

REDEMPTION

CHRIS'S STORY

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FOR HIM PUBLISHING

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CONTENTS

Disclaimer	V
1. I Was Supposed to be Here for You	1
2. Is This Where I'm Supposed to Talk About Snow?	32
3. Back to Brother Sister Bonding--New Orleans Style	59
4. I'm Not Sure If This Is the Right Place, but...	72
5. Am I Meant to be Alone?	85
6. Can I Tell You What Happened from My Point of View?	118
7. Something Feels Off	139
8. What's Meant to Be Will Be	161

9. Wait for Me	186
10. I Loved Every Second of it	205
11. Probably Should Have Seen That Com- ing	237
12. Happily, Ever After	263

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DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction.

All names, characters, businesses, places, and incidents are either the products of the authors creativity or strictly meant to be used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental and/or for entertainment purposes only.

WARNING-This story talks about tough topics that many people chose to avoid. These scenes are not meant to downplay the difficulties of these topics, glorify them, or make light of them. The reason they are being addressed is because these things *do* happen and pretending that they don't doesn't prevent the situations from occurring. If anything, talking about such things openly will hopefully offer

a bit of hope, and if nothing else, people who have experienced similar situations will know that others see them, and that they are not alone.

Please be advised that by no means is the author trying to offer advice or counseling, the only thing meant to be taken away from this story is that the Almighty can move/heal/restore *anything* if it is His will, and we give it all to Him. Again, this story is not *real* it just speaks about real life things and possible situations.

1

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I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HERE FOR YOU

CHRIS

Hey there—It's me again.

Do you remember when I hijacked my sister's story?

It was chapter 23 of book 6 in case you forgot. You probably remember that I'm not great putting all the details into words, but if this were a movie, I'd have you on the edge of your seat, feeling as if you were a part of the world I'm sharing with you. I have the visual thing down, and I enjoy setting up a scene to show what's really going on.

I genuinely have no idea how to share my story and would have been okay with not saying a word, only the part of my life that I am currently living is worth talking about. So, now...what's the best way for me to get you there?

I think I need to bring us back to the trip that healed things between my sister and me. The trip that reactivated our wonder twin powers. Each time I struggle with whether or not I should share or keep it locked away, I remind myself that healing is messy, but the end result is usually worth it so...I'm willing to give it a shot.



When I asked Riley if I could go with her when she told my parents she needed to bail again, I was desperate. I had no clue what I was supposed to be doing with my life. I can't stress enough how much relief I felt the moment she said, *it was okay* for me to tag along. To say we had a strained relationship at that time would be grossly underestimating just how bad things had gotten between us.

I'm not trying to beat a dead horse. Wait, that's a bad pun but, unfortunately—it's fitting. Anyway, things were how they were because of me. I can admit it now, looking at it from a place of healing. Riley already told you about the younger years, and you know about Marybeth, but you don't fully know what happened between Marybeth and *me*.

In Riley's story she left out that she *did* end up writing an original song about the way she was feeling after she belted out her modified version of "*Good for You*" at karaoke. The song she wrote herself came out almost as if she had been drafting the lyrics since the moment, she realized that the life she planned for, was ripped away from her. The second she finished her song; she just broke. What she had come up with on the spot had all the right emotions, and yet it was painfully clear just how much she loved Mikey because even her heartbreak song was kind. She was hemorrhaging her emotional pain by getting the song out, but it clearly only made her feel worse.

Or so I had thought. I walked over and got down on my knees so I could hold her while she cried. When I asked if she was okay, she admitted something I hadn't expected.

"You were right. I needed to get it out, but Chris, what is wrong with me? I have tried to write my own music nearly all of my life, and the only times I have been able to is when I lost Brian Daniel, and now, when Mikey killed every part of me on the inside. I never wanted to write that song, and I will never play it again."

"Did it help any, though. You were fighting your feelings, and then you sang karaoke, and it clearly sparked something. You think maybe it's because the song you sang out there was meaner than you wanted it to be?"

"When I sang, '*Good for You*,' I was trying to let go of some of my anger, yeah. When I walked back here, I felt horrible. He only did what I pushed him to do. I just don't know how to stop loving him. I never want him to feel any part of the way I do. And never because of me. Do you think you or I will ever be truly happy? How did we end up getting to

a place where we needed to run away when we grew up surrounded by so much love it's a bit insane?"

"You know. I was shocked that you knew a song with a little bite to it. Apart from the ones you learned watching too many kid shows growing up." I teased a bit to get her to laugh. When it was clear she was thinking about her and Snow embarrassing me at Benny's, I winked at her and continued. "The rest, I'm pretty sure we will figure out in time. Maybe that's the whole point of this trip. Maybe the two of us learning to lean on one another again will help us figure out where we belong and what's next."

There was a moment of silence before my sister asked, "You didn't post it, did you?"

"I live-streamed you at the club, but only people we know had access, and the song you just wrote, I shared with mom." I left out the part where I knew our mom was close enough for her best friend to overhear, because I really hadn't done it to go against my sister. The look she shot my way before she rested her head on my shoulder caused me to feel a little remorse, but there was no way to undo either, so I held her, assuring her that it would all be okay.

**In Riley's version of our talk in the hotel room, she admitted to asking me who broke my heart. I answered, but I didn't offer any real details until the above stuff took place and she killed it, karaoke-style and then post semi-privately. She didn't go into much detail about the night we talked about all the hard stuff, but I am going to because it shows the real, open honesty we shared with one another. I'm sure her reasoning was to allow me to share in my time, and I appreciate her for letting me be the one to tell my story, my way.*

"So, Marybeth?" Riley asked, and it was clear she wasn't judging when she had every right to.

"Yeah. I really thought I loved her, and she destroyed me. I'm not going to blame her fully for the way I acted, but she did have a hand in making me treat you even worse. She even came between Wyatt and me." I began, and when she asked me for more

details as she curled next to me like she used to when we were little, I looked up at the ceiling, blew out a breath, and let it all out.

“I figured out that I liked her more than just because we all hung out all the time when I was about eleven or twelve. When I told her, she started flirting with Mikey and Wyatt. I knew she was messing with Mikey because of you, and then both of them because she knew it bothered me. She loved making me jealous.

“Before you ask why I put up with it, I did it because she offered me just enough so I would play her game. She would tease me. Ri, I am telling you, she knew exactly how to get to me. The first time she kissed me was in the bathroom at the Edwards. She snuck in, and I knew she wasn’t kissing them then. Of course, I liked thinking we had this secret thing between us. That night in the basement, when we were playing truth or dare, everything just blew up. I slipped and told her that I loved her when we were in the pool house bathroom, kissing like we had done so many times since the first time. No one heard, but

she decided to respond by testing me to see whether I was telling the truth.

“After you left, she had sex with Wyatt, and then me. I was hurt. Nah, I was pissed. But I was also thirteen and full-blown lost to my hormones. She told me she thought I was too easy and dull. She said I was like a puppy dog. Actually, she said I was at the stage where people regretted their decision to get a dog in the first place.” I ended up taking a breath and reaching for my water to push away the feelings from the past that were trying to resurface as I shared, for the first time, what happened back then.

“I am so sorry, Chris. It’s not true. I promise I’ll be quiet so you can tell me the rest, but I needed you to hear me tell you that it isn’t true.” Riley insisted, and I knew she was crying, but I didn’t deserve her sympathy, so I shot back, “Riley, I treated you like garbage, so I don’t deserve your tears.”

Thankfully, she just squeezed me and waited to see if I was going to continue.

“The night I was beaten down to my lowest was the night she made me watch her with Wyatt. She

claimed it wasn't planned, but she kept telling me how I was almost as good as he was, only not quite. She sent me a text telling me to meet her at the pool house, only when I got there, they were right in the middle of it. I knew Wyatt had no clue what she had planned, but then she...she looked at me and told me to watch, so I could learn *how a real man does it*. I was so angry, but I was embarrassed even more.

"Wyatt...Wyatt stopped right after she said it, put her in her place, and said he was never talking to her again. I think he apologized—he mumbled something my way, so I just figured he did, and then he left without even finishing. We never talked about it again because what do you say? We just went through the motions. What happened, though, messed things up between us, but we just ignored that, too.

"After Wyatt no longer gave her attention—let alone even a glance in her direction, she learned how to play nice for just long enough that I would believe her, and then she would knock me down. She really got her thrill when she would have me meet her someplace, only to have me walk in right while

she was in the middle of having sex with someone else. She begged me to allow other people to join us, claiming I just wasn't enough for her. It's hard not to believe the things she was saying when she pretty much told everyone at school."

"Oh, Chris. I really am sorry that happened to you. What she did was in no way okay. You were a child, and she abused you," my sister offered, clearly upset for what she believed had happened to me.

"It wasn't abuse. I was having sex, Riley. I wanted to be with her. Besides, she was only a year older than me, so I hardly think that she fits the description of an abuser." I tried to clarify, but Riley sat up, took my hand in hers, and calmly explained, "That's not how that works. You may have been convinced that you wanted her, and in that moment, I believe you most certainly did. Hormones have a way of blurring lines, though. As far as you loving her, only you know that, and I will never say something stupid or try to claim you can't truly love someone until you hit a certain age. The things she did, the way she treated you, Chris, that's abuse. She bullied me all

along, but it was nowhere near as harsh and horrible as the things she said and did to you.”

“She wasn’t wrong. Wyatt turned out to be Mr. Do Um Right while I couldn’t figure out how to keep the one person I was with satisfied.” I retorted, hating the fact that my sister was trying to make me into a *victim*.

“No. No, first of all, you were a child. And before you try to tell me again that Wyatt wasn’t affected, you are wrong. People aren’t supposed to jump from person to person like he did. We aren’t created like that. I know that the world tells you otherwise, but it isn’t true, Chris.” Before she could say anything else, the jerk I had been to her for years came out.

“What do you know about any of it, Riley. You are a virgin, and the only person you ever even kissed for *real* was Mikey.” Riley cringed at my words and pulled away from me as if I had hit her. Instantly, I regretted it and jumped off the bed, made my way toward her side, and fell before her on my knees as I apologized profusely.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t mean that. Old habits die hard, and while it’s no excuse, I don’t want to be this way anymore. Please, forgive me.”

Riley nodded her head and knelt down with me on the floor. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me while she stroked the back of my head the same way my mom would.

“Let’s go sit on the porch,” Riley offered, as she sniffled back tears. Trying to make light of the situation, she added, “I think we get our young and dumb stuff from mom,” and then she laughed.

“Do you ever wonder what life would have been like if our dad hadn’t died?” I asked, and when Riley sat down on the chaise beside me, I rolled on my side so I could look at her while she stared at the waves crashing onto the sand. It was dark, but there was enough moonlight to allow me to see my sister, and for my sister to look out at the sea.

“Anytime I do, I feel bad because I like our life. I sort of get why mom struggled so much in ways, but none of the things I can imagine about life in Texas with Christopher ever make sense,” she shared.

“But he was the one who found Spring View. They were supposed to move there together,” I reminded, and Riley turned onto her side, mirroring me before she added, “Yeah, but if they had come together, then we wouldn’t have Lucas, or any of his family. The only thing that may have been is Uncle Josh meeting Aunt Beth. I feel bad saying that, but it’s all I know. I couldn’t for a single second think of having to live life without Lucas and *all* the others.”

“I get it. I just wonder sometimes what it would have been like. Not because I don’t appreciate what we have. I think maybe mine has to do with wanting to know if things would have been different when the whole Marybeth thing took place. I didn’t feel like I could have talked to Lucas about it the same way I may have been able to if our dad were alive.”

