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Unforeseeable

By Sydney German

Chapter 1

Ava stared at the wall; blood splattered onto the beige paint. The dark liquid trickled down the wall in succinct patterns, following an unseen trail. It had taken days of back and forth between her and her husband to finally choose what color to paint the living room when they had decided to re-paint their house. Arguments had unfolded, paint swatches taped onto walls, and they had still ended up with beige – the most neutral color they could’ve chosen.

She hadn’t realized when she’d grabbed the bat. Her vision had gone blurry, her mind unable to comprehend the scene in front of her and without thinking, her hand had reached beside the door where they kept the intruder bat. Her fingers tightened around the handle, lifted the bat, and she swung like she’d been playing baseball for years. Hitting its target, the metal bat sent a ringing into the air and there was a loud crack as Conner’s head flung to the side from the impact, his blood spraying the wall behind him. The only sounds now were her breathing, which was flowing in and out of her lungs in uncontrolled gasps, and the pounding of her heart echoing in her chest. Still holding the bat raised above her head, Ava slowly moved her eyes from the blood on the wall to her husband lying at her feet. Crimson liquid matting his hair and pooling underneath his head. When she saw what she had done, she dropped the bat and it hit the wooden floor with a clang. Ava sank to her knees, the blood soaking into her pants.

“Oh my god. No, Conner. No, no. Please. I didn’t... I didn’t mean to” she stuttered as she reached out to check his pulse, her fingers trembling as they pressed into his neck and blood oozed into the space between her fingers. One moment then two passed and she felt nothing, no pulse.

“Please, give me something. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. Oh god, I’m sorry. Conner please,” Ava begged, desperate for a response. Moving away from his neck, she grabbed his wrist and placed two fingers against his skin, still no pulse. Setting his arm back on the ground, she put her ear directly to his chest – searching for the sound of the heartbeat that she’d fallen asleep to every night for the past three years. Now there was only silence.

Ava sat up and her hands hovered over his body, unsure of what to do. Her eyes moved up from his chest to his face. A face that she loved and looked for in every room, but it had been mutilated and no longer resembled the husband she knew. Suddenly, Ava felt her stomach twist and she pushed herself away until her back hit the front door, stopping her from moving any further. She put her hands up to her face, smearing his blood onto her cheeks and tried to steady her breathing and will the nausea to go away. But the air was heavy and made it impossible to take a full breath while the smell of metal clung to her nose.

“What have I done? What have I done?” Ava repeated as she stared at the body in front of her and realized there was no way out of this. She had killed her husband and there was no escape.

Chapter 2

3 Years Earlier

Ava washed her hands in the sink after having syrup thrown at her by a raging toddler. The mom had apologized profusely and left a significant tip before racing her kid out the door leaving Ava with syrup dripping down her shirt. She turned off the water and was drying her hands with a paper towel when the front door diner chimed and a man walked in. He sat at the counter and picked up a menu. Ava tossed the paper towel in the trash and went up to him, “Hi, can I get you anything?” She asked.

The man put down the menu and Ava felt her heart skip a beat. He had green eyes and dark hair with pieces hanging down just below his eyebrow. He looked at her for a moment and then said, “Just a coffee, please.”

Pausing for half a moment, she grabbed a mug from below the counter and placed it in front of him. Pouring coffee into it, she said “There’s cream and sugar in those containers right there,” pointing next to his elbow, which was propped up on the counter, “And just let me know if you need anything else.”

Giving a small smile that displayed subtle dimples, he said, “I will, thank you. And if you don’t mind me asking, what’s your name?”

“Ava,” she said. “What’s yours?”

“Conner. It’s very nice to meet you, Ava.”

Struck by his charisma, she responded, “It’s very nice to meet you as well, Conner.”

~

For the past three days, Conner had come into the diner and ordered a cup of coffee and sat at the counter for a couple hours. During that time, she learned that he was in town for work. He did something in business, which was beyond Ava's area of expertise. He was supposed to be in Santa Fe for a few weeks and then would head back home to Northern Virginia. She had never even left New Mexico but had heard about all of the trees and the traffic near DC.

"Hi, Conner," Ava said as he sat at his spot at the counter. "Coffee?"

"You're a lifesaver, yes," he said, slipping out of his jacket and putting it on the back of the stool and placing his phone and wallet on the counter.

Ava grabbed a mug and put it in front of him before pouring in some of the freshly brewed coffee from the pot. "How are your meetings looking today?" She asked.

"Not too bad. I had one this morning and then a dinner meeting tonight, so I figured I could come hang out here in between events instead of sitting around my hotel room watching trash television."

Glancing at him, Ava said, "Well, I'm always happy to see you," causing a red tint to blossom on Conner's cheeks.

She wouldn't normally flirt with a customer but no one else was in the diner except for Wyatt, the diner's renowned chef who had worked the kitchen for longer than Ava had been alive. He was like a father figure to her and always made sure she was okay. Ava wouldn't usually flirt in front of Wyatt either but he was currently in the back with his music playing through his portable speaker and was completely unaware of the happenings in the front.

“Believe me, the feeling is mutual,” Conner said. “Do you work tomorrow too?”

“I work in the morning but I’m off in the evening.”

“Well, I don’t have any meetings tomorrow, so I was wondering if you’d like to get dinner with me. We could go anywhere you’d like,” Conner said, looking directly at her, his eyes sincere.

Ava hadn’t gone on a date in a long time. She had gone out with a couple boys in high school but nothing ever became very serious and she’d never had much time for dating after graduation. And usually, she’d say no to spending time with someone she met at work, but when he looked at her, she felt intoxicated and couldn’t focus on anything else.

“Okay, I’d love to,” she said.

Conner’s face broke into a smile, “Great! I can pick you up at your place tomorrow at five.”

“Actually, I can meet you there if that’s okay.” She didn’t want him to see where she lived or possibly run into her mom.

Her mom, Stella, was outgoing, spontaneous, and the only edge she ever waited on was a curb when she was too intoxicated to make it the rest of the way home. She got pregnant with Ava when she was seventeen years old, never told the father, and ran away from her devout Mormon parents. She used the couple thousand dollars that she’d stolen from her parents to buy a trailer off a friend. The piece of junk was practically falling apart but it was a place to live, and it’s where they had continued living.

