleep at his own place tonight? That boy is worn to the bone. Oh, and how are you feeling after all that...?" She acted like it hadn't been years since I'd been in this house, like I'd left mid-conversation and she was simply picking it back up.

"All that what?" Hope asked.

"Boy got himself shot saving your daughter; at least that's what Art just told me." Dorothy passed us both to retrieve her coat from the rack by the door.

"You were shot?" She focused on a hole in my jacket. "And Willow?" Her panicked gaze darted back to mine.

"She's fine," I assured her. That had been the only acceptable outcome.

"Because you were there," Xander commented as he came down the stairs.

Great, now he chose to show up. I shot him a look, but it didn't stop my brother from running his mouth.

"Cam stepped right between them, even with that gun pointed straight at his chest." Xander beamed like a proud parent.

Hell. I was in Hell. And knowing Hope, she'd see straight through me.

"You stepped... He had a..." Hope blinked quickly and then spun back toward the living room as Dad stepped into the hallway. "You aimed a gun at my daughter?"

"Claws are out," Xander murmured.

"Because you couldn't keep your mouth shut," I retorted.

"Like the whole town won't know by morning," he

scoffed.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dad shouted, jabbing his finger in my direction.

“You aimed a gun at my Willow?” Hope repeated, getting right up in Dad’s face.

“I didn’t know it was Willow, and you have my most sincere apology,” he told her quietly, then focused his venom right back on me, as usual. “Explain yourself.”

“Dad, it’s Camden. Remember? He was up at the ravine with us earlier. He’s home now,” Xander said slowly, as if he were talking to a child...or a man who couldn’t remember who he was 50 percent of the time.

“I know who the hell he is, Alexander. Why are you in my home, Camden?”

Hope gasped and stepped back.

“I’m here to help you,” I told him in the calmest voice possible, gathering every emotion in my body and shoving them in a box, just like I did on missions.

“You? The boy who vowed never to darken my doorstep again? The boy who burned down the bunkhouse in a fit of boredom? The boy who’s been here once in the last ten years, and only to bury his brother? You’re here to help?”

The boy I’d been would have cried.

The teenager I’d grown out of would have cursed at him and walked away.

The man I was now stood there and took it because I was finally strong enough to.

“Dad!” Xander snapped, stepping forward. “Stop it! You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying. He’s the reason Sullivan isn’t here. He’s the reason your daughter”—he looked at Hope—“buried the love of her life when she was nineteen. He’s the reason everything goes to shit.”



“Art, you know that’s not true,” Hope said quietly.

“He gave the order that killed Sullivan.”

My breath caught as Dad’s ice-blue eyes met mine. I couldn’t deny it. Not when it was the truth.

“I didn’t know—” I started.

“You got him killed! You’re not sleeping under my roof. You’re not welcome here. Get out.”

My stomach turned to lead and plummeted to the floor.

“Dad! No!” Xander shouted.

There was zero mercy in my father’s eyes, zero give, and zero chance he was going to change his mind...but he was the one who’d asked me to come here. Didn’t he remember?

Screw this. Screw all of this. He was never going to listen. He’d made up his mind the moment he read the report Xander had promised not to show him.

I turned around and walked out of the house, letting the screen door slam behind me. Rocks jabbed into my feet as I hit the drive. Shit. I’d left my boots inside. Whatever. I had another ten pairs in the Jeep. I’d find a hotel—

“Cam!” Xander yelled as I reached the Jeep.

I climbed in, but he got to the door before I could close it. A set of keys jangled from his outstretched fingers, but I kept my eyes straight ahead, refusing to see the inevitable pity in his eyes.

“Go to my place. This will all blow over. I promise.”

He’d made that same promise when the mood of the house hadn’t lifted six months after Mom’s funeral. Xander’s optimism was a giant heap of lies he told himself to make swallowing the shit easier.

“No,” I replied. The last place I wanted to be was in Mayor Daniels’s house, getting my dirt all over his perfect life. I didn’t even know where he lived.

“Come on,” he pled. “I’ve got HBO.”

“Don’t watch much TV.”