“Hum. I suppose that may be a valid thought, but it doesn’t work fully. If Christopher were alive, who’s to say we would have ever met Marybeth or Mikey? And you didn’t talk to Lucas, but I don’t believe it’s because he isn’t our biological father. Talking to any dad about sex, I’m quite positive, isn’t exactly an easy thing to do.” Riley offered, and as much

as I could see that she was right, I hadn't allowed myself to think those things, mostly because I was looking for a scapegoat.

"Chris. Why didn't you talk to Uncle Josh, Mo, or even Dr. Edwards? It's easy to look back and try to find something to blame for the bad things, or wish for different things altogether, but there's no way of knowing what might have been. You also don't have to stay where you are, either. What you've done, or what happened in the past doesn't dictate who you are or what comes next for you. You get to decide and change course." My sister assured me, and for so long, I felt as if there was no way I'd be able to escape who I had become. But the way she looked at me while telling me things I hadn't believed to be true for myself, offered me hope.

"I really don't know why I let Marybeth come between us. I hope you know that she was jealous of you, Ri." I informed, and the look my sister threw my way suggested she wasn't the least bit convinced.

"I heard that excuse a lot in regard to all of the people who hated me. I don't believe it, and hear-

ing it again doesn't make it any better," she stated, almost as if she felt nothing.

"It's true. Even though it won't do a lick of good to change how terrible it must have been for you, there's something about you that makes people uncomfortable with themselves. You are talented and smart, and you never chase after people's approval. That's a mirror that most people can't handle seeing their own reflection in."

Riley and I ended up falling asleep on the porch for a bit before I woke up a few hours later and carried my sister to bed.



I went live each day while Riley and I made our way to New Orleans. Each time, there were new people logging on so they could *follow* our journey. Mikey was one of the people who was watching us along with everyone else we knew in Spring View. I felt bad that we had everyone blocked (apart from our parents), but we both needed the time we were spending with one another to be free from outside distractions.

I promised Riley that if she allowed me to vlog our time together things wouldn't always be heavy, but sometimes, the people following would ask questions that brought her into the deep. The most beautiful thing about my sister's responses was that she was always honest, no matter how much it may have hurt her in the process.

One of the the times that I went live was when we were driving from one beach to the next and a follower asked, *'What was it like when the two of you were in the midst of your sibling rivalry?'* I read the question out loud and wished I hadn't the second I finished and was even about to tell Riley she didn't have to say anything, but she answered as she focused on the road ahead.

"It was the closest thing to what I am feeling right now but spread out over way too many years. Chris and I—what we had, was my favorite thing until we met kids close to our age who didn't know us. Things stayed as close to the same as they could until those kids started throwing rocks to test if we were strong enough to handle the onslaught of their attacks. We

were children, so we didn't know we needed to cling to one another, and instead, we started to turn toward the ones who were trying to break us, which, of course, only weakened our bond. I don't believe that my brother meant to hurt me, as much as I know that I never wanted to hurt him. Of course, I can only speak for myself.

"I remember the first few times I would rush home to tell my brother about something or seek him out because I needed him to be my strength, only to find that we no longer had that bond. That's why I said it was similar to how I feel now. All loss is difficult. You literally have to figure out how to move on without a person you depended on in some way for however long you had them with you. It doesn't have to be death that causes your loss, either. In fact, I can say with all honesty that death may be easier in a way. When the person you lost is living, you have to deal with the realization that life goes on and cares very little about how it makes you feel. What once was but no longer is just seemingly mocks you and your romanticized plans that you depended on to be

true, only to find that you were the biggest fool ever to believe in such ridiculousness.”

I don’t believe she was finished, but I ended up cutting her off, feeling the need for her to clarify what she had said.

“Ri, death is final. What you are saying is only true because you are heartbroken. You can’t possibly believe that death is easier.”

“I said, maybe. I was getting there. And yeah, Chris, I am devastated that my life—the one I thought about since I was a child is no longer...hold on. I need to pull over. I hate this deep stuff, but if it stays inside, I’m actually afraid what may come of it.” She explained as she made her way over to a rest area and parked before she turned to look at me so she could pick back up where she left off.

“Anyway, where was I? Oh, right, I was blabbering on about loss. As if I could truly forget. So, yeah, death leaves you with all of the things that were stolen, and that sucks tremendously. But when the person is alive, you still feel those same things, only you get to watch them move on without you. You get to see how easily you were replaced, and then you feel

resentment trying to work its way into your repertoire of emotions, and that, that taints and ruins even the good parts that make the loss hard to begin with.

“Each time I watched you live your life as if I was your enemy broke my heart. I was always happy for you when you did well in sports, when you made friends so easily, and yet there was a part of me that resented you for leaving me behind. What I am facing now makes me question all the things I never picked up while we were growing. I ask myself over and over, what’s wrong with me? Why am I so easy for people to leave? I can’t do this— Please stop, Chris.” My sister cried out, and I ended the live instantly.

“Riley. I am sorry. Oh, man.” I told her, meaning it, but needing to do something more. I had no clue she would end up in a place so dark and completely vulnerable, and all I knew was that she needed to be reminded that she was *not* alone. I was there, and I was never going to let her face things by herself again.

I got out of the Jeep and ran to her side so I could hold her. When she was in my arms, I tried to ease some of her pain the best I could.

“Listen, I can’t take back what I did, no matter how much I wish I could, but I can promise I will never do it again. I also need you to see that as long as you are alive, things can change. Riley, you are not alone. No matter what happened with Mikey, this is not the end for you. You can’t give up hope. Promise me, you won’t give up,” I assured and then begged.

Once we were in a better place and Riley was ready to get back on the road, she asked me to drive, and then she asked, “Do we call mom and dad so they aren’t freaked out, or do we go live again. This time, I get to hold the camera.”

“I think we call mom and dad, and I will make a post letting the people who were watching know you just needed a break. I will also insist on them trying to keep the questions more on the lighter side.”

After we assured our parents that we were fine, Riley rested her head against the doorframe of the Jeep and closed her eyes. Fifteen minutes had passed

before she said in a resolved tone, “I believe that hope is a bit of a two-timer. It offers a glimmer of positivity when things seem too bleak. On the surface, that seems like a good thing, but sometimes, it’s detrimental. Hope, when the path you are on isn’t meant to be, regardless of how much you want it, is nothing more than a liar.”

I hated that she was right, but I still didn’t believe that she was in a position to lose hope. She may not believe that there was a happy ending for her and Mikey, but I had a feeling she was wrong. Regardless, I said nothing and allowed her to drift off to sleep.

There was more to our road trip than just a bunch of tears. The emotional moments helped build back up the trust between us much quicker because we were both sharing things that left us emotionally naked and vulnerable. What helped us get to the place of feeling as if all was right in our twin world was when the fun, carefree moments that had always come so

easily between us, showed up so we could live them out once again.

We chased one another, played catch, buried each other in the sand, but most of all, we laughed. Some days we laughed so much my cheeks hurt when we'd end up back in our room. Each night we fell asleep on the patio, and each morning, I would wake and carry my sister to bed before the sun would rise.

It was odd at first, being able to stay up until we could no longer keep our eyes open, not having to worry about being awake to work on the ranch. Waking up without an alarm or roosters crowing was weird, but I learned pretty quickly how nice it was.



“Hey Crissy...If you could be any animal, which would you pick and why?” Riley asked when we decided to play an Ask Me Anything game. The way we chose to play it changed after many times we found our answers were the same, so we would ask, and then on the count of three, we would say our answer at the same time.

“Okay, got mine. Ready...One...Two...Three,” I ended up saying, “Wild horse,” whereas my sister

said, "Leighton's horse," and that is why we ended up playing it the way we had. Before we changed it, it was hard to believe that hearing what the other person said wasn't influencing our answers since, as I said, we had so many things in common.

"I get your answer. Being wild and free, especially as a horse, seems like a pretty sweet life." Riley agreed with a smile.

"Being owned by Leighton is for sure a sweet life. She doesn't hold back when it comes to spoiling the ones she loves." I returned, also understanding why she answered the way she had.

"Ri...have you ever checked to see if mom found the place, we used to hide all of our candy wrappers?" I asked, and when she shook her head before adding, "No, but I was so scared we were going to get caught when we moved from the apartment to GiGi George's."

We both laughed a little while we reminisced about the good times, we had growing up. Almost as if she somehow knew what we were talking about, my phone rang. I laughed even harder when I let out, “It’s mom,” before I answered, and as soon as Riley heard our mom’s voice, she asked, “Were your ears ringing, Mom?”

“What? Wait, were you two talking about me again? I think you may be having far too much fun at my expense,” she teased, and that was the best part about it. She was indeed teasing. The fact that Riley and I were mending things that our mom wished had never been damaged between us was all that mattered to her. If poking fun at her helped, she was clearly on board.

“Actually, it’s not about you, really. We were wondering if you ever found anything that...hum. How do I say it without giving it away in case you don’t know yet?” I tried to ask without blowing it. I nearly choked, and Riley snorted, when our dad called out, “If you’re talking about the evidence you hid in the base of the fake plant—I not only found them, I kept

getting rid of them for you after I did. Mom still may not even know.”

“Wait, Daddy...did you find it when we moved?” Riley pressed, while Mom kept asking for the details as if she could go back and dish out punishments or something, even though she was still laughing.

When our dad made a sound to let us know that it was indeed when he first learned of the discarded proof of our contraband candy heists, I questioned him as to why he never told on us.

“How could I tell. You were stealing it from my hiding place in the truck. If I asked, I would have to admit that I, too, was sneaking the stuff mom had banned, and I didn’t want to jump into a situation where I would potentially have to lie to her.”

Riley and I were both laughing over our newfound appreciation for our father’s own participation in our sneaky childhood shenanigans. The timing was perfect when Riley pulled up to a gas station just as our mom more assertively demanded to be let in on the big secret.

“Chris...You have to be the one to tell her. If it’s me or Dad, she will not stay in this good of a mood.”

Riley teased, and as much as my mom wanted to be hurt by her daughter's playful teasing, there was no denying the truth behind it. I was a Momma's boy, and I knew how to present things in such a way to keep Elizabeth Walker from losing her cool.

Our mother took the news of her children and husband lying to her while sneaking treats rather well. As much as I wasn't convinced, it was only because I was the bearer of truth, my sister believed it enough for the two of us.

"So, have you figured out what you're going to do. Did you pick your next place or are you still winging it?" our dad asked, and Riley looked at me, clearly hoping that her answer wouldn't upset them.

Right before she was about to answer, I placed my hand on hers and squeezed before I let them know, "I asked Ri to show me what her life was like in New Orleans, so we are taking our time and making our way to all the must-see spots, and then we are headed to Grandpa Jay and Uncle Forest's."

Riley closed her eyes when our mom sucked in a breath she more than likely hoped we wouldn't

hear. I stroked my sister's knuckles, trying my best to keep her from losing control of her emotions. Riley's leaving was hard on our mom, and while our dad was able to convince her that it was the best thing for Riley, it was clear she hated the idea of being apart from one of her children—again.

We could hear our dad tell her it was okay, and when Riley said, “Mom, I don’t think I have ever told you how much it meant to me that you never clipped my wings. I also know that I never told you how much I wish I could have been less of a...wait, what is it you called me, Crissy?” Riley paused, hoping to lighten the mood before she added, “A drama queen.”

“Hey, no need to say mean things. I already told you I have since learned a thing or two about you, Sissy, and I took it back,” I defended, unsure where she was going and not wanting to drag the past into things I couldn’t take back, no matter how much I may have wanted to.

“I’m not trying to be mean, I just wanted to make sure mom knew that I have you now.”