Brief surprise crossed his face but it didn't faze him. "That's perfect. Can I get your number?"

Smiling, Ava nodded and put her number into his phone under her name. Conner looked down at the new contact. "Ava Reed, I can't wait to take you out to dinner tomorrow night."

~

After getting home from work that day, Ava had spent two hours going through her wardrobe to try and put something together for her date with Conner. Her style was primarily her work uniform and sweatpants and she figured that wasn't quite the right attire for dinner. She had a few dresses and some decent jeans that could be paired with a blouse she had stolen from her mom. But nothing looked how she wanted it to. It all looked too casual or too young since most of her dresses were from high school and she was twenty-one now, soon to be twenty-two. Ava considered going out and buying something but that seemed like way too much effort and too expensive. She pulled on a maroon dress that she had found at a bin in Goodwill and went to look at it in the mirror. The sleeves were too long and stretched out while the rest of it hung from her body. She took it off and sat down on the floor amongst the discarded clothes. Reaching up and grabbing her phone from her bed, she opened Google and looked up 'dinner date dress attire.' All of the women in the pictures looked sleek, put-together, and expensive. Far from what she had in her closet. Ava clicked on her messages and saw Conner's name at the top from when he had sent a text earlier. For a moment, she considered canceling but thought about what she would be doing instead – the same thing she did every night. Going out for one night wouldn't hurt her as long as she could find something to wear. Ava tossed her phone back onto the bed and pulled herself up off the floor. The clothes could be figured out tomorrow. Right now, she

wanted a shower and some food. Grabbing her towel from the back of the door, she went into the bathroom and turned on the water letting the steam surround her.

~

It was the next day and Marsha, the owner of the diner, was picking apart the diner and Ava apart

“The bathrooms need to be checked and cleaned every hour and these look like they haven’t seen a mop in a month,” Marsha said after sticking her head in each bathroom, scrunching her nose up in disgust. Ava followed slowly behind her. “And the front needs to be checked every 15 minutes. Wipe down tables, sweep the floor. It doesn’t matter how busy we are. The front needs to be checked.” Ava didn’t think Marsha really knew how few customers they got but she wasn’t about to say anything. “Don’t get me started on the kitchen. It’s a disgusting. If this were to get inspected, we would never pass. Do you know what happens if we don’t pass, Ava? Hmm? You lose your job and what will you do then, huh? Nothing. You will do nothing,” Marsha snapped, her eyes staring down at Ava in their criticizing manner.

“I understand, Marsha. I’ll make sure everything is how it’s supposed to be,” Ava responded, trying to maintain professional and not snap back at her boss. As much as she despised this job, she needed the money and with the small staff, the hours were available.

“You better. I’ll be back tonight. I want this place spotless,” Marsha said, grabbing her purse from the front booth and walking out the front door.

“Got it,” said Ava to no one.

Once Marsha's BMW had peeled out of the parking lot, Ava went back behind the counter and knocked on the doors in the kitchen. "You know she's gone, right?" she said to Wyatt who had been hiding out in the back. He pushed open the swinging doors and sat at one of the stools at the counter.

"How dare she call my kitchen disgusting. I could eat off the floor of this place if I needed to," said Wyatt, offended by the criticism of his kitchen.

"I would only eat off that floor if I'd been starving for a week or someone paid me a lot of money," said Ava. "God knows the last time you cleaned in there."

"I'm all about surface clean. If it looks clean then it is clean," said Wyatt, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well try to make it a little more surface clean before she comes back in tonight. I have somewhere I need to be and I think she'd enjoy making me scrub the floor with a toothbrush."

"She can't make you scrub anything with a toothbrush. And what do you have to do tonight?"

"I might have a date tonight," Ava said, sheepishly. "And maybe she can't make me but she would absolutely try to," said Ava.

"With who?" Wyatt asked. "Is it that guy who has been coming in here the past few days?"

"Yes... his name is Conner and he's very nice."

“I thought I saw you two making googly eyes at each other from across the counter,” Wyatt joked. “Just be safe, okay? I’ll kick his ass if he doesn’t treat you right,” he said, more seriously.

“It’s just a date. I doubt any ass kicking will be necessary but thank you.” Ava said with a laugh. “Can you make sure Marsha doesn’t call me back here tonight though?”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed on your date,” Wyatt said, drawing out the last word mockingly.

Grinning at him, Ava said, “You are the best, thank you.”

“Whatever. Can we open now, please. Enough talk about your love life.”

“Okay okay, I’ll unlock the door” She switched the sign that was hanging on the glass from closed to open and turned the lock until it clicked. Checking to make sure it was unlocked; she pushed the door open slightly and then let it close.

~

Successfully making it out of the diner in time to shower and get dressed, Ava had gone with a black dress from her mom’s closet and a jean jacket that she found stowed away at the bottom of her drawer paired with black ankle boots and gold jewelry. Considering her options, Ava didn’t think it was half bad as she left her blonde hair down to let it dry in its natural waves. She’d never done much with her hair anyway.

Glancing at the clock and seeing that it was a quarter to five, she grabbed her phone, keys, and wallet then locked the trailer door on her way out. She was meeting Conner at an Italian restaurant about 10 minutes away. Eight minutes later, with no traffic, she pulled into the

parking lot and saw Conner standing at the front wearing chinos with a white t-shirt under an open jacket and converse sneakers. He was leaning against a column with his arms crossed – confident but casual – and butterflies erupted in Ava’s stomach at the sight of him. He was incredibly handsome. Parking in a space, Ava turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car, taking a moment to check the window and make sure everything was in place.

Ava walked up the sidewalk that snaked alongside the building up to the front entrance. “Hey there,” she said, not wanting to startle Conner too much.

He looked up from his phone and his eyes trailed from her face and down, “Hi, Ava. You look beautiful,” he said, meeting her eyes. “I wouldn’t have minded the work uniform but you’re stunning in a dress.”

She felt her cheeks flame, she wasn’t used to getting compliments aside from the old men at the diner who tried to sweet talk their way into a free dessert. “Thank you,” she responded, “You look pretty good yourself.”