“You’re still so damned stubborn,” he muttered, digging into his pocket and retrieving another set of keys, this one with an eighties-style Broncos stallion on the key chain. “Then, at least go up to Uncle Cal’s house. Well, I mean, technically he left it to you, so it’s your house.”

Uncle Cal. The one person I’d been able to lean on. The only guy who’d ever understood the rage that always seemed to simmer just beneath my surface.

Xander shook the keys. “Come on. Don’t go to a hotel. None of the tourist places up here are open yet, and it’s a forty-five-minute drive back to Buena Vista. The electricity still works up there, and the water runs. I check it every month. It’s not like I’ve dusted or anything, and it’s not the Four Seasons, but it’s yours. Do it for me, please. I can’t watch you drive away and wait another six years to see if you’ll come back.”

“I’m not leaving the state, for Christ’s sake. Just Dad’s house,” I promised. I’d had no intention of coming back when I left last time. We’d both known it. I couldn’t blame him for that touch of worry in his voice, so I took the keys, and he sighed in relief.

“I’ll check on you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be fine. Will you?” I motioned back to the house. “I know you need a break.”

“I’ll take one once Dad comes to his senses.”

Ha. Like that was going to happen.

“Look.” His voice softened. “We all know you didn’t kill Sullivan. Dad just...” He shook his head.

“I gave the order. May as well have pulled the trigger,” I said quietly, staring at the front porch. Our team had been called in to support a combat outpost under fire, and when our chopper managed to land, all hell had broken loose. I’d

been ordered to head toward a break in the defenses with whichever soldiers were available.

“You relayed orders. That’s all.”

“I chose a squad leader to reinforce the side of the outpost taking the heaviest fire,” I corrected him. “That sergeant took his squad and did just that.” We’d split what was left of that platoon down the middle. I could have chosen the staff sergeant on my right. Instead, I took the one on my left and headed for the wall with his soldiers. “Sullivan was in that squad.”

“You didn’t know that.” He shook his head emphatically. “How could you have? I’ve read the report. There’s no way you would have seen him in a mess like that.”

By the time I’d recognized Sully, it was too late. My hands tightened on the wheel. He’d been shot ten feet away from me.

If I had just chosen the guy on the right, Sullivan would be alive. That was where Dad had stopped listening.

“I’ve got to get out of here.”

“The back way is still open,” he said. When it became apparent that I wasn’t going to reply, he mumbled something about my stubbornness and shut the door.

I waited until he was clear, then started the engine. Instead of taking the road back to Alba, I followed the fading dirt road west, putting the Jeep into four-wheel drive and skirting the edge of the Bradley property line for a few minutes until I climbed the next ridge and turned north.

I crept through the open, rusted gate and crossed onto Uncle Cal’s land. Guess it really was mine now, according to the property taxes I’d been paying. Still felt like his, though. He’d died the year before Sullivan, and I’d been deployed again, unable to bury the man I’d loved more than my own father.

A few minutes later, I put the car in park.

In the sunlight, I'd be able to see what remained of the ruins at the hot springs down the ridgeline and the tip of the abandoned Rose Rowan Mine below those. But given the sight my headlights illuminated, maybe it was a good thing it was dark.

The landscaping had overgrown the sprawling single-story home, and the roof was missing so many shingles, it looked more like a suggestion than a reality. Uncle Cal had added rooms as he'd wanted, giving the house an unsymmetrical, eclectic feel that I'd always loved as a kid. Now that I was an adult, it just meant that there was a shit ton of roof to repair. I could only hope that the solar panels had fared better.

Yeah, it was going to be a massive amount of work, but at least I wouldn't have to sleep in body armor. The same couldn't be said for the house I'd grown up in.

I got out of the Jeep and headed for the front door, pausing at the porch. My thumb dusted off the markings Uncle Cal had carved into the upright stone he'd jokingly called his address.

"Elba," I repeated, shaking my head with a little laugh at the joke no one in our family ever remarked on. Napoleon's island.

Guess I was well and truly exiled now.