“Riley, I feel like no matter what, in the end, I lose you. And now, it’s hard not to feel as if I will be losing you both”

“Oh, Mom. I hate that you feel that way. Listen, I promise, we will keep you in the loop. I need you to know that Spring View was always my dream. It still is, because nearly everything I love is there, but until I learn how to be there without suffocating, I need a little time and the healing that only Yah can offer. Well, Yah, and as it so happens—my brother.”

“Hey, mom...instead of dreading things and worrying about where we will end up, how about you try to figure out if you would come live with us if we decided to move. I mean, we’ve talked about all sorts of places. I definitely think you would thrive in a tropical setting. Coconuts, and reggae, with dad holding you while you dance together like you used to all the time when we were little. Riley is loaded, so she can take care of us. No clocks, no phones, just sunshine and living off the land—and by land, I mean Riley, of course.”



“So, I feel like we have opened up some doors or windows, maybe both, and yet there is still so much left we just haven’t faced yet.” I got out as I flipped through the shots I took when we stopped at a crazy zoo, completely spur of the moment.

“Like what? I don’t think I am avoiding things. Are you?” Riley asked, and even though I was the one who threw it out there, I was drawing a blank.

“Not that I can think of at this moment. Maybe I’m just feeling like I missed out on so much of your life. I resented you for no reason, and yet I committed to it like it was part of my life’s purpose.”

“I resented you, too, sometimes. Well, mostly how much Mom believed everything you said. I got so much grief, all because I was honest about my feelings for Mikey. Mom treated me as if I were trying to pull the wool over her eyes when I was literally begging her to trust me as I told her everything. Before you go and try to explain the why of it, Mikey already did. No matter what y’all have to say about it, it still isn’t the slightest bit fair.”

“Not fair? You’re right, but Ri, Mom just didn’t want you to go through what she had to.”

“See, I hate that that is what is always said as a means to justify things. Whenever I hear it, it ticks me off. We were the outcome. How am I not supposed to feel as if she regretted us when that’s always the point that is driven home? She had sex with the person she had already committed her life to and got pregnant with *us*. She and Christopher were in love. Why is that a bad thing or something you don’t want for your child? I already told her I was not ready for that step, but I needed the love that I felt for Mikey, and I needed the love he always...” She stopped, apparently surprised by the intensity of her emotions.

In a strained voice, she finished, “I hate that now that I no longer have Mikey, I can understand for the first time a little bit of the why.

“On a side note, can I say something that is wrong...I mean, completely wrong?” As soon as I let her know she could say whatever she wanted without having to worry about me judging her, she confessed, “Even though we are over, a part of me wished I had given myself to him. Chris, that part of me belonged to him. I wanted him to be *that* guy.”

I wasn't sure what to say. Hearing my sister admit what she had and knowing what it actually entailed was a bit awkward. I don't think I would ever be ready to hear that my sister was with a guy, but I also knew I was just being a hypocrite, so I said nothing.

IS THIS WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO TALK ABOUT SNOW?

CHRIS

I don't feel much like repeating the whole song fiasco my sister told you about back when I first met her friend, but I would like to take a moment to defend myself. I wasn't doing anything overly pushy as the song they sang suggests. I was only trying to be nice, but I was unfortunately more awkward than anything and maybe that came across as me being creepy because...well, I had self-esteem issues, remember?

Might I also add that Wyatt was there, and he had flirting down to a science, so I, completely, due to

the above-mentioned lack of self-esteem, didn't want him to sleep with her at all.

Snow was a true celebrity.

When she first showed up, she looked nothing like her well-known image that the public easily recognized. I wasn't into pop, but she was pretty and growing in popularity, so I knew who she was. It was easy for me to understand the vast difference between a person and the artist they became when they were on stage because my sister and her alter ego, Silver Walker, were night and day different, as far as looks, and even personality were concerned.

I was first introduced to the person, Kimberly. She had come to meet Riley on the ranch and had lunch with all of us in the main house. I didn't say much to her at all, but I did notice that she was pretty. I could also tell that Wyatt's wheels were spinning. I mean, what teenage boy would pass on the opportunity to try and hook up with an up-and-coming pop star? Wait. I can answer that for you—Mikey Edwards, but let's be real, not too many others, and I am not

trying to say it was the right thing, or acceptable thing, even. I am just stating that hormones have a way of shutting off the brainwaves that would normally tell a person, *maybe you shouldn't do that*.

What I knew when we met up at Benny's later that night was that I would do anything to keep Wyatt away from her. Turns out, non-stop talking while telling her how much fun we could have if she decided to extend her stay, wasn't as cool as I thought. Did I tell her she was beautiful more times than what would be considered acceptable? Yeah, perhaps I did, but I really didn't for a single second think she would sleep with me or even speak to me after she left—I just wanted to keep Wyatt away from her.

When she and my sister decided to make me look like a tool, I felt almost as horrified as I did when Marybeth would cut me down only, I sort of understood where the dissing duo were coming from. In my attempts to protect the young woman from falling into the bed of a beast, I unintentionally ended up getting her tangled up in my own annoying snares.

I walked out of Benny's feeling like the creep they labeled me and was sitting behind the building in a spot that most people avoided, due to the fact that it was close to the dumpster and there wasn't any parking close by. Just when I stood up to leave, I heard a voice call out, "Hey, I hope you aren't out here because of me. I thought the rancher, cowboy types are supposed to have thick skin," causing me to turn around. The way the outdoor light hit her face made her seem more like the girl I met at the ranch and less like the one who put me in my place.

"I do know how to take a hint. Not that that particular song is hint worthy, despite its title. I do apologize, though. I didn't mean to go full-blown creep on you, so I am sorry about that." I managed to get out in what I hoped to be a neutral tone, and the only reason why I believe I pulled it off was that she came right up beside me, leaned against the wall and continued to talk.

"Now, that is odd. Something tells me there is more to the over-the-top player stuff you were pushing real hard back there. You weren't giving creepy vibes over at the ranch. You were rather adorable

when you walked into that kitchen and nodded my way. I saw the pink spread across your cheeks, and I thought to myself, how pissed would Riley Rae be if I flirted with her brother?"

I knew my cheeks were giving her a replay of what she had just called me out on, but I just stood there and shook my head slowly. In that moment, I knew I was out of my league and wondered why in the world I didn't just let Wyatt do his thing.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I got a little starstruck?" I asked, and she bit her lower lip and grinned before she rejected my claim.

"Not for a second."

"Oh, and why's that?" I pressed as I shifted my weight so I could get a better look at her before she answered.

"Because I don't for a single second believe you knew who I was or ever listened to my music. If you are going to tell me that you did a search between lunch and showing up here, then I'd be more inclined to. But" she started and then paused to step right in front of me before she continued, "I really don't believe you are anything more than a gentle-

man, either. I feel as if you are someone, I may want to know a little better. You are far too cute for me to diss and completely dismiss. I hope you know, I was just having a little fun.”

My heart pounded in my chest. She was so far out of my league that I wasn’t even sure if we were even playing the same sport. Better yet, I don’t think I even knew what sport she was playing at all. Maybe it was water polo or something. All I knew was that she was hot and the way she licked her lips before she, in slow motion, placed a kiss right on the corner of my mouth screamed trouble, but I knew there was little to no chance I would heed the warning.

She asked me for my phone, and then she took it from my hand, typed her number into my contacts, and grinned.

“I seriously hope to hear from you soon, Chris,” she offered as she sent herself a text so she’d have my number, and then she dared me with a seductive taunt, “I wouldn’t mind having something more to remember you by.” I watched her tongue slide across her lips, begging me to come take a taste, so I did.

I slipped my hand around her waist with my one hand to pull her closer to me, and then I took off my hat, leaned in, and kissed her. She slipped her hands up and into my hair, while she hungrily fed on my mouth, clearly suggesting that she was willing to give me so much more. I fought to keep my cool, and after we kissed for a bit, I slowed things down, ending it with all the borrowed bravado I somehow mustered up, and then held her gaze as I licked my own lips in response.

“Whew,” she whispered before she quickly regained her wits. And before I knew what was happening, she grabbed my hat, placed it on her head, and said, “Thanks, cowboy. I think I would really like to have a token of this little exchange so I can keep you close while I fantasize about that kiss and what I hope comes next for us.”

I didn't expect too much from Snow. I'm not going to lie and say I didn't want her to call, text, write, heck, I would have been okay with her sending me

messages using a carrier pigeon, but I didn't *expect* anything.

Nearly a week after we kissed, and she walked away, she sent the first text which said,

I can't believe you haven't reached out. I'm also not sure what to do with that

And *I* wasn't sure what to do with her text, so I pressed pause, tried to come up with something that wouldn't come off as too desperate.

I'm sure you found ways to keep yourself busy.

How have you been?

After I hit send, I remember my heart pounding in my chest. I also knew how much I enjoyed the flirty banter she so boldly hit me with. At first, it was all exciting, but it didn't take long before our interactions began to feel a little familiar. While it was happening, I didn't know what it was, but looking back I could easily see how she was no different than Marybeth.

Snow was a shell of a person who almost needed me to give her my attention and when I didn't meet her expectation of what she felt I should be doing, she would purposefully try and make me jealous. It was almost as if she needed my energy one way or another—if I didn't swoon enough, she would force something else to arise so she could syphon as much of me as possible. The worst part about the whole thing was the fact that she was famous so I automatically felt as though I wasn't enough for her and figured that I should just be grateful she even gave me any of her attention at all.

I learned after a few months that her game was to see how far she could push my buttons. I think a part of her hated that I wasn't begging for her attention. When she reached out, I was there but I seldomly called her. I would text sometimes, but Snow was the one that had to initiate our conversations. I truly believed that she was testing me to see if I was using her, or maybe even to see if I was someone she could one day trust.

I wouldn't hear from Snow for days sometimes, and then weeks, but when she was alone, and under the influence of something she would always reach out. I would get texts that were sexually charged, angry, overly detailed with photos even of her with other men hoping to get a rise out of me, and I will say, I was jealous, I just tried not to let it show. Snow's texts I wasn't a fan of but I truly convinced myself that I was in love with Kimberly. Snow was overly confident and wanted to prove to herself that I was under her spell. She sent things like:

Hey, my sexy cowboy. Have you replaced me yet?

Do you still think of that kiss?
Would you meet up with me if I arranged it all?

Once you get the private show, you will never be able to get me out of your mind. No one will ever be able to love you the way I can and will

The thing that drove her crazy was those messages; I paid very little attention to. Those, I saw Marybeth in and sometimes I even thought about blocking her when she acted that way. Each time I was about to cut ties, Kimberly would show up in need of approval.

Sometimes, I feel like a fraud.
I am no one and yet everyone
thinks I am larger than life.

Everyone but you.

Kimberly...you are so much
more than what other people
think. Including me.

What do you think? I get so
mad that I care so much.
There's something about you,
Chris, that I can't seem to let
go of. I feel like you see me
and you are still here. You
have never asked me for any-
thing. You don't tell anyone
that we even talk. Are you em-
barrassed?



I think that fame seems lonely. I think I prefer this version of you because it's the behind the scenes and not a character or front. Sometimes, I wish I could hide you here on the ranch and show you what it's like to just be and live free.

That particular text led to her calling.

"Tell me more. Tell me that I could be the girl you love. That I am someone worth more than my money," she begged in a voice so small and filled with tears.

"Kimberly, you *are* worth more than your money. I don't want a dime from you, and I don't even want Snow."