“Thank you. I tried to throw something together from the luggage I brought with me,” he said, shrugging slightly.

“Job well done. I’m impressed.”

Conner laughed and moved to open the door, “Ready?”

“I’m ready,” Ava said, walking through the open door into the restaurant.

~

Ava was shocked at how easy the night had felt. Conversation wasn’t rushed or forced and the food and drinks had been delicious. Conner had paid for everything, which Ava had been

extremely grateful for since she knew the meal cost about the same as a week's paycheck. After the restaurant started to signal that they were closing by putting empty chairs on the tables and vacuuming the floor, Conner suggested they go see a movie. It was later than expected, close to 10 pm, but surely every theatre had late night showings. Not wanting to part ways yet, Ava had agreed and they'd gone to see some kind of thriller. It wasn't a genre that she usually watched but it was enjoyable anyway. Halfway through the movie, in a very empty theatre, Conner had shifted ever so slightly to hold her hand – his thumb gently making circles over her skin. His hand in hers felt safe, reassuring. When the movie was over, Conner had driven them both back to the parking lot of the restaurant where Ava had left her car.

Conner turned off the car and got out to open Ava's door. She took his hand to step out and stood there for a moment while he shut the door. She slowly walked the five steps to her car and leaned against the door, knowing that her back was probably now covered in dust. He stood in front of her and reached for her hand, holding it between the two of them. Looking up at him, a halo from the streetlamps surrounding him, Ava said "Thank you for everything tonight. I had a really amazing time."

"Of course. I want to see you again." He stared at her, glancing at her lips and then back up at her eyes. Ava felt her heartrate increase from excitement. Still holding one hand in his, Conner moved his other hand to her jaw, his fingers fanning across the side of her face. Ava looked at him, letting him tilt her chin up ever so slightly, and took a short breath before he moved in and placed his lips on hers. It was a gentle kiss, but Ava felt a warm heat rush through her. Her grip on his hand tightened and she slightly opened her mouth in response, deepening the kiss. Her hands trailed up his arms and she felt his body relax. His hand moved from her jaw to the back of her neck. Ava had never felt a longing like this before. She couldn't focus on

anything but the feel of him and she didn't want to stop kissing him. After what felt like seconds but could've easily been hours, Conner moved back slightly, breathing deeply. "I.. umm.." he stuttered, paused "You are incredible."

Ava reached up to meet his lips and lingered for a moment, "So are you, Conner."

~

Back home after her date with Conner, Ava imagined she was floating. The everyday annoyances didn't carry the same weight as they had eight hours earlier. The stack of textbooks and assignments to finish weren't as daunting and the dread for tomorrow's shift was subdued. Before parting ways, Conner had asked if he could see her again soon and she'd said yes. There was something to look forward to beyond work and school. He gave her some resemblance of hope. Usually, she preferred her own company above anyone else's, but the date tonight had been electric and Ava had never felt so at ease with a person she barely knew. It excited her but scared her at the same time because the feeling was so new. Above anything, Ava was cautious but with Conner she wasn't sure she wanted to be as careful. It wasn't the smartest decision but being responsible for her life and her mom's life, most the time, was exhausting. So, while Conner was in town, she was going to enjoy the time spent with him. Try to avoid overthinking and playing it safe and go with whatever happens.

~

The following day, Ava's head was in her hands and the text floated up from the pages that were spread across the table. After getting home from work, she'd taken a shower to rid her hair and skin of the residue of grease and the smell of burnt coffee, then sat in her spot at the table. She was trying to get her associate's degree with the hope that one day she could get her

bachelors. But for now, an associates would at least be something. Ava had always been a hard worker but academics wasn't something that came naturally. Unfortunately, though, school was the one thing that could offer Ava everything she wanted – a way out. As long as she could keep affording it, she would stay enrolled.

The door of the trailer crashed open and in stumbled Stella who looked like she hadn't been home since yesterday.

“Hey, A,” said Stella as she slammed the front door back into place. “How long you been home?”

“Few hours. I got off work at the diner at 3, so came home after that. Where were you?” Ava asked, knowingly.

“Oh, I was just hanging out with Ricky at Sal's down on the corner”

Sal's was the bar that Stella frequented since it was the closest place to the park where they lived and Ricky, her most recent man, spent most of his time there too.

“We were playing darts and then this asshole threw his drink on me because he's a sore loser. I told him I needed to come home and take a shower because I'd rather walk home then smell like the horse piss that he drinks.”

“Are you staying home after you shower?” Watching her mom sway from one side of the trailer to the other, holding onto the wall for guidance.

“Maybe, I don't know yet. Just let me take a shower, yeah?”

“Okay, yeah. Go take your shower. I'm probably going to heat something up for dinner if you want anything.”

“No no, I’m fine. Not hungry,” said Stella as she went into the back corner of the room to strip off her clothes and toss them onto the floor, no regard for the hamper that was right next to the accumulating pile.

Ava put the books to the side and opened the door to the mini freezer. She pulled out a frozen pizza and tossed it into the microwave for 3 minutes. The whirring of the microwave mixing with the sounds of the shower that had just been turned on.

This was a consistent routine. Stella would come home to shower or grab a change of clothes and then leave to go back to Sal’s or whatever bar would take her money. At some point, Ava would usually receive a call that she needed to come pick up her mom and pay the bill. She’d half carry her mom back to the car and set her up in bed where’d she’d be passed out until the cycle continued again the next day.

Opening the microwave door, Ava took out the steaming pizza and placed it on a plate. She letting it cool for a second before taking a scorching bite of cheese and responding to a text from Conner about making plans.

Chapter 3

Over the next couple of weeks, Ava spent every possible moment with Conner. They spent hours talking, touching, and teasing each other about the little things that didn't matter. But to Ava, it all mattered. Every second with him mattered even more than the last. She had never been in love, at least not a love that was serious, but this felt like falling in love. When he smiled at her, she felt seen and understood, and when he touched her, her skin tingled. He was supposed to go back home in a week after already extending his trip by a few days and Ava was dreading it. She wasn't ready to let him go.