How the hell was I supposed to accomplish the one thing Dad had asked of me if he wouldn't even talk to me?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Willow

My cell phone flashed an alert for a front-door entry, and a video clip automatically started playing. I tugged my headphones down to rest around my neck, effectively silencing the BANNERS album I'd been listening to, and saw my best friend on the screen, juggling a carrier tray of coffee and my house key.

Another hour and this project for Vaughn Holdings would be finished, but something told me I was about to hit a major delay. Thea never popped in without a reason, and I had a sneaking suspicion that reason was Cam.

“Willow?” Thea called out.

“In the office!” I mentally kissed my productivity goodbye and set my headphones on the glass desk.

“There you are!” She gave me a smile brighter than the morning sun and a cup of coffee from Alba Perks.

I thanked her for the coffee, then took a sip of the chocolaty mocha and waited to hear why she'd dropped by so early. She liked to get to her yoga studio before nine, even in the off-season.

“I was hoping you'd be home.” Her eyebrows rose over light-blue eyes.

“Ha! It's eight thirty a.m. on a Tuesday, so I'm working.

Where else did you think I might be?” I took a sip and savored the mocha, wondering how long it would take for her to bring him up.

“Oh, I don’t know...over at the Danielses’ place?” she asked in mock innocence, blowing the steam across the lid of her cup.

Not long at all.

“Okay, what have you heard?” I leaned back in my chair as she plopped her butt right on my desk. The gossip wasn’t something I’d missed while I was at college, but Thea was someone I’d longed for every day at Rutgers.

“I know that I was dropping Jacob off at preschool and some of the other moms had a few fascinating stories about a very hot, very tattooed, very Daniels-looking man stopping in at the gas station before heading up the mountain. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, now, would you?” Her blue eyes sparkled as she tilted her head.

“Why on earth would I know who stops in for gas?”

“Oh, come on. Julie Hall was dropping off Sawyer before heading to the hospital, and she said—”

My cell phone alerted me to another entry, and a quick peek showed my mother walking in.

*Work from home, they said. It’ll be fun and productive, they said.*

“Mom! Boundaries!” I called down the hall.

“Thea! How lovely to see you.” Mom ignored my comment, her perky grin sending warning signals down my spine. What was she up to now?

“Mom, seriously? I thought we had the whole ‘the key is only for emergencies’ discussion?” Moving back last year had definitely challenged my mom’s hovering nature, but I knew she did it out of love. She was in her element with someone to fuss over, and lately that someone was me.

“Well, you get so grouchy when I interrupt your work, so I figured I’d just let myself in and see if you were here before bugging you.”

I wasn’t touching the lack of logic in that statement with a ten-foot pole. “Right. Mom, what’s up? I know you didn’t drive all the way up here to see if I was home. You could have done that with a phone call.”

She shifted an overstuffed canvas tote on her shoulder. “Is it a crime to want to see my daughter? I mean, you were gone for four years, and I feel like I’m still getting used to having you back. I love having both my girls home again.” Her tone was so exaggerated that I nearly choked on the syrupy sweetness of it. “But I do need a favor from one of you.”

“We both know that Charity is asleep, so out with it!” I demanded with a laugh. No doubt my older sister had gone back to bed after taking Rose to school. She usually worked the closing shift at her bar, since she lived right above it.

Mom smiled back, mirroring my own, and set the bag on the purple armchair in my office. When I’d bought what I’d lovingly called The Outpost, I’d repainted every wall and all the woodwork white, decorating in pops of bright color that I could easily change out when the mood struck. Art school had given me an appreciation of how color affected mood, and after losing Sullivan...well, I’d needed a lot of color. Now, I was good with just bits and pieces.

“So you’re right, we both know Charity is still sleeping, so I was thinking that you might run a few things over to Camden for me.”

“Ha! I knew you knew!” Thea jumped off my desk, making my monitor wobble.

I steadied the equipment that cost more than I’d made my first year and sighed, glancing up at the onyx rook that

sat next to my monitor. That little chess piece was more valuable than any of my electronics.

“Yes, I knew,” I told Thea. “Why can’t you run it over yourself, Mom? The Danielses’ place is way closer to your house than mine.”