"Chris...I know I told you that I feel like a fraud but most of that has to do with you. I am so used up that I am fully spent. My first time was when I was still a child. My parents, my own parents told me that *if I was a good girl and did whatever was asked of me that I could fix all of their problems*. My father sold me into the entertainment business and when I learned that he was a joke for how little he settled

for while I was being passed around by disgusting men who smelled and were never gentle—how could anyone love that. I don't even love that. That is why I hate you sometimes. You only care about Kimberly, and I can't be Kimberly. She is a coward. She is nothing more than an object that other people abuse. Maybe now, you will finally stop giving her a voice. Maybe now that you finally know that I can't even tell you how many people have used my body because I blocked out as many as I could, you have to let that part of me go."

How do you walk away from that?

It wasn't her fault. She was a victim of sexual abuse at the hand of the people who were supposed to protect her. The people who brought her into the world sold her as if she was nothing more than an object they grown tired of. My heart broke for her, and I felt that if I could just show her that I was willing to stick around, she would learn that she was more than the terrible things she was forced to endure.

"I'm not sure why you think I am supposed to blame you for things that happened to you? I'd like

to kill your parents and every single person who ever looked at you with anything other than good intentions. Kimberly, you aren't what happened to you. You are strong, and..."

"Stop! I don't want to be strong. I wasn't given an option, and I would much rather never hear that word again because it makes me sick. Strong people don't have to numb themselves with drugs and alcohol just so they can sleep at night. Strong people don't have to pay for friends because they are too afraid that if people found out the truth, they would never speak to them again."

"Okay, it's time for you to face the facts that I know the truth, and I haven't gone anywhere. I wouldn't tell a single soul anything you have ever told me, because I love you," and that was where I pushed it too far. Kimberly hung up on me the first time I told her I loved her and she avoided me for close to a year before she reached out again. Well, that isn't entirely true. Snow would send me pictures before she would go on stage. Sometimes she would send something after, when she was partying. Kimberly,

though, I didn't hear from until she unfortunately became a victim of sexual assault once again.

My heart sank when my phone rang the night she called me. The second I heard her sobs; I knew it was the girl I cared about and not the entertainer. When she told me she was drugged and didn't even know how many people hurt her, I wanted to be there only she begged me not to come. I didn't even know where she lived so it wasn't as if I could show up anyway, but we talked all night. We even stayed on the phone each night after, sometimes without saying a single word, she just wanted to know I was there. This happened when Riley and I got to New Orleans. The only thing Kimberly begged me not to do was search online for her. Funny thing about that, I never did apart from the first day we met.

I didn't care about that sort of stuff. I grew up knowing the lies of the matrix and even though they found a way to walk beside it for my sister, the rest was all a part of the *keep them fed and distracted*

spell that keeps the majority of people asleep while the vile and most heinous creatures go around doing things so disgusting that when people learn about what they do, they chose to believe it couldn't be true.

In the end, I think I proved myself to the broken and terrified girl I was trying to help. Sadly, sticking around, ended with her punishing me more and more each time she realized that she let me in. Kimberly needed what I had to offer but Snow hated me for seeing her as anything more than a superstar.



From the time that Kimberly reached out to me to the second she slipped into one of the empty chairs at the table we were having lunch at in our hotel in LA was nearly a blip. However, our past connection, along with our nearly 24/7 contact, caused it to feel as if we had never stopped talking.

Snow rarely showed up anymore, and the girl I was convinced I loved was the one I couldn't wait to take into my arms and hold until she felt safe. I wanted to

kiss her again after I looked her in her eyes and told her all the things she was afraid I couldn't really feel for her after all she had been through.

Right before Riley showed up and had a moment in the bathroom, Kimberly asked if I would stay at her place. I wanted to be there for her, but I didn't want to end up in a position where things between us moved too far too fast. Every part of me wanted to sleep with Kimberly, but I didn't want to do it unless she was sure she was in love with me. I didn't want to be just another name she added to her list of regrets.

"I really like them together. I also like that you two are getting along." Kimberly shared her thoughts after Mikey and Riley left.

I was looking at the video footage she captured of Riley and me acting out 'Can't Stop Singing' from *"Teen Beach Movie,"* only we swapped parts, when Kimberly curled into my side and smiled.

"You are quite the ham. I think your fangirls are going to love this. You are something else." I turned

just enough to kiss her temple and closed my eyes when she tried to bring herself lower so she could take things to a more physical level.

“Kimberly, no. You don’t have to do that.” I got out as gently as I could, hoping she wouldn’t read my redirection the wrong way.

“What? I have never been turned down in my life and now—what...am I not good enough for you?” She threw back while she looked at me as if I had just told her I wanted nothing to do with her.

“That’s not at all what I am saying. I just want to finish editing this so I can post it, and then I would like to spend some time with you. Believe me, I want you, but it’s been soooo long since we’ve even been close enough to breathe the same air. I don’t want to rush and ruin things between us.” I explained, trying extra hard to make sure she could feel my sincerity.

She curled into a ball, her knees pulled up, her arms wrapped around them and looked at me as if she wanted to believe me, but she just couldn’t figure out how to. Wanting to lighten the mood and get her out of her head, I pulled her feet and yanked her toward me. When her back hit the cushions of

her couch, I moved over her—holding most of my weight up- and then I leaned down and kissed her.

It was almost as if she had no clue what to do. When she didn't immediately return my kiss, I pulled away and pecked her all over her lips and the area around her mouth. Each peck seemed to get her to set her thoughts aside for a moment. When I noticed her mouth begin to curl into a slight smile, I returned to her lips and held the kiss a little longer. The second time she grinned against my lips, and the third time, she ran her fingers into my hair and deepened our kiss.



"Kim...can you please plug my phone in? I forgot to charge it, and I want to shower before my sister gets here." I asked as Kimberly tried her best to pull me back into her bed.

"I can, but it is going to cost you ten more minutes of *bed* time. I will be the big spoon," she returned in a sleepy voice while she tried pulling me closer.

"I will lie back down, but don't you have a busy day? What time is your choreographer coming?" I questioned as I positioned myself beside her in the

bed where she tossed her leg over mine and rested her head on my chest.

“Shhh. It’s not time for talking. Let me just be near you before this day steals away all of my peace...please,” she begged in a quiet but still annoyed voice. I wanted to know what she meant, but I figured I’d wait to ask since she was only asking for ten more minutes.

Thirty seconds later, “Forget it. I’m awake and frustrated,” Kimberly groaned out, and the second her feet hit the floor, it was clear Snow was preparing to take over. No more kindness, just a groan, and she was out the door, headed downstairs.

My sister filled you in on what came next—the choreography, the make-up, and the almost fight she and Snow had in the backyard. I will now fill you in on how I found out about said fight.

I was sitting on one of the hanging chairs, talking to my mom. The room I was in was like a misfit room, almost as if its purpose was to house the things Kimberly liked but didn’t really fit anywhere else in

her house. Whatever it was, I, oddly enough, seemed to find myself in it at least once a day.

Anyway, my mom was checking in to see how Riley was doing and asking about things in my life when, like a hurricane, Snow stormed up the stairs. I ended the call with my mom and followed after the picture-perfect performer as she mumbled nasty little jabs at what I assumed was my sister.

“I’m not sure why I ever thought this would work. Riley is this fragile little doll who is so out of touch with the real world, and yet she acts as if everyone is out to hurt *her*. Okay—fine, she and Mikey had a fight and, oh...got back together and all is right in her perfect world. How was I supposed to know? How was I supposed to help her when I had to deal with the monsters while she gets happily ever after?” She yelled, and when I moved closer with the intention of pulling her into my arms, she held her hand up and uttered, “No. I have my face done, and whatever it is you were going to do is no different than the fairytale bs that seems to surround the two of you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I pushed, understanding she was having a moment, but refusing

to allow her to blame me or my sister for the wrongs in her life simply because she had to live a nightmare.

“It means your perfect, sheltered life is nothing more than a taunting, mockery of a promise of something that will never be. You come here, act like the hero, only to shove in my face that you are better than me. Both of you. I’m sorry we can’t all be innocent...” I didn’t care about her makeup; I wrapped my arms around her and corrected, “Don’t do that. No one thinks they are better than you. I love you, and so does Riley. Actually, Ri thinks you are larger than life, and while she may have thought you let her down, it’s only because she was hurting. She is so afraid of losing you or letting you down that she was worried she already had...that’s all I promise.”

“I am...I feel so...” Kimberly tried to get out. Still clearly not wanting to mess up her makeup, she took in a deep breath and maneuvered her body in such a way as to let me know she wanted out of my embrace. I allowed her room to pull away, but I grabbed her hand and lifted it to my lips and held her knuckles there until she looked at me.

“For some reason, you still don’t believe that I am all about you.” I tried only to be met with a snort and dismissal.

“Says the man who refuses to have sex with me when I am naked in the same bed. Actually, I believe you decided sleeping on the floor was better than sleeping in my bed.”

I wanted so badly to get her to understand why I didn’t want to sleep with her yet, but I learned that when she was in the mood she was in, nothing I could say would help. To further back my point, Snow went from nasty to cruel when she yanked her hand from mine and spat out, “I don’t blame you—who knows what you’d catch. We wouldn’t want to taint the ever-perfect Morris boy, now, would we?”

I was sitting in a makeshift command center/backstage area with Uncle Forrest and a few of his security men when the door flew open, and Snow started acting as if she had been hit by a ghost from her past.

"I saw him. That bastard tried to get in, and yeah, Bronx was on it, but how dare they show up and think they can try to intimidate me? Wasn't it enough that they took what they wanted and left me like some used-up piece of trash? Those kids out there—are they innocent because their parents are the monsters, or will they get destroyed too? You want me to work with you, claiming you will protect me from the evil, but that's a bunch of bull. You can't be part of their world without becoming a puppet or settling for almost-famous. Eff that. I am going to soar. I am going to be so big they will have to see my face everywhere they look, knowing what they did to me. They want to be big and bad; well, they already stole my innocence years ago, so there is nothing left for them to take—but I will not allow them to intimidate me anymore. I will not live in fear. What you have to offer may be good enough for little miss Riley Rae, but I've already been broken in by those sick perverts, so I'd say that I've earned the fame I will be claiming."

We were so focused on the traumatized girl on a mission to try and reclaim as much of herself as

she could when a noise off to the side caught our attention. Bronx had just grabbed my sister, who overheard at least some part of her friend's breakdown, and was ushering her away.

"Don't even think about touching me. I need to be back on that stage and end this night with a bang. Maybe you should leave. I promise you—*Kimberly* is not going to be going home tonight, and you've made it loud and clear that you don't like Snow." She shot her warning, but I knew she was only pushing me away because she was hurting and needed to be in control. She didn't wait for me to reply; instead, she grabbed a bottle of water, chugged it down, and made her way back on the stage she had just left only ten minutes earlier as if nothing had happened.

I had no idea what I was supposed to do. As I stood there, I listened to Forrest trying to figure out what had happened. Sure, it was already made clear that someone who had hurt Kimberly tried to get access to her, but he wanted the full rundown. Once he was filled in, he looked at me and asked if I was okay.

“I knew, and yet...man, it’s not fair. She didn’t deserve any of the things that have happened to her. And what for?” As far as what he had asked—I was fine. Meaning, the one that mattered was Kimberly, and nothing about me and how I was feeling was even registering, so I had no clue what else to say. After a few minutes of staring ahead at nothing, I broke the silence.

“Uncle Forrest—thank you. For keeping my sister safe.”

He shook his head and pulled me into a hug. I didn’t know what to do, but I was pretty sure he was hoping to make things clear. Forrest was letting me know that he heard me, while also making sure that I knew he was there.

“What do I do? I am not leaving her alone, but I already have an idea what she’s going to do.” I uttered. Not really expecting him to have an answer, but willing to do whatever he suggested if he had an idea.