At first, Ava had been hesitant about showing Conner where she lived. It was run down, small, and she didn't want him to think less of her because of how poor she really was in comparison to his nice clothes and work trips. The only work trips she went on was to pick up extra sugar from the convenience store down the road. But Ava really did need to do homework and Conner had promised to not be a distraction while she studied. Even if he was a distraction, it meant a little bit more time together.

When she heard the knock on the door, she took a deep breath and opened the door, avoiding eye contact. Conner stepped inside and let out a low whistle. "This is pretty nice," he said. "I'm not sure what I was expecting but definitely something a lot worse than this based on the description you gave me."

Ava looked at him, eyebrows raised, "Thanks?" She responded, unsure if that was a good thing or not.

"It's a compliment, I promise. In college, one of my friends spent most of his time living in an RV and trust me, that place was a shithole."

“Well, it’s the best I’ve got so I try to make do. And the lack of space keeps my excessive spending habits in check,” Ava said, trying to make a joke.

Conner laughed, “Yeah, I can see that. Alright, do what you need to do and I can do some of my own work too.”

“Okay, just let me grab my stuff.” Ava took off her jacket and put away her bag. She grabbed her laptop and stack of notebooks and textbooks and settled in at the table. Conner sat at the table across from her, their knees slightly touching.

Ava arranged all of her materials as needed and Conner opened up his laptop, glancing up at her every now and then. “You know I can see you looking at me,” Ava said, still writing in her notebook.

“It’s hard to resist.”

Flattered but trying to stay focused, Ava shook her head and continued writing.

They’d both been working for a couple hours when Ava’s phone rang. She answered and Stella was on the other line, calling from Sal’s. She was incoherent and slurring but Ava was able to get the gist of the call – she needed someone to come pick her up because the bartender had cut her off and everyone had left. Ava told her she’d be there soon and hung up the phone.

Placing her phone down on the table, she considered her options. She hadn’t given Conner the full story about her mom but he knew that she drank more than she should and Ava was on her own most of the time. He’d been watching her while she took the call, his expression openly curious about who was on the line.

“Is everything okay?” He asked.

“Yeah. It’s just my mom. She needs someone to pick her up.”

He closed his laptop and slide it away, “Let me come with you. I can help.”

No one had ever really helped her with her mom before. It had always just been her.

“She’s going to be a wreck...” Ava responded, not a no or a yes but a warning.

“That’s okay. She’s your mom. Let me help,” Conner insisted. He stood up and grabbed his phone and wallet from the table.

Knowing she needed to go before her mom hitched a ride from a stranger and ended up dead in a ditch, Ava said, “Alright. Let’s go.”

They pulled up to the front of the bar where Stella was sitting on the ground, staring angrily at the sidewalk. Conner parked the car and Ava rolled down her window. “Hey, Mom.”

Stella looked up at the car, “Took you goddamn long enough.” She awkwardly pulled herself up off the sidewalk and staggered over to the car. Yanking at the handle, the door opened and she fell into the back seat, mumbling to herself about how long she’d been waiting.

“You good?” Ava asked, turning her head to look at the woman splayed across the leather seats, her dress askew and makeup smeared across her face.

“Hmm. Yeah. Good,” Stella responded, wiping her mouth on her hand.

Conner watched in the review mirror, not saying a word. Under her breath, she said to him, “Okay. Let’s get her home.” He put the car into drive and drove around the parking lot to the exit.

For the first time, Stella seemed to realize that someone else was in the car. “Who is this?”

“Mom, this is Conner. We’re friends,” Ava said.

The awareness of a man seemed to sober Stella up some. She sat up and said, “Bullshit you’re friends. Are you fucking?”

Ava’s skin immediately warmed. She looked sideways at Conner who was still staring ahead at the road but was smirking. This was why Ava hadn’t wanted Conner to meet her mom, especially in this state. She lacked a filter and wasn’t usually kind with what she had to say. Or she’d try to keep him for herself. “Jesus, Mom. Seriously?” Ava said.

“If you’re spending time with a man then you’re fucking,” Stella said, bluntly.

Trying to avoid an argument, Ava moved to face forward and turned the music up.

Staring ahead, she felt Conner look at her but she couldn’t meet his gaze. She just wanted to get home and away from all of this. Stella was still mumbling in the backseat, disgruntled about not getting a response. A few minutes later, the car pulled up in front of the trailer and Ava quickly got out and opened the door to the backseat.

“Let’s go, Mom,” Ava said, impatiently.

“I’m coming, Jesus. Give me a sec,” said Stella, clumsily pulling herself out of the car.

Conner had gotten out as well and walked up to the front door. “Ava, do you have the keys?” He asked.

“Yeah, here.” Ava pulled the keys out her bag and tossed them up to him. She grabbed Stella’s purse from the floor of the car. Then followed her up the stairs as she tripped on all three steps while Conner held open the door. “I’ve got her. Thank you for helping. And I’m sorry about everything,” Ava said.

“It’s not a big deal, really. Are you sure you’ll be okay?” Conner asked.

“I’m positive.”

Conner nodded and then lightly kissed her on the cheek and said goodnight before letting the door close behind him. Once he was gone, Ava let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

Stella was sitting at the table, watching her. “So, what’s the deal with him?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Sure doesn’t look like nothing,” Stella responded. “Looks to me like my daughters been whoring around with strange men.”

Ava’s head jerked up and she stared at her mom. “I’m not ‘whoring around.’ I haven’t done anything stupid and he’s leaving to go home soon anyway.”

“Of course he’s not from here. It’s just like my daughter to fuck a man who isn’t even from around here. You’re going to end up getting pregnant and I’m going to get stuck with a baby.”

Ava knew her mom was drunk and usually said things she didn’t mean the years of anger and resentment was surfacing. Since she was a teenager, Ava had taken care of her mom and made sure they had a place to live. She paid the bills. She had a job. And what was Stella doing? Drinking. Every day, she was drinking and spending time doing god knows what with her own strange men. Yet, here she was accusing Ava of being a whore and wasting her life.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ava said, her voice raising. “You think that YOU’RE going to get stuck with a baby? First off, just because I’m spending time with a man doesn’t

mean that I'm going to get pregnant. Second, you barely took care of me when I was a baby. Hell, you can barely take care of yourself now. Do you honestly think that I would leave a baby with you?"