I’d put off thinking about Cam since the moment I’d woken up this morning. And by put off, I meant refused to acknowledge when he’d popped into my head...which had been about every minute or so. Plan was working out great.

It wasn’t like I could help it. He’d basically been gone ten years. He was bound to bring up some thoughts...some feelings.

“Because he’s not at the Danielses’. He’s up at Cal’s place. Not that it’s Cal’s anymore. It’s his, you know,” Mom finished with a nod.

“He’s at Cal’s?” I asked quietly. He’d always been more comfortable there as a kid—we all had—but it wasn’t like that place was really cleaned up enough to live in yet.

“Art... He was difficult last night, as you well know.” Mom shot me a glare that told me she’d been filled in on what had gone down at the ravine.

God, Cam had just gotten home, and Art had kicked him out? That was the only explanation for him staying up at Cal’s. My eyes were drawn to the huge picture window in my office that looked east across the ridgeline, and my heart lunged against my ribs, like it was straining to travel without me. If he was at Cal’s, that meant there was only a mile between our houses. For ten years, he’d been thousands of miles away—half a world, sometimes—and now he was close enough to visit with a quick walk.

If I dared...which of course I never did. Because I was an idiot, not a masochist.

“Willow?” Mom prompted me from my thoughts. Always



here but never present. That's what Dad lovingly said when I drifted off as a kid. He didn't find that same quality quite so enchanting now that I was an adult.

"Sorry," I apologized out of habit. "So why don't you just run it over to him yourself?"

Mom cringed. "Well, I grabbed his boots— It's a long story, but I was there when it all happened, so I thought he might be a bit embarrassed to see me."

"As opposed to being delighted to see me?" I tilted my head. "You know he can't stand me." Cam's loathing of me was the worst-kept secret in all of Alba, and we were known for fast gossip. Even when I'd been with Sully, Cam had barely tolerated my presence those last months before he went off to basic, and then it had been under obvious duress.

It hadn't always been that way, but it was sure where we ended up.

"Right, and that's why he stepped in front of a loaded gun for you," Mom chided. Oh yeah, she was miffed that I hadn't filled her in last night.

"He did what?" Thea shouted, the sound echoing off the bare walls.

"Calm down," I mumbled. "He had on a bulletproof vest." Not that I'd known. When I'd thought that bullets had penetrated his chest... I never wanted to feel like that again. As for what I'd felt, well, I wasn't pausing to examine that, either.

"Not on his head, he didn't," Mom retorted.

"Who had a gun?" Now it was Thea glaring at me.

"Arthur Daniels," Mom explained. "Don't worry— Xander locked it up. But you can't tell me that boy hates you when he literally put his life on the line for yours."

My mind drifted to his mint-and-pine scent. His arm locked around my waist. The way he'd ordered me to go, both

before his father shot him...and after. Glad to know he was still a walking contradiction.

I sighed, letting my head rest against the high back of my chair. One thing I'd learned about Camden was that he might absolutely abhor my presence, but he'd never stand by and watch me get hurt.

"I never said hate. He no doubt did that because he loves you guys. Always has. And I'm sure he feels some weird sense of responsibility because Sullivan died."

Both Mom and Thea averted their eyes, as usual.

"I can say his name. You can, too. It won't hurt me any more than it already does." Sure, his loss still ached, but not in the way it had. That first year, it had been a sucking chest wound. I couldn't breathe, couldn't sleep. Couldn't see past the next few minutes.

Now it was like a reconstructed knee that ached when the weather changed. I knew it could flare up again at any minute when the conditions were right, but it consumed me only in rare moments. I had put myself back together years ago. Unfortunately, none of Alba had gotten the message that I was healed. They still treated me like I might dissolve into a puddle of tears at any moment.

"We know," Mom said softly with a sad smile. "We just... worry."

Thea's lips pressed into a thin line, and she nodded. Sully had been her husband's best friend, and Pat had struggled just as hard as I had.

But no one had suffered like Camden. I'd known with one look at the funeral that Cam had been irrevocably shattered by what happened to Sullivan.