“I’m going to send Maxwell over to her place. He has experience with this sort of thing. He knows

how to keep things under control, and worst-case scenario, he has a medical background. Chris, I don't believe that happy endings are out there for everyone. Some people don't know how to choose something better when all they've ever had was the worst things imaginable. I know you care, but I need you to hear me out. You can't set yourself on fire hoping your flames will keep her warm.

"Now, what that means as far as what you should do—I have no clue. I just need to be your uncle and tell you that I see you. I know the mountain ahead is one that may turn out to be a cliff that lands with you in a living hell instead. If things get to be too much, promise me you will let me know. I think she may need to spend a little time with my mother." The only thing I could think to do when he finished his supportive warning, or whatever that was, was nod, and then I asked if I could catch a ride back to Kimberly's house.

BACK TO BROTHER SISTER BONDING--NEW ORLEANS STYLE

IT'S CHRIS STILL (OBVIOUSLY)

Now that you have a little more info regarding Snow and me, I think it's best if I bring us back a little and let you in on what happened when we arrived at Grandpa Jays. I'm not sure if you knew this, but it was the first time I'd ever been there. Riley mostly went with our Aunt Ashley, and then once she got her license, she would go by herself. I liked Jay, and Uncle Forest, but the stuff that happened in New Orleans wasn't really my thing. I mean, I wasn't a singer, so it never interested me to go there.

Since I am being honest, up until our little run-away trip, I wanted nothing to do with my sister's

alter ego. Sure, when she helped our mom conquer her fears in front of thousands of people, that was pretty cool, but it was Riley who did that, and I was sort of forced to tag along. I assumed, whenever she ran off to Grandpa Jay's she was doing so to play a part. I figured it was the way she learned to escape the stuff that was piling up on her. That stuff, when it was taking place, I wanted nothing to do with.

My heart began to beat a little faster when we pulled up in front of Jay's stark white three-story home. I'm not sure what I was feeling, but if Riley felt anything at all like I had been, I understood why she came here. It felt almost as if the very house was sending out pulses of peace, like it was letting my soul know it would be safe there for as long as I needed.

"Ri, is it just me, or does this place feel like" before I could even finish, my sister said, "Home. It's a *home* away from Spring View. I never get tired of looking at this place, and being here, is *good*. It's like each time I pull up I am taken aback by just how beautiful it

is. Wait until we get through the gate, and you see the backyard, and then the house. I am so glad you are here with me. Thank you,” she offered with such sincerity that I found myself smiling.

“I think I’m the one who should be saying that to you. I feel like this is going to be really good for both of us. Thank you, Sissy, for letting me do this with you.” I offered as she pulled her Jeep down the tight driveway that was hidden until the automatic gate opened, revealing two cement paths just wide enough for a vehicle’s tires. Riley parked in one of the empty spaces of the four-car garage and smiled when she announced, “They’re both here.”

“Didn’t you tell them we were coming?” I asked, a little confused as to why she reacted to them both being home if they knew we were coming.

“Yes, I just wasn’t sure when we were going to get here. It’s nice that they are both here, and it may just be them, too. Granted, not every person who stops by drives their own vehicle. Anyway, let’s go. I can’t wait to show you everything.”

I followed my sister's lead while taking in the backyard. It had the feel of a tranquil little mini resort that was hidden away from the city that surrounded it, as if no one else knew it was there apart from the chosen ones who were granted access to it. There was a small pool with a waterfall feature that was tucked away instead of being the focal point. The way it was designed made it blend into the scenery more like a pond, and if I didn't know better, I would have assumed that's what it was.

The covered porch area had white outdoor furniture that reminded me of the Edwards' set that was always so inviting and comfortable. All of the plants and trees seemed to be hundreds of years old. Not that they were anything other than serene, they just felt established and well-manicured.

I was just about to tell my sister that I could see what she meant about the backyard when a door opened and both Jay and Forest appeared with smiles on their faces. I returned one of my own but noticed a slight hesitation as well as something that I couldn't name come over my sister. Unsure of what

happened, I remained where I was and waited to see what would take place.

The two men stopped and stood side by side, waiting for Riley to make a move. I had no idea what was going on, only something inside was telling me that whatever it was meant something. It was as if they were waiting to see whom she went to first, or how she would greet them—like whatever my sister did next would tell them what they needed to know somehow.

Her bottom lip quivered, and then she looked back and forth between them both, clearly deciding to push aside whatever they were hoping to find, and with a hard, intentional shake of her head she forced a smile and said, “What can I say, I missed this place so much I even brought my wonder twin so he can see what all the fuss is about.”

We all saw the tears she was pretending weren’t there, and when Grandpa Jay pulled her into his arms, I couldn’t help but feel a little heartbroken for my sister who had somehow turned into a fragile little girl right before my eyes. Grandpa Jay began

to whisper words I couldn't understand, and even though it was clear that he knew she was sad, it was also evident that he knew what she needed in that moment, more. Forest greeted me and suggested that we go and get the things from the Jeep.

Once we were far enough away, he broke the silence, offering me confirmation of what I had come up with on my own.

"Your mom called, and so did my sister. We were trying to figure out what this visit was about. I am glad you came along with her. I think you are going to find that this place is a little gem. You are welcome here for as long as you'd like to stay. With or without her, I hope you know that."

"Thank you. I *am* looking forward to getting to see why my sister seems to be drawn here." I began as I took the bags we had packed out of the Jeep and placed them on the ground.

"Uncle Forest, I think she may stay here if things don't work themselves out," I added, knowing it was true but hoping to hear what his thoughts were.

"What do you think? Is there any chance they will make up? Will you stay with her?" he asked, clearly

concerned but also wanting to figure out if we were just dropping by or planning to stay for longer than a couple of days.

“My gut says maybe they can, but not if he really was dating someone else. I have no clue what he was thinking—he didn’t talk to me either, so I know just about as much as she does, only I saw them together for more than the second she did. As far as staying, if she does, then, yeah—I think I will. This trip so far has been more than I could have ever imagined. It feels good to have my sister back, and who knows, maybe New Orleans is just what I need to figure out what I should be doing with my life.” I answered, and the smile Forest threw my way right before he bent down and grabbed a couple of bags had me wondering what was going on inside his head.

I didn’t have to wait all too long to find out either. Uncle Forest simply cocked his head to the side and asked, “Is your heart not in Spring View? I mean, I have to put forth a whole lot of effort each time I visit to get myself to leave. It’s almost as if it has a magnetic-like, supernatural pull.”

"I don't mind Spring View. I just don't want to miss out on what's meant for me by staying someplace I'm used to just because it's all I know. And I've been talking to Kimberly," I explained, and noticed his eyes widen a little, which led me to ask, "Do you know?" causing him to wince.

He nodded as his face worked itself into a frown, and the two of us just looked at one another without saying a word. After a moment, I added, "Please, don't tell Riley. She doesn't know we are talking, and I'm not really sure what is even going on, if there's anything going on so..."

"I didn't hear a thing, but Chris, be careful. The world she lives in is extremely dark. We are doing all we can to try and protect her, but unlike your sister, we are trying to pull Kimberly out of hell, and she has been in it so long that everything else seems a bit too good to be true for her to trust."

A part of me wanted to lash out and demand for him to clarify what he just said because Kimberly needed people to love her or, at the very least, be there for her unconditionally. The look in his eyes offered me the truth of what he meant, though. He wasn't

telling me to leave her alone; he was simply warning me how bad it all was. She may have told me things, and I may have believed I understood far more than I truly did, but Uncle Forest and Grandpa Jay knew the entertainment industry, and just as he said, they knew the demons who had full control over the lives of the rich and famous.



Have you gone out and live it up N.O. style yet?

Kimberly sent and just like that I was all about connecting with her. Riley and I had plans to meet up with Amede and I was looking forward to seeing what night life looked like in the city we were in. All I knew was country living and don't get me wrong, Spring View did have a few bars and Benny's, but it was small town fun. Sure, I snuck into a few places when we were on the road playing ball, but I was a minor and while I still technically was, I had a feeling that things would be different in New Orleans than I was used to.



Riley is taking me to meet up with Amede. I know we are going to get something to eat and then...no clue

Will you text me when you get back?

of course.

Do you have any plans?

take out, sweats, and that's about it

You already know what happened when Ri and I went out with Amede...I was the one who told you so I don't need to go into again. When we got back to Grandpa Jay's I sent Kimberly a text just like she asked me to, and I was surprised when she called.

"I saw a really cute guy in New Orleans tonight. He was hanging out with a girl I know and her—I can't believe she hasn't hooked up with him yet—partner in crime. Did you meet anyone special?" Kimberly got out, as she sent me a screen shot of

the photo my sister had posted on her story. I tried my best to smile as I answered her last question first, unsure if it was really Snow looking to kill the mood.

"I did. I met her in Spring View a few years ago. You may have heard of her—she goes by the name Snow but to me she's Kimberly. Now, as far as Ri goes, I actually like Amede. I don't like the fact that he is smooth as butter and spread all over the state of Louisiana and I am sure plenty of other places I don't need to think about, but something in me believes him when he says he would never hurt her." She didn't say a word about what I had to say about her. Instead, she added to what I had to say about Amede.

"Chris—there is no way Ri could handle the likes of him. I joke but he would do things she has probably never even thought about in her life," Kimberly got out while laughing at whatever she was picturing in her mind.

"No. Stop. I can't. That's my sister. I can't for the life of me allow myself to even *sort of* go there." I pleaded as she laughed even harder. We chatted for a bit and just before I was about to fall asleep, Kim-

berly's voice, so small and just barely audible broke the silence.

"Did you really mean what you said?"

"Hum...what did I say?" I questioned automatically but then guessed so I continued, "Oh. If you are talking about what I said about *you*, then, yes. I've told you that already though. So many times, you're probably sick of hearing it at this point."

"Not nearly enough, and it's good to know. I was afraid that you were finally sick of me. That I reached the max of messed up and you couldn't wait to search for someone a little less of a disaster," she got out and I could tell she was truly worried and up in her head.

"Everyone is a little messy. And your mess isn't your fault. As long as you don't get sick of me, I'm here." I tried to comfort her and fought back a chuckle when she sulked out, "Do you think we will ever see one another again? I have forgotten what your lips feel like and I can't help but wonder if being in your arms would help keep all the monsters away."

"Say the word, and I will come." I offered, but just as she always had in the past, she dismissed it. That

time, she just said nothing. I ended up falling asleep with her and I remember asking myself just before I was swept into the land of dreams—*if this was all she was going to give me, would it be enough?* It wasn't until we were on the private plane headed to LA that I was able to answer that question. My answer at that time was—yes. If it helped her, I would do anything.

I'M NOT SURE IF THIS IS THE RIGHT PLACE, BUT...

AHYOKA'S VOICE

My name is Ahyoka. It's said pretty much as it's spelled. I've been an outcast since before I was even born. I was conceived when my mother fell in love with a married man. Half of my DNA is shared with a person you have already met. My half-brother is Sunny. Thanks to modern technology, we actually grew quite close. Most of his life, he listened to his mother speak poorly of me, which, in all fairness, I understand, but not entirely.

I never could wrap my brain around the idea as to why the woman gets called the homewrecker and is blamed for breaking up a marriage when it's the man

who was in the committed relationship. I also had no idea how it applied to my mother, who had no clue my father was married for the brief time while they were together. I suppose the name fits if the person knew and chose to sleep with the married party anyway but that wasn't the case. What I understood even less was how I was the one who had to carry my parents' stake for something I had no part in other than breathing the day I was born.