Stella looked at her, unaffected, "Well you seem to think you turned out pretty okay so I must have done something right."

Ava laughed, "I had no fucking choice!" She yelled. "You're so goddamn delusional. Every day I work and do school. But you see me spend time with a guy ONCE and suddenly I'm a slut?"

"Oh, honey. All girls are sluts when it comes down to it."

"You certainly were, that's for sure."

They never talked about her mom's past. Ava knew part of the story but not all the details and knew that it was better not to ask. Stella's face began to flush and she stood up. "I did the best that I could with you. It wasn't my fault."

"Nothing ever is," Ava responded. She was past the point of caring about her mom's feelings. If she wanted to get mad then let her get mad.

"Everything I've done has been because of you. I left home because of you. I bought this home because of you," Stella said, waving her hands around their trailer.

"Are you wanting a thank you? We live in the middle of nowhere in a trailer that you bought years ago and the only reason you left was because of your own selfish reasons. I had nothing to do with that," Ava said. "Besides, I'm the one who pays the fucking bills."

“Oh! Congratulations! Well guess what, you’re only alive because of me so yes, a fucking thank you wouldn’t hurt. Now for the love of god, get me something to eat. I’m starving.”

The words hung in the air. The selfishness and delusion that Ava had been dealing with for years came crashing down around her and the realization of the truth hit her full force. She was an adult and she didn’t have to deal with this. For so long, Ava had stayed because she felt like she had to for her mom. But this had never felt like home and she was fed up with being a babysitter.

“You know what. Make your own dinner. I’m leaving,” Ava said. She walked to the other end of the trailer, pulled out a bag and started throwing clothes in. Her school stuff was already in her backpack and an envelope of hidden cash was stashed between the pages of an old textbook. A place she knew her mom would never look.

When Ava walked back up to the door, Stella stood in the same spot looking dumbfounded.

“You’re not actually leaving,” she said.

“Yes.” Ava said, “I’m done.” And she walked out the door.

Chapter 4

As she stood in front of Conner's hotel room door, Ava realized that she hadn't really thought through any of this. When she'd left, she hadn't had a plan but somehow ended up here. Staring at 248 in silver numbers. Conner could easily turn her away or insist she go home. They'd only known each other for a few weeks, and he had no obligation to let her stay. Even so, she knocked on the door. The sound echoing through the empty hallway. Immediately regretting her decision, Ava backed away from the door and turned to walk back towards the elevator when the door opened.

There stood Conner in gray sweatpants, no shirt, and his hair disheveled. She'd either woken him up or he was close to being asleep. She felt a wave of guilt wash over her.

"Ava?" He asked, running his hand across his face and into his hair.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't be here like this. You obviously just woke up and I didn't mean to overstep. I'm so sorry, again," she rambled.

Still looking perplexed, Conner said, "Hey, you're fine. I just wasn't expecting to see you here tonight. Is everything okay?"

Ava hadn't thought this part through either and didn't know how she was going to explain her situation to him. "Umm... not entirely. I left my mom and need a place to crash."

"Oh, Jesus. Of course, you can stay here." He stood to the side to let her into the room and she hesitantly walked inside.

The only light in the room came from the TV, which was displaying replays from an earlier football game. The bed looked slept in with the sheets askew and the pillows tossed to the

side. Besides the TV stand, against the wall, was Conner's suitcase. Most of the clothes had been piled on top instead of folded with a few pairs of shoes thrown to the side.

Closing the door behind him, Conner turned on the overhead light. "Sorry the room is kind of a mess. I wasn't really expecting company."

The state of the room was the last of her worries. Ava sat on the edge of the bed with her hands folded in her lap. Unsure if he was going to let her stay, she'd had left all of her stuff in her car, so all she had on her was the clothes on her back, phone, and car keys.

"Do you want to talk about what happened? Everything seemed fine when I left." Conner inquired. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Ava suddenly felt drained and she didn't have the energy to recount the fight with her mom. "I'd rather not right now if that's okay. I just want to sleep."

Still looking concerned but not wanting to push her, Conner sat down on the bed next to her and said, "That's okay. I'll be here when you're ready to talk. We can go to sleep if that's what you want."

Even though she was exhausted, Ava felt calm for the first time that night. She'd always been independent but maybe having someone to rely on wasn't such a bad thing. Ava slipped off her shoes and climbed under the covers, letting the softness of the sheets surround her. Conner turned the TV off and moved the sheets back to lay next to her. Ava turned so that her face was against his chest and he put his arms around her, pulling her in close. Overwhelmed by his warmth and the weight of everything that had happened, Ava let herself cry. Rubbing her back with his hand, Conner whispered over and over into her hair that everything was going to be okay.

~

Ava woke up to light streaming in through the curtains. Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes and yawned before realizing where she was and the events of last night. She then noticed that Conner wasn't in the room. Her first thought was that he had left. He had packed his suitcase and gone home when she was asleep. Her stomach began to flutter with panic when the door opened and Conner walked in carrying coffee and bagels. Seeing that she was awake, he said, "You were sleeping so soundly when I woke up that I didn't want to wake you. And I figured you'd be hungry so I went to go get breakfast."

The fluttering in her stomach stopped and was replaced with grumblings of hunger. "You would be right," Ava said, combing her hair with her fingers. She knew she looked like a mess but didn't entirely care. "Thank you for letting me sleep. And for the food."

Handing her one of the cups and a bagel, Conner said, "Course. You needed it."

She took a sip from the cup and felt a little bit better almost instantly. Even when her world was upside down, coffee still helped.

"So, what's your plan?" Conner asked, taking a seat in the chair at the desk.

"I don't really know but I'm not going back." Ava knew this for certain. She'd wasted too much of her life already waiting around for something to happen and taking care of a woman who should be able to survive on her own.

"Are you going to stay in town?"

"Not if I don't have to. This is my chance to do something different. Take control of my life."

Conner paused for a long moment, sipping his coffee and taking a bite from his bagel. Ava could tell he was thinking something but wasn't sure exactly what.