"So his boots are in the bag?" I put us back on topic just to steer clear of the grief tsunami that threatened to overtake the room.

“Right. Yes. And a few other things he might need. Would you mind running them over? I’d really appreciate it. And I know you two don’t particularly get along, though you most certainly used to.”

Man, did she love to remind me that at one point I’d been attached to the Daniels boys at the hip. Especially Cam.

“I just...” She continued when I remained quiet. “I know he’s not mine, but if Lillian were here...” She shook her head, unable to continue.

“I’ll take it,” I agreed, knowing it would ease her and maybe myself, too. “If I hurry, I can be back by ten and get this finished.”

“Oh, I have to head to the studio!” Thea jolted as if she’d just noticed the time. “I have a class coming in at ten I need to get set up for.”

“Business is good?” Mom asked.

Starting up something new was always a risk in Alba. Sure, the season—the summer months—was a gushing waterfall of business, but the fall was slow and the winter downright dead before a trickle started back up in the spring. It was one reason the younger generations kept leaving.

“Not bad! We partnered with that little resort down in Mount Princeton, so they’ve been sending business our way. Today is a bridal party!” Thea finished in excitement.

Mom’s expression changed in a way that only I caught. It was a twinge of pain that she’d learned to camouflage quickly over the years, but it was there nonetheless.

In some ways, losing Sullivan had been harder on her than it had me. I’d lost the man I loved, the one I’d planned on spending my life with.

She’d lost her dream of holding a grandchild that she could see both herself and Lillian in. It had been like losing her best friend all over again, combined with mourning what

she'd considered to be my future.

I saw it all the time around our small town—the specter of what-if. The futures parents dreamed for their children died hard around here, and laying them to rest demanded a thousand impromptu funerals over the course of a lifetime. The past could be buried and would eventually set you free. Hopes and dreams for futures that would never come to fruition? Those suckers were the real ghosts.

Mom blinked herself free of her most recent burial.

“That’s just great, Thea. I’m so proud of you. How about I walk you out? You can tell me how Jacob is doing. I just love getting to see his sweet little face around town.”

Thea agreed, then hugged me tight. “Call me. I mean it. I want to know everything.” She pulled back and gave me the same look she’d dished out around locker doors in high school.

“I promise.”

“Oh, and Willow, if you have anything you think Cam might find...useful, why don’t you take that over at the same time?” Mom hinted. “He says he’s back for good, so he might need it.”

My face flooded with warmth.

“Yep. I’ll get right on that. See you later.” I forced a smile and ushered them out my front door.

Once I shut it behind them, I leaned against the oak expanse and did my best to breathe like a normal person on a normal day.

So what if he’d jump to conclusions? So what if I’d be opening myself up to a heaping dose of ridicule and that cold, cruel stare? Mom knew damn well what I had stored in my spare bedroom, so wasn’t it better if I delivered it before she accidentally blurted out my secret to Cam? The only thing more embarrassing than what I was about to do would be

him showing up and demanding it himself.

I was doing this now to save myself further humiliation... not because I stupidly wanted to see him. Right.

My bare feet crossed the sun-warmed hardwood of my little house, passing the open-concept living, dining, and kitchen area, then my office, and heading back to the two bedrooms, only one of which was occupied.

Mom and Dad built The Outpost the summer I'd decided not to go to college. The summer I'd decided to stay home and wait for Sullivan to return from deployment. Bed-and-breakfasts were huge up here, but little houses where families could vacation were even bigger. They'd rented it out for a couple of years before Mom decided that the rental business wasn't for her, and now it was mine. Well, in another three hundred and forty-eight mortgage payments, it would be.

I opened the spare bedroom and sighed at the contents. "Stop being a chicken," I lectured myself.

Then I put on my shoes, tied my hair up in a messy bun, and got to work.

A half hour later, my SUV climbed the last stretch of snow-laden dirt road that led to Cal's. Camden's black Jeep sat parked in the driveway, the tires and lower portion of the paint caked in mud.

I put my car in park and killed the ignition, and before I was ready, I found myself knocking on his front door.



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