If you want to add to things that weren't my fault and yet seemed to define me nevertheless, you can add the fact that I was born with a spiritual gift that makes most people uncomfortable. Well, it made them uncomfortable until I learned to keep to myself and avoid people as much as I could. The fact that I worked in a gas station/convenience store since I was tall enough to see over the counter means I have to deal with people. Living in the middle of nowhere means not many of them, and I couldn't have been happier for it.

How did I end up in the middle of nowhere? That one is easy.

My mom was treated so poorly by the people from my bio dad's tribe that she went back to her own. Her father was never accepted, so he lived on the outskirts of where my mother's family lived. My grandpa ended up buying the combo place of business and took me on when my mom decided that motherhood wasn't really her thing.

I'm not kidding. She came home from working as a waitress one night and pretty much blamed me for the fact that she was broke. She was a pretty good mom up until that point, and even taking that point into consideration, I still didn't blame her.

That gift I told you about is the reason for it.

I can read energy.

Some people call it aura, and others label such people as empaths, which isn't really the same, but I've heard it all, and most people are way off. What I know is that I can read the energy that comes off of people so clearly, I know who to trust, and who to run away from. There are very few people who have nothing to hide. My grandpa and my brother are some of the few out there who have true positive energy.

That's another thing that people don't understand about my gift. It isn't just about color, like so many false gurus claim. Color isn't all that comes across when you are given the ability to see energy. Intensity and clarity can be good indicators of positivity, but can also radiate warnings, as well. You may be putting off an energy bright as the sun, and yet still have a darkness within that intends to cause harm.

The colors have become pretty well known for what they signify, and I've heard far too many people claim they have seen bright white around people when that is so far from the truth, but it's become a money-making scheme that, sadly, innocent people fall for.

My grandfather had a bright and clear yellow-green energy that he used to emit, which makes sense, seeing that he was a compassionate, nurturing soul who was confident and uplifting. My brother shines an intense greenish blue with orange woven throughout. For those of you who don't know what that means, it means that Sunny is loving, insightful, powerful, and creative. He is more than those things,

of course, but these qualities are a part of his core being.

People have layers of energy. There's what they are made up of, and then there's what they are going through. The fact that I can see the energy so clearly as well as all the layers, even as they transition, makes it hard for me to form any real relationships with people. I'm sure you can imagine that being able to tell when people are lying before they even tell the lie isn't something easy to overlook.

Apart from being able to read people I also have always loved making things. I enjoy making clothing and sandals from animal skins, but I love making jewelry the most. The clothing and footwear I learned from my grandfather and my uncle teaching me.

My mother's brother took charge of the family (tribe) when my great-grandfather passed away. It should have been my grandfather but there was a push to have him replaced because he followed the

laws of Yahuah as well as the guidelines for what it means to be a Set-Apart Elder strictly. When he learned that the people weren't happy with him stepping into a leadership role, he decided it was best to allow his son to take over. Conveniently enough the same time this was all taking place his house became out of order. Thankfully, his decision to walk away offered me an opportunity to learn the ways I should go while removing the people who did a whole lot of talking when they should have been watching where they were going instead. I'm pretty sure that every way of life has some sort of belief that people should worry about what they are doing instead of busying themselves with what others are up to.

It wasn't just the busy-body-ness from what should have been our family were plagued with either, more and more, our small village began to live up to their stiff-necked reputation allowing the traditions of men to work their way in and slowly wear down the strong pillars of righteousness the Most High had instructed His children to stand upon and live out.

Let's go back to the time when my grandfather and I were working together. I was thirteen, and he had just finished showing me how to attach the sole to a pair of soft bottomed shoes.

"Ah-Ya, I saw one of your new pieces out in the store. Why did you put it in the back?" he asked as if he were simply observing a shift in the weather while keeping his hands busy and his eyes fixed on the stitches.

"It's for the one who was made to hold my heart. I don't want to make it too easy for him." I answered, easily chuckling when his eyebrows rose clearly hoping I would tell him more.

"Really...is he meant to come here, or will you put it up on the online store and leave it in the hands of Yahuah to make sure he is the one who finds it?" he pushed without any real desire leaning toward a favored outcome. He just wanted to keep me talking and stay connected as long as he could, hoping I

wouldn't stray from the Narrow Path. His push at a blasé follow-up caused my chuckle to grow into true laughter, and when he nudged me with his shoulder, I had to blink away the tears of joy that pooled in my eyes.

"Grandpa, I am not certain of anything. I was just pulling your leg. I only put it in the back because I really like that one. I think it's my favorite only I know it's not meant to be mine. Besides, I am far too young to even think about that stuff. But Grandpa, how will I truly know?"

"Ahyoka, Yahuah will show you. You have to lean into Him for all things. Besides, He gave you your special gift. Trust that you will know and then check with Him to make sure. You already do this with all the people you cross paths with. Everything will always work out how its meant to in its proper time as long as you keep your eyes on Him." He advised in the same way he always had. Everything in life always led back to Yahuah, and as long as I kept that knowledge close by and walked in its truth, I wouldn't lose my way.

My grandfather had the same gift I had only his wasn't as strong. The way he would explain it was that he could only see the energy emitted in the moment he was in—the here and now. It would shift if the situation changed, of course, but it was more or less like a thermometer—a way for him to gauge what was already displayed. Whereas my gift came with the ability to see deeper. Sure, the brightest was closely related to the situation surrounding the person, but alongside of the outer layer was a whole lot more.

I suppose you could think of it like the dashboard of a vehicle that flashes all the indicator lights to let you know if something is wrong. My grandfather's gift worked similar to that, whereas mine was closer to the operating system designed to reveal what was going on on the inside. Handy, but also a bit overwhelming until I learned I wasn't a human mechanic and I definitely wasn't responsible for doing anything with the information I was made privy to. I hadn't been tasked with the job of fixing people but more so was gifted the ability to see who they really were while also witnessing their true intentions.

"Your grandmother's light was so beautiful. You have the same color woven inside of you. Whenever I get a glimpse of it, I feel as if she is a little closer." My grandfather shared, and being with him knowing how special our bond was made the loneliness that would sometimes try and creep up on me flee.

"I sometimes wonder what my energy looks like. I think it would be sort of cool to use it as a comparison to others. I don't think that would work though." I thought out loud, and then focused on his response, "It definitely wouldn't work with my gift, but I could see where your desire could be helpful. I suppose if you were able to see your own you would eventually start to compare others to how you live and who you are. Even if it were subconsciously. Perhaps that is why the Most High shields you from yourself. It is far more important to see who people are in regard to His opinion than that of our own."



"Hey now, Miss Ahyoka, are those boys still giving you a hard time?" One of the regulars questioned the

moment I stepped behind the counter and readied myself to make his chicken and waffles.

"They try, but they are all bark. Nothing a little broom can't handle." I assured while lifting the corner of my mouth into a half grin.

"I've never been one to dismiss aggression or rudeness, claiming it was a way to flirt. I think it's a sign you should be paying a little extra attention and correct the behavior before it becomes a means of actual crime. I can lend you Nova for a bit if you'd like." The older man offered, and I felt the warmth of a true smile spread across my face.

Nova was a seven-year-old German Shepherd/wolf mix, and she was one of the most lovable yet fiercely protective animals I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. She and I spent a lot of time together when she was a pup, and whenever her humans went on vacation.

As far as the boys Mr. Wilkerson initially asked me about, they started coming around when I was in middle school. No matter what they said, I knew they were only interested in me because I

was someone they didn't really know. Our town was small enough that people knew one another. If you weren't sure about a person, chances were, they wanted it that way, causing the inquiring minds to create their own stories. Meaning, I was 'interesting' simply because the townspeople didn't know too much about me. They heard the stories people made up, and most of those tales were heavily based on gossip involving my mother or grandfather. I was only relevant when they came to get gas or something from the store, and once I was no longer in their sight, the boys seemed to forget I existed, which was more than fine with me.

I can't say I blamed them for their curiosity either. Small towns in the middle of nowhere could become boring if you didn't like spending time with yourself. The only real problem I had with that particular group was that the one who did most of the talking had a dark side. So dark that it was hard to miss even without my ability to read his energy.

One day he showed up and got a little handsy. I was doing my best to keep my distance, but he

backed me up against the counter and shoved my face down where he held me while his body pressed against mine from behind. Unsure of how to get free, I reached out to Yahuah, and just when I asked Him for a way out—Nova came to my rescue.

Tas (short for Tasela—which I later learned meant falling star...how fitting) was just about to turn on the dog when Mr. Wilkerson's voice called out, causing my almost attacker to give up and take off as if nothing happened.

Mr. Wilkerson told my grandfather about the scene he had walked in on, and between the two of them, and a few of the other people in town, they tried to make sure I wasn't in the store alone, and if I was, it wasn't for too long. None of them said anything to me about it, which I appreciated; they just made a point to stop by throughout the day.

AM I MEANT TO BE ALONE?

CHRIS

I left Snow with the intention of never talking to her again. She pushed things too far when she told me she terminated her pregnancy, which I had no clue about. She said it as if she had just ordered a drink at the overpriced coffee house she went to at least once a day.

We were in Vegas, and I was tucked away in her hotel room like usual, when she came back after her performance and was clearly under the influence of some illegal substance. Things between the two of us had gotten to the point where I really started to believe we had a chance.

Spending time with Sparrow changed something inside Kimberly, and when she asked me to come to her in Washington state, I made arrangements to fly there on the first available flight. Being with her and witnessing something different within reminded me so much of the girl I fell in love with, when all we had between us was whatever happened over the phone.

One of the biggest issues between the two of us was the fact that I wouldn't have sex with her. I know you learned that from my sister's story, but the more she fought me on it, the more I couldn't bring myself to do it. However, that quickly changed after we spent a week together in the woods. Everything I had hoped for while I tried to love her, as she fought so hard against me, finally seemed to slip into place. We talked, and we laughed, and the person I knew was inside of her was right there with me for more than a moment. She told me she loved me, and I believed her. Things between us were good until she decided she was ready to move back to LA.

I heard all the talk about fame and what comes along with it. I even heard nightmare stories from

Kimberly about the industry itself, but a part of me believed that she found a way to do what she loved while being protected by Jay Durand. Here's the thing, though. Snow had a vendetta against her abusers. She wanted them to see her on that stage where she would pretend they hadn't broken her. Along with her desire to be a name that would haunt the people who stole her innocence, she wanted all the money she could get her hands on. Jay could get her money, but the lasting fame she craved more than anything else comes only when you sign away your soul.

Even with all of that, I still would have stayed beside her because I knew what she had gone through. None of it was her fault, so I tried to love her through it, hoping that one day she would see that she was worth kindness and respect because of who she was and not just what she had. So, I would have stayed except that I learned firsthand that the stuff people dismiss as ridiculous or part of some conspiracy theory is real. It took less than a week after Kimberly signed with a well-known record label for the person whom I had fallen in love with to no longer exist.

Everything about her changed in some way, but it was most evident when she was on stage.

Kimberly was obviously a decent singer, but my mom, sister, and aunt were all much stronger vocalists. *Snow* was a crafted character that was being pushed on people, and what she sold was no different than every other pop star. She was overly sexified to make disgusting pedophiles and rapists happy, while subliminally teaching children that it's okay, hoping to blur the lines so they would be easier to mold and manipulate. I mean, take a look at the way things work now a days—what's acceptable. Their agenda isn't really hidden any more. In fact, it's so in your face that people struggle with the truth that Satan runs this world and would rather pretend it's all part of some hairbrained conspiracy. I suppose that's why they say *ignorance is bliss*.

After Jay swooped in and tried to save Snow with the help of my Uncle Forest, I made the decision to try to make things work between us. It was when I decided I wanted more than the conversation we had

that led me to care for her in the first place; either through text, all-night phone calls, or video chats.