“What if you came with me” Conner asked, making eye contact.

“What?” Thinking she'd misheard him.

Repeating himself, he said, “What if you came to Virginia with me. I know it's soon and kind of insane but I want to be with you and like you said, this is your chance to do something different. You can keep working on your degree and find another job. The diner can survive without you.”

All Ava could do was stare at the man in front of her, this perfect man, who was asking her to move across the country with him. “Are you insane?” She asked, somewhat seriously.

“Maybe I am,” he said. “But I am in love with you and I have never been so certain about anything.”

Ava looked down at the cup in her hand and weighed her options. It was a crazy plan and could go completely wrong but something was telling her to say yes. To jump and not think about the consequences. And she knew that she loved him too.

“I'll go,” Ava said, unsure the words actually came out of her mouth.

Shock spreading across his face and then erupting into a grin, Conner said, “Really? You'll go? Just like that?”

“I guess I'm a little insane too.”

Conner's face lit up and he put his food on the nightstand before sitting next to her on the bed and kissing her – a reason enough to follow him across the country.

Pulling away, Ava said, “I would need to give my notice at the diner. It’ll be sudden and they’ll probably be mad at me but it’s better than just leaving and not saying goodbye. Especially to Wyatt.” Ava said, her head starting to spin with the possibilities.

Still smiling, Conner said, “Yes, of course. I’ll even go with you if you want me to,” he hesitated before asking, “Are you going to tell your mom that you’re leaving?”

Ava considered it for a moment before saying, “No. I’ll tell her once we’re there but I’m not going to give her an opportunity to stop me.” She hadn’t expected it to be so harsh but her mom had always had a way of convincing Ava to do whatever she needed her to do.

“Okay. It’s your decision and she’s your mom,” Conner said.

“Thank you. And I can go by the diner by myself today. Wyatt will be upset enough; it probably wouldn’t help to see your face. Not that I don’t enjoy seeing your face,” Ava said, teasingly.

“Whatever you need to do. I’m just excited about our future together. I didn’t think it was going to be a possibility.”

Amazed at how close freedom felt, Ava nodded and said, “Let’s go home.”

Chapter 5

A Few Months Later

After uprooting her life and moving across the country with Conner, Ava had felt at peace. She had everything she'd ever wanted: independence from her mom, a home that was built into the ground, a man who loved her, and opportunities to become her own person. She was happy.

“Come outside with me,” Conner said. They had been sitting in the living room watching the first snow of the season cover the ground outside. Ava had had plenty of snow days in New Mexico but this one would be her first in Virginia. As the flurries fell onto the grass, Conner tugged on her hand to get her up off the couch. “Please,” he begged, “I want to show you something.”

Laughing, Ava let herself be pulled off the couch. “Okay okay,” she said, still giggling, “I’m coming. Just let me put on shoes and maybe a jacket.”

“Shoes, yes, but you don’t need a jacket. It’ll be quick, I promise.”

Ava pulled on her boots and followed Conner out through the front door, the cold air hitting her as she stepped onto the front steps. He walked to the middle of the lawn and stopped, waiting for her. Crossing her arms to protect from the chill, she went and stood across from him. Snowflakes were sticking to his hair and his cheeks were red from the wind. “Yes?” She asked.

He took her hands into his and took a breath. “Ava, the moment I saw you in that diner, I knew it was over for me. You’re so beautiful and strong and I cannot imagine spending my life with anyone else.”

“Conner...” Ava said, when she realized what he was doing.

“No, let me finish,” he responded, putting a hand onto her cheek. “I know that our relationship has been rushed and that might not work for everyone, but it works for us and I love you more than anything. You have brought more joy into my life than I ever thought possible.” Conner knelt on one knee and pulled out a ring from his jacket pocket, holding it out in front of him he said, “Ava, will you marry me?”

She knelt with him onto the snow-covered grass and she held out her left hand. “Yes. 100 hundred times, yes,” She exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him once he put the ring on her finger as the slow fell around them. There was no hesitation or doubt about marrying him. He was her life.

~

After Conner had proposed, they had decided to elope. Ava didn't want an extravagant wedding, and Conner wanted to get married as soon as possible. So, a week of being engaged, they had gone to the courthouse and made their marriage official.

Ava loved Conner but after three years of marriage, their relationship had become a reality instead of a whirlwind fairytale. He was gone a lot with work and she spent most of her time doing projects around the house. Conner had persuaded her that he could take care of them both financially and the house was older and had a lot of things that needed fixing. Especially if they were going to have a family.

Soon into their marriage, Conner had become insistent that he wanted kids. Ava had never put much thought behind whether she wanted children. As an only child of a single mom, she hadn't been around many younger kids. Instead, she'd been brought along to all of the social

gatherings that her mom went to where she would be given a spot on a couch until someone took her home. The thought of creating a life and shaping it, making sure it become a functioning member of society terrified her. But Ava wanted to give him what he wanted and to thank him for saving her from a life of diners and endless desert.

At first it was exciting – the thrill of starting a new family. Then, after months of negative pregnancy tests, Conner had become discouraged and suggested that they seek medical help. Ava conceded and went to a fertility doctor. They offered medications and proposed that she track habits and diets before starting fertility treatments. It was two years of monitoring schedules, recognizing how her body felt, sex when she was ovulating, and medications that took over her hormones. She was constantly tracking how her body functioned and hoping that something would work. So far, nothing had helped.

Chapter 6

Conner wanted to re-paint the house since there hadn't been a new coat of paint on the walls since he'd bought it. Ava didn't think the house needed re-painted, but she liked the idea of having creative decisions when it came to the house. As it turned out, they had different artistic visions when it came to paint colors. Ava wanted bolder colors. She'd never been able to decorate a room or an apartment, so she wanted something colorful and welcoming. On the other hand, Conner preferred subtle colors like grays and creams that were easier to match furniture to. They'd spent hours looking at different paint colors and trying to decide which ones to choose. Eventually, they had a selection paint cans and all the necessary tools needed for the project. Ava had wanted to hire painters since she had no experience with painting a house, but Conner had promised that they could do it together in a weekend. It wasn't a very big house and it would be an opportunity to spend time together.