The conversation Riley overheard backstage after the tail end of their performance in LA was the main reason Jay reached out to Sparrow, hoping she could help. One of the perverts who was at the birthday party meant for teenagers was a big deal in the music industry. He wasn't on the guest list that was given to security, and even though he wasn't one of the people who had physically harmed Snow, he had been there and knew enough about what had happened to her, which meant he wasn't innocent either.

To make matters worse, the man was a conniving demon who knew what to say to get inside her head. He fluffed her feathers and told her that she should sign with him. I already told you what she thought she needed, and he was the one who put the idea into her head that she could prove to her abusers they hadn't broken her by becoming famous enough for her face to be everywhere.

Bronx and his team had the man removed, and even though she told me to leave, Kimberly allowed me to stay when she returned home, and I was sitting

on the oversized chaise upstairs. She fell into my arms and cried as I held her. We didn't say a word; I just held her until morning.

I thought for sure that she was going to self-medicate with some sort of mind-altering substance, but she didn't. I actually allowed myself a brief moment to believe that things would work out. That's how we ended up going to Spring View together. A part of her, I knew, wanted a life with me away from the spotlight. The other part clearly wasn't able to let go.

We were in a rental, making the drive from the airport to my parents' when the bastard from the party called. She didn't answer on speaker, but he spoke loud enough that I could hear in the otherwise silent car, even though it was clear she didn't want me to.

"Snow, Sweetheart—I know what they did to you, and I am sorry you had to go through that, but don't you want to make them fear you now? Don't you want the people who had their way with you over and over while you cried and begged them to stop to see you succeed in spite of what they did to you? You

were a child with no one to protect you, Kimberly. But now, as Snow, I can get you to the top, where you can show them that what they did to you wasn't enough to break you."

As she sat beside me, Kimberly broke.

It wasn't a meltdown or something that could be seen outwardly. It was a deliberate break in the part of herself that she hated—the part I loved. Kimberly chose to lie to me when she hung up, claiming it wasn't the same man, and by doing so, she made the way for Snow to work on erasing what was left of the person I was desperately trying to cling to.

The girl who allowed me to be someone she finally held on to when things were too much began to slip away. It wasn't all at once; it was moment by moment. No matter how much I tried to keep her with me, the call of fame, like a siren, worked its way in, and I could see she was going to answer. The only thing I didn't know was when.

**I hope you will forgive me for ending this part abruptly...I am sure you want all of the details, but I have to walk away at this point. I'm pretty sure that*

you've been able to use your brilliant mind to piece together things on your own, and once all the pages have been read, you will find that you were given all the details that matter. If I continue, I'd have a few good moments I could share, but I'm not convinced they truly were. I am more inclined to believe that I wanted them to be so badly, that the times when things between us were more normal, I'd romanticize them; seeing them as this love story that was nothing more than a tragedy masquerading as something that would last.

No longer interested in perpetuating those lies, I'm choosing instead to move the story along to the day everything in my life changed.

Not just the bad—but the *good*.



I hadn't truly thought through my decision to leave.

Yes, I was certain I was done and wanted to get away. The part I didn't think about for long enough was the vehicle I ended up renting to get me out of there. What I was thinking about in the moment

was getting away as fast as possible, so I opted for an all-black Kawasaki Ninja 500.

Growing up on the ranch offered me the opportunity to learn how to drive pretty much anything I wanted to. It wasn't until I was close to two hours away that my mother's voice began to ring out inside my mind, begging me not to get a motorcycle after I learned how much I loved riding them in high school. I hadn't disobeyed her, seeing as the one I'd been straddling was rented. The moment I started hearing her voice just so happened to coincide with the time I decided I needed to stretch my legs.

You see? A sport bike isn't ideal for a person over 2000 miles away, and looking at a 32-hour drive. I also hadn't planned out my route either. I just decided to hop on the metal horse and head east.

Turns out, I was led exactly where I needed to be. Even if I hadn't fully realized it when I ended up in a desert surrounded by absolutely nothing. I actually began to panic a little when the sun began to set, and there was nothing in sight.

My mind began to throw all sorts of questions around, like, *How much further would I be able to drive before I needed gas?* Why the heck hadn't there been a warning like the one when we drove to the Florida Keys—informing drivers that there would be no place to fill up after they passed a certain point.

That shouldn't have been a thing, seeing as you were driving on a bridge, so it should have been self-explanatory, and yet they were still kind enough to tell you anyway. I'm convinced it was for all of the people who had to be warned not to drink bleach or iron clothing while they were wearing it—figuring some may have survived longer than they should have due to growing up in a time with all the warning labels, and yet, there I was, unsure where I would run out of gas if I kept going.

"Yeah. Whose calling who an idiot, you idiot?" I asked myself as I let up on the accelerator and pulled over to the side of the road. Once I typed in my desired destination, I smiled inwardly when the map showed my journey was nearly straight. Sure, there were a few slight fluctuations, but barely, considering the vast distance between point A and point B.

I used my two fingers to zoom in, hoping to find a place I could rest and refuel, and with full gratitude, the map showed there was a lone one-stop shop a little less than forty miles ahead.

I thought about calling three different people and talked myself out of each of them before I went any further.

My mother was the first, which I am sure by this point you already know why. I might also add that I already told you she wouldn't be happy if she learned I was on a motorcycle, so I figured it was best not to put myself into a position where I'd have to lie to her.

Next was Mikey. He and I grew even closer after he married my sister. I wish I could tell you that all of it was on the up and up, but that's just not true. There was a part of me that clung to Mikey because he was the easier one, between him and Wyatt, for me to be around. He was easier because he was as close to the same person he had always been. The rest—the stuff with Wyatt was all on me.

Anyway, I thought about calling him, oddly enough, because I knew he would pray for me. You

might ask why I didn't call my dad or Uncle Mo, and I just want to say there is no bad blood, and it wasn't meant to suggest anything. They just weren't the ones I thought about in that moment.

Lastly, the person I wanted to reach out to was my sister. It was odd that she came to mind last because she is the one I knew I needed most. The way I had been feeling, only she knew the depth of my heartbreak, and she never made me regret opening up to her. To my surprise, she even kept things I said between us when I asked her to. Not that Riley was a gossip. It's just that she cared and she trusted her husband and my dad enough to share (well-intended, of course) things that she believed to be heavy with hope of finding a way to help.

I stretched my arms, high above my head, and twisted my back, readying myself for the journey ahead that would hopefully offer me a smarter option than what was in front of me since I left Vegas without any real plan of how I was going to get home.

The small, dark, and desolate destination I was headed toward came into view, causing my heart to beat loudly in my ears and my nerves to stand on edge. It was as if I were driving up to an overly played-out scene in a horror movie. Not so much because the place had clearly seen a few generations, but more so because there wasn't anything else around it for miles.

The closer I got, the more I cursed myself for not thinking things through. When I pulled up and thought it might have been too late, that the place was closed for the night, I squatted down next to my rented bike and cried.

I screamed and groaned as if I was trying to purge every single thing that ever caused me pain, and when I felt myself begin to shake as I allowed my butt to hit the ground, I called my sister.

"Chris," was all she said, and it was odd because, much like my dad, Riley usually answered my calls as if I were one of her favorite people. When she said my name this time, it was almost as if she was letting me know she already knew I needed her and she was giving me permission to cut to the chase.

I couldn't get my mouth to form any words because I didn't even know which ones to say to make sense of the situation I was in.

"Oh, Chris..." Riley uttered, and then I felt a buzz as my phone alerted me that Riley was asking me to share my location with her. I allowed it, and then I started mumbling what felt like everything at once, wanting to get it all out of me, hoping to take away the power it had to keep me in a state of barely living.

"Ri, she killed our child. I knew, as she kept on throwing nasty comments my way, that she was no longer in there, but I loved her too much to just leave her, and then she told me she was pregnant in one breath and assured me she took care of it in the next.

"Why am I not enough? Why is my love nothing more than something that people have to tolerate? I thought maybe if I just hung on, she would see that I wasn't just another person trying to use her. What about me is too hard to love, Ri? Tell me. Don't friggin' lie to me, damnit. Tell me why I am unlovable." I shouted at my sister, who was crying right along with me, whispering for me to stop.

“Chris, it’s not true. You are lovable; you just pick the wrong people. It’s not you. I promise.” She got out through her tears, causing me to shake my head in response and squeeze my phone hard enough that it started to feel as if it was going to break, so I let up a bit.

“I don’t know why I called you. You are my sister. You are going to lie to me, hoping to shut me up...” I began to shout back venomously, caught up in my own pain so much I didn’t care if I lashed out and hurt her in the process. Want to know the truth...the reason I picked her to call was that she wasn’t the person I just accused her of being in the slightest.

“Shut your mouth right now. You may be hurting, but what you just said is a lie, and you know it. I have never lied to you about the jerk you try so hard to be when you are hurting, and that’s exactly why you called me. So listen up. I am sorry. I love you, and I am trying to figure out how to get to you as we speak, but you are not unlovable. You pick the wrong people, Chris. You find the ones with rabies and hope that if you just pick them up and love them enough, they will heal and thank you for it. If

anything, you are too forgiving. You have yet to learn that some people need to be loved from a distance, and your purehearted, genuine willingness to give all of yourself, regardless that it kills you in the process, will never be enough for people who are determined to destroy you.” Riley said each word, making sure I heard her.

And then, as if none of it happened, she stated, “You are in the middle of nowhere. Do you have enough money? Please tell me you have a plan for sleeping somewhere tonight. Hey, Chris? I think it’s best if I arrange for you to fly home, I am...” she rattled off, but a sound of gravel crunching beneath feet caught my attention, causing me to whip my head around to see what had caused it.

The gasp I let out had Riley asking what was going on, clearly concerned. Instead of disconnecting the call, I took her off speaker and stared up at a beautiful woman making her way closer to where I was sitting.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I heard you pull up, and then you just disappeared. I wanted to make sure you were okay.” The stranger

announced, and hoping to save myself from seeming like an even bigger fool, I got to my feet and thanked her for her concern.

“Thanks. I’d like to come up with something less mortifying, but there is nothing I can say to explain my crying like a baby in the middle of nowhere.”

“Maybe that’s the key. I know I have cried plenty of nights when I look around and see nothing. I promise, it’s not all bad, and once you are back on your way, I am sure things ahead will be much happier. Are you in need of gas, food, or the restroom?” The girl returned, and the more she spoke, the less I felt as if all was lost.

“All of the above.” I let her know, and with barely enough light, I was able to notice a smile spread across her face as she waved her hand toward the building behind us and said, “Right this way.”

I let Riley know I was going to take care of things and assured her I would call her back once I figured out what I was doing; and then I followed the young woman with long, gorgeous, dark hair that fell

just below her waist into the multipurpose establishment.

“Do you work here alone?” I asked, regretting it as soon as it came out. What kind of weirdo asks a girl in the middle of nowhere if she is all alone? Clearly catching my internal realization, she joked, “Why? Are you afraid for my sake or yours?” and then she laughed before slipping behind the counter and asking, “Do you know what you’re in the mood for?” while tilting her head in the direction of the small kitchen to make it clear what she was asking.

“I feel terrible asking you to start everything up and make a mess for me. I’m sure I can just eat some snacks.” I answered, genuinely not wanting to bother her.

“It’s not a problem. It’s my job. You know what...I’ll make you something that isn’t on the menu if you want,” she offered and stayed where she had been standing, waiting to see if I would take her up on her offer. There was something about her that felt as if she was more than just a girl I’d never see

again, and when she smiled after I nodded, every part of me felt like, for the first time, I was truly alive.