At 7 am the alarm started beeping and Ava fumbled for her phone to press snooze. They were painting today so she wanted just five more minutes of sleep. She rolled over to face Conner but saw that his side of the bed was empty. Hoping that he had just gotten up early to make coffee, Ava closed her eyes for a few more minutes before grabbing her phone and turning off the alarm. She saw a text from Conner saying that he had to go take care of something at work but he would be back soon and she should go ahead and start without him. Annoyed at his early morning disappearance, Ava pulled back the sheet and climbed out of bed. She didn't bother showering since she was going to be covered in paint by the end of the day anyway.

While the coffee was brewing, she set up all of the paint cans, brushes, rollers, and plastic sheets in the living room. She figured they could start at the front of the house and work backwards.

A few hours later and Ava was done with half of the room. Conner still wasn't back, so she sent him a text asking when he would be back and letting him know her progress. Putting her phone to the side, away from the paint, she made herself a bagel with cream cheese and sat on the living room floor admiring her work. It wasn't professional by any means and she still needed to clean up the edges, but it wasn't half bad for her first paint job. Finishing off her bagel and wiping the crumbs off her lap, Ava checked her phone again but there weren't any new notifications. She knew he had to work but it was a Saturday and he had promised to help with the painting. Besides, who needed to have a meeting before 7 am on the weekend? Starting on the next wall, Ava could feel herself getting more annoyed the longer she thought about it and the more she painted. He was always at work and she was stuck here doing a project that had been his idea in the first place.

Around 5 pm when it started getting dark, there was still no word from her husband. Ava was tired, angry at Conner, and had paint stuck to the strands of her hair, so she put away the paint and got into the shower. Thirty minutes later, with the paint scrubbed from her skin and washed out of her hair, Ava stepped out of the glass stall into the steam-filled bathroom. She put on a rope and wrapped her hair up into a towel before going into the bedroom where Conner was sitting on the bed.

Before he could say a word, Ava said "I don't want to hear it. Whatever kind of apology you're going to try and throw at me right now, don't bother."

"I'm going to anyway. I'm sorry, okay?" Conner said, his hands folded in his lap. "I know I said that we would paint together and I wouldn't have work, but something came up and I needed to take care of it. I didn't realize that it was going to take all day."

Ava leaned against the wall with her arms crossed. “I don’t care. You left and I painted the living room. It’s fine.”

“You do care. I can see it.”

Ava shook her head and walked out of the door. She didn’t have the energy for an argument right now and she was too mad to even look at him.

Conner followed her and said “Let me make it up to you. There’s a work event tomorrow night. Will you go with me? It’s an auction, so there’s going to be dinner and drinks. We can dress up, make a date out of it. Other people from work will be there along with some of my clients,” he paused and then said “Please? I really want you there with me.”

She was angry but knew these kinds of things were important to him. “Give me until the morning, okay?” she said, her back still to him. “Let me decide in the morning.”

He put his hands up as a surrender. “That’s fair. I’ll ask again in the morning.”

~

Ava went to the auction, but she wished she had stayed at home instead. The entire event was out of her league with the constantly flowing wine and the lavish attire. She had attended other work events with Conner before and they were all similar; while Conner talked business with those around him, Ava stayed at their table slowly sipping her wine and occasionally making small talk with the other wives.

Later in the evening, after the dinner had been served and before the live auction began, Ava drifted over to the silent auction table. None of the items that were being sold were things she could imagine bidding on, but it was still fun to look at them and see what other people were

paying. As she moved from one item to the next, she glanced up to see Conner standing in the corner of the room, away from the rest of the party, with a woman. Ava didn't recognize her but she was wearing a deep purple gown that flowed onto the floor seamlessly and her long hair that was curled into waves covered the exposed skin on her back. They hadn't seen her yet but as she watched her husband and this woman, Ava felt her stomach twist. They weren't doing anything other than standing next to each other and talking, but she felt uncomfortable with the entire situation. Walking back to the table, Ava sat down in her seat and smiled at the other wives and hoped it looked genuine. She took a sip of her wine and looked up as Conner walked up and took his seat next to her.

“Sorry, I was talking to one of my coworkers about this deal that we're both working on. We're trying to get it done this week, but there's some paperwork that still needs to be filled out and filed.”

“Which one?” Ava asked.

“What?”

“Which coworker?”

Conner scanned the room and pointed at the woman she'd seen him with. “The one right there. Her name is Meredith,” he said.

“She's pretty,” Ava said, she took another sip before continuing, “Is all that paperwork going to mean more late nights?”

“Possibly but we're trying to get it done.”

Ava nodded and turned away from him just as the live auction began.

~

In the car an hour later, Ava still couldn't get rid of the sickening feeling in her stomach as though something was wrong.

"Did you have fun?" Conner asked.

"Yeah," Ava responded.

"I wanted to bid on something, but I figured I should let the clients have the nicer items. Let them spend their money instead of me. Besides, I get to go on a lot of those kinds of trips for work so I'm still able to travel."

"Yeah, absolutely," Ava said. Not wanting to talk anymore, she leaned over and turned up the music.

Conner glanced at her and turned the music back down. "Is everything okay?" He asked.

"I'm fine."

"I don't believe you."

"That's fine. Don't believe me." All she could think about was Meredith. The ease and the closeness between her and Conner.

"Can you just tell me what's wrong. I'm tired of this passive aggressive, cold shoulder you keep giving me."

"I'm not. I'm fine."

"Jesus, okay. Are you on your period? Are you pregnant?"

Ava looked at him for a long moment and then said, “No, I’m not.” And turned to face the window.

The last time that Ava had taken a pregnancy test was a couple months ago when her period had been off by about two days. She’d gone to the pharmacy on the corner and bought three pregnancy tests. The possibility of finally being pregnant was exhilarating. She had started to think up the various ways that she could reveal the news to Conner and how excited he would be about their first child. She could do one of those funny t-shirts about being a dad or a card. Instead, he came home that evening to her curled in a ball on the bathroom floor, holding the negative result. As she cried, Conner had sat next to her on the white tile in silence.

They hadn’t been seriously trying to get pregnant since then, and they had mostly avoided talking about the situation at all. Ava still wanted a family with Conner, she still loved him but it was hard feeling like a disappointment. Like she was failing at giving him the one thing he wanted.

Facing the window with the music turned up, Ava spent the rest of the car ride home with a pit in her stomach.

Chapter 7

A couple weeks later, just past 11 pm, Conner opened the front door, waking up Ava from the doze she'd fallen into on the couch. As she sat up, the blanket that had been around her shoulders fell into her lap.

"Sorry sorry, I didn't expect you to still be in here," Conner whispered apologetically, setting his briefcase next to the stairs and taking off his shoes.

"You're okay. I thought you'd be home sooner so I figured I'd wait up for you. I don't get to see you much in the evenings anymore," Ava responded, yawning and running her fingers through her hair.

"I know. It's been some late nights lately but since you're up, can we talk about something?" Conner asked, taking a seat next to her on the couch.

"Yeah, what's up?"

Rubbing his hands on his pants and looking off to the side, Conner said, "I don't really know how to start but I need to tell you and maybe this isn't the right way to do it but you deserve to know. Just, remember that I never wanted to hurt you. It just happened."

Ava could feel every nerve in her stomach ignite into wave of anxiety as her hands lost all feeling in them. "What happened? What did you do?" she asked, slowly. She knew she didn't want the answer but was going to hear it anyway.

Conner took in a deep breath and let it out before saying, "I cheated on you."

Ava was sure she was going to pass out. All of her muscles went weak and there was a buzzing in her ears. No longer feeling cold, she tossed the blanket to the side and stood up,

distancing herself from him. Conner reached for her, putting a hand on her arm. “Ava, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t touch me,” Ava said, yanking her arm out of his grasp. “Don’t touch me.”

A look of regret and sorrow passed through his face as he stood up in front of her.

“Please listen to me. I’m sorry. You can’t imagine how sorry I am.”

All the pieces started to fit together in Ava’s mind. The late nights and the stupid smile on his face as he climbed into their bed when he thought she was asleep. The texts that would flash across his phone when he’d turn the screen away from her. The woman in the purple dress, Meredith. She already felt sick but needed the details. “When did it start? And with who?” Ava asked, taking slow steps in a circle around their living room.

“It started a few months ago with someone I work with, Meredith,” Conner said, as he watched his wife pace around the room.

She knew it. As soon as she saw them together at the auction, she knew in her gut that there was something going on.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Conner responded.

Her voice raising, Ava scoffed “Yes you do. Tell me.”

“I wanted something more and she was there. She wanted me,” Conner murmured.

“And I didn’t? What am I supposed to be to you? Your roommate? Someone you picked up off the street to cook you meals and keep your bed warm at night? Am I just a stand in until your real wife can move in?”

“No, of course not. You’re my wife. My only wife. I just.. I got lost and forgot what our marriage meant. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t keep this a secret from you anymore.”

“You could keep this secret from me for months. What changed? Why make the decision to tell me now?”

Conner stared at the floor, unable to meet Ava’s eyes. “Meredith is pregnant.”

Fury ignited her skin. “Pregnant! Are you fucking kidding me?” Ava yelled. “We tried for years. YEARS. But you can fuck this bitch a few times and she’s pregnant just like that?”

Running his hand over his air, Conner said “this isn’t her fault.”

“No shit this isn’t her fault. You’re the one who stuck your dick where it didn’t belong!” Ava exclaimed, throwing her hands up.

“I’m sorry, okay but what happened happened and I can’t do anything about it now.”

“Are you serious? ‘What happened happened’ and that’s your explanation for this? You sit there and tell me that it just happened and there’s no way to change it. Bullshit.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Ava,” Conner’s voice raising ever so slightly, the apologetic tone gone and replaced with defense.

All Ava could do was stare at him. This man who she’d spent three years of her life with. Their relationship had moved quickly, motivated by the affection and exhilaration of doing something daring and unexpected. He had picked her up when she was drowning and charmed his way to a wedding from there. Conner had surrounded her with sweet words and promises of a more fulfilling life. A life that she desperately wanted – one away from her past and her mom. He was safe and stable and had wanted all the same things she wanted in her life: family, a

loving home, and security. But now, she looked at him with guilt and anger painted onto his face and couldn't quite figure out how she'd gotten here. How she'd let herself fall for the possibility of freedom only to give him power over her.

“I want you to tell me that you aren't going to have anything to do with it.” Ava said.

Conner stood up, slowly. “Don't be stupid.”

Ava had never felt this kind of anger. Her skin was warm and she wanted to scream until her voice gave out. “Stupid” Ava repeated. “You consider the fact that I don't want my husband raising another woman's kid is stupid.”

He walked to the center of the room, his back towards her, before turning around and staring at her for a long moment. “It's my kid too.”

“But you're my husband.”

“Ava, let's be honest, our marriage has gone to shit. We hardly ever talk and when we do, it's as though I'm talking to a stranger. You're so distant all the time and I can't get through to you.”

“Maybe that's because you're never home. You don't even try to know me anymore and only focus on yourself and this bitch of yours.”

“Stop calling her a bitch”

Ava laughed in disbelief, “Did she know that you're married? That's she's been screwing someone's husband?”

“Yes, she knew.”

“Great. Then I can call her anything I want because she knowingly inserted herself in my marriage and fucked up my life.”

“Your life was fucked up way before Meredith. I mean, come on, why do you think I married you?” Conner asked. “You were so desperate to get away from your mom that you latched on to any possibility of leaving. I wanted a beautiful wife who could give me what I wanted and I thought that was you. You wouldn’t push back against anything I’d say at the risk of me leaving you behind. So, when you shut yourself off and we became strangers, I turned to Meredith. So, guess what Ava, you’re the only one who loses out in this situation because I’m leaving you and you will be on your own.”

The world around her was collapsing. Her husband was leaving her for a woman who was pregnant with his kid. She had given him everything she had and he was leaving her. Now, there was nothing left for anyone to take. Black crept into the peripherals of her vision and without realizing it, Ava grabbed the bat and swung.