“I’m a great listener if you’d like to get things off your chest. It’s never good to drive distracted, but even worse of an idea when it’s dark.” She offered, and as much as I wanted to know her name, I stopped myself from asking so I wouldn’t look like a fool. I offered her a half smile and asked where the closest place to spend the night was, and when she smiled back, I think a part of me believed that I was dreaming.

“I’ll be sure to tell you all of your options, but first, I need to know chicken, beef, or vegetarian?”

“Beef, or chicken, but I don’t mind veggies either, so whatever you feel like cooking up,” I answered, prompting her to turn to face the kitchen area, flip on the light, and fasten an apron around her waist.

I took a seat in one of the six fixed stools at the counter directly across from the large flat-top grill she would be cooking on, and watched as she expertly sliced and diced ingredients like a pro. When the

silence became a little too loud for my liking, I asked, “How long have you worked here?”

“Nearly all of my life in some capacity at least. I moved here when I was still a small child. My grandfather brought this place, and when my mom took off, it was just him and me. But you don’t have to ask about me, you know? I will gladly offer an ear. I mean, it’s not every day you get an opportunity to throw caution to the wind. Free advice from someone you will never have to worry about seeing again.” She offered, but I didn’t like what she was implying, regardless of how true it was.

“I appreciate your offer, but I’m not sure how much worse I want to make things for myself. You clearly walked up when I was in the middle of crying on the phone with my sister. I don’t believe that gutting myself with a person who, as you so clearly put it, I will never see again will be helpful.” I answered. Just saying the words hurt and that didn’t make any sense, so I convinced myself I was embarrassed that the most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on caught me at an all-time low.

“What I witnessed was raw and complete heart-break. I didn’t mean to intrude on something so personal, but I also wanted to make sure you were okay. We *are* in the middle of nowhere.” She supplied and threw a wink with a grin my way.

“You know I won’t put up a fight if you plan to kill me,” I confessed so easily, and was only a little shocked that a part of me meant it.

“I believe that, and that is exactly why I offered an ear. I know sometimes it’s hard to see anything other than whatever knocked us down. It always feels hopeless when whatever it is is in the process of trying to drown us.” The young woman insisted, and the way the light was shining on her made it look as if she was glowing from within.

“You look like you have a halo the way the light is shining on you. You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if this is all some sort of divine intervention to hopefully pull my head out of my butt, so why not? I suppose if I just lay it all out there, I will have no other choice but to deal with it.” I mustered up but was temporarily distracted when she placed a plate of chicken and steak stir-fry in front of me. It

looked and smelled incredible, and I couldn't wait to dig in, but I knew it was hot, so I let her know my initial thoughts and then threw my current issues on the proverbial counter to gauge her reaction before I shared anything deeper.

"I was a secret I don't even know what, to a well-known person who has played games with me for years. Less than five hours ago, she told me she got rid of our unborn child without any emotion and then called me insane when I let her know I could no longer live my life following her around like some sort of unwanted dog." When she held my gaze and didn't flinch, I offered more.

"Every single woman I tried to love has made it clear that I am pathetic, and it's hard to hold onto hope when I had to call my sister to save me from myself after I ran away and ended up in the middle of nowhere. If I hadn't stopped here, I would have never made it through the night on that bike."

"Hum, well, you mentioned divine intervention, so I would like to second that line of thinking for a moment. I'm here, and while I may not know you, I am an excellent judge of character. Have you ever

considered the possibility that those people you tried to pour your love into weren't capable of receiving what you had to give? I believe that we have one person meant for us, and no one else can truly appreciate our value unless they are given the ability to truly see it." She offered, and as I searched her eyes, I couldn't find anything to suggest that she was simply trying to sell me some sort of band-aid with a lollypop to appease me just so she could send me on my way.

"Fate? Is that what you are alluding to?" I asked, allowing my skepticism to take center stage. It wasn't that I hadn't witnessed the likes of couples seemingly being made for one another before. Hell, all the people I knew met their person and were completely love drunk. But I really thought two of the four women I gave myself to were meant to be mine.

"You can call it whatever you'd like, but yes. Is it so far out there to think that there is someone who was born to live and love the way the Creator of it all designed it to be? I like to think, when I am looking up at the stars, that the one who was made for me is also looking, and each time we look up at the same time, we are all the more closer to meeting face to

face. It's easy to feel as if this world is so big we are lost within it, but that only happens when we forget that we were created with a purpose and are loved beyond measure."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but people who believe things like that with such conviction have usually never been made to feel as if they were nothing more than a burden." I returned, trying my best to make her not believe the worst of me.

"Being made to feel worthless comes from people who are broken inside. If they have made you feel that way, then they are not your people. My own mother walked out of my life when I was four years old. She said I was my grandfather's problem, and she never turned back. My father was married to another woman when I was conceived, and when my mother and I lived near him, all of the people around us called her a home wrecker, and I was lumped into the same category because my father's wife wanted nothing to do with me. I am not suggesting that you brought anything upon yourself. I am simply letting you know that if a person had no issue being cruel to you often enough that you begin to believe what

they say, they were never meant to be with you in the first place.”

Hearing her explain some of the hurt from her past, while she tried again to help me see that I shouldn't accept things as facts simply because those things happened unfairly and caused me pain.

I thought back to our life in Texas a bit, but it had been so long ago, and I found life had more than made up for its rocky start; however, I knew what she meant. I decided to keep my understanding to myself, not wanting her to feel as if I was dismissing what she shared.

“Can I ask your name?” I questioned in a voice that sounded a bit shaky in my ears. I loved the way her face lit up when she playfully answered, “I will tell you, but only if you promise you will keep spilling your beans.”

I licked my lips for some reason, feeling all sorts of confidence that I thought I lost years ago, and pushed back, “I'm pretty sure learning your name will only help your cause. I can consider you a friend if you tell me.”

“Well, I thought the stranger thing is what would make opening up easier, but you *are* just passing through, so I suppose I can tell you. My name is Ahyoka.”

“That’s a beautiful name. Thanks for sharing it with me. This food, by the way, is delicious. Just let me know what I owe you. Is it okay if I hang around a bit? I feel as if you were getting ready to close when I showed up, and I don’t want to keep you. I just don’t know what it is, but...” I tried to figure out what to say when she began to nod and offer something, clearly hoping to ease some of the unintended tension my hesitation had caused.

“I would like that. Besides, you barely even started getting things off your chest. Have you forgotten? I rudely stumbled upon a private moment.” Ahyoka caught my wince at her words and placed her hand on my forearm before adding, “In no way did I intend to make things awkward for you. I just want you to know that I barely know you and wouldn’t even think to do something that would cause you so much pain. When people truly love someone, they

wouldn't dare to do so either. So, Mr. Motorcycle, you need to pick better women."

Ahyoka and I talked for six hours. I was exhausted, but I would have stayed awake as long as she would have allowed me to. She caught a glimpse of the time and uttered, "Oh no. I am sorry I kept you awake so late, or I suppose I should say early," and then she began to chew her lip as if the time was a bigger issue than it was. I was about to tell her it was okay when she added, "The nearest overnight lodge is at least a forty-five-minute drive. I don't feel right sending you on your way, and besides, you wouldn't be able to even check in until after noon. So, please, come stay with me. My place is right behind us. About forty or so steps once we walk out the back door."

After I asked if she was sure, she all but insisted, claiming it was best option for me to get some sleep.

"Thank you. I really appreciate your hospitality as much as I have your company. It's hard not to trust you were right when you said I was led here. Ahyoka, being with you for a few hours has been wonderful. I feel so much better than I did when I pulled into your parking lot."

“I am so glad to hear that. Let me go and lock up. There are a few regulars that will be here in a couple hours, and as long as they can fill up their tanks, they won’t mind if I am closed.” She explained as she made her way over to the double glass doors to do what she had said needed to be done. When she walked past me, I caught a hint of what smelled like honeysuckle and green apples that must have come from her hair as it flowed behind her from her hurried steps.

Ahyoka opened the door to a single-wide trailer, and as we made our way, I actually counted the steps, so I told her, “It was thirty-eight steps for me,” which caused her to tilt her head to the side, a bit confused, and then she laughed when she figured it out.

“Welcome to my home. It isn’t much, and I hope you don’t mind, but there is only one bed that I planned on giving you when I offered. I just got rid of the one that used to be here,” she began to explain and pointed to a sleeping compartment before she

added, “when my grandpa passed, opting for more storage.”

“It’s fine. I can sleep wherever you were planning to. I am not going to take your bed from you.” I insisted, and with a shaky breath, Ahyoka looked me in the eyes and said, “Are you willing to share? I know it’s...” causing her eyes to widen the moment she realized what she had offered.

Wanting to calm her, I placed my hand on her shoulder and let her know softly, “I will sleep wherever you want me to, and if you are okay with sharing a bed, I promise to be a perfect gentleman.”

“Okay. I know I can trust you, so yes, we can share. Before we go to bed, would it be okay if I hugged you? I know that’s stupid and weird, even,” once again, I wanted to stop her from feeling out of sorts, so I pulled her into my arms.

As I held her and placed my nose against her hair, I took in a deep breath, hoping I would burn her scent into my mind so I could remember her for the rest of my life. A part of me wanted to stay with her forever, but the part that wasn’t completely insane reminded me that we had just met; I didn’t live in

Utah, and there was no way that just because she showed me kindness meant that she wanted to deal with my mess. Besides, I just got out of a relationship and thought too highly of Ahyoka to use her as a rebound.

I wasn't sure how long it had been, and I didn't want to let her go, but the moment I felt her body beginning to pull back, I did the same.

"I don't think I have to offer you the grand tour. I mean, what you see is what you get. Help yourself to anything in the fridge, and well...I'll climb in first so you can get up if you need to. After I fall asleep, I don't move much." She rattled off, once again being caught up in nervous energy.

"You have been this solid, self-assured person from the second you first spoke to me, and yet all of a sudden you have this completely opposite energy trying to take you out. You sure you don't want me to sleep at the table?" I asked, concerned that she was second-guessing her hospitality.

"No. I'm okay. I just have never had a man apart from my grandpa, and my uncle in my home before."

She admitted and climbed onto her bed, where she moved all the way toward the wall to make room for me. My heart pounded so hard in my chest that I almost believed she could hear it. Thankfully, I didn't have to worry whether or not it was true because I fell asleep.

I slept until the sound of my phone woke me up.

At first, I forgot where I was, so when I opened my eyes with the sole purpose of wanting to shut off my phone, I looked around trying to figure it out. I turned my head to look down when I remembered, but the feel of the girl who was nestled up beside me felt too good for me to want to move. I knew I went to sleep lying flat on my back with my arms folded against my chest, but Ahyoka's head was resting on my peck, and her arm was draped over my stomach. I didn't want to wake her, but I needed to find out who was calling, so I tried my best to move, knowing I would regret it the second I slipped away.

I missed the call that woke me, and decided to text my sister back instead, hoping that Ahyoka wouldn't wake up. In between texts, I took a picture of the girl who shared her bed with me. A part of me wondered if it was wrong, but the other part never wanted to forget how incredibly beautiful she was. I wouldn't share it with anyone; I just couldn't let her go. I knew what I was feeling was one-sided; she never even asked me for my name, but that didn't mean that I was willing to forget one of the best nights of my life.

I got you a flight home. You'll need to hurry so you can drop off whatever you are driving and check in. I will be at the airport to pick you up. I love you.

My sister's last text read. And I knew it was the best way for me to leave. I didn't want there to be any more awkwardness between Ahyoka and me, so I wrote her a note. In my rush to leave without waking her, I let her know how much she truly helped me. I also told her I believed she was an angel, and if not,

it didn't matter because she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

I didn't give her my number because I didn't want to make her feel as if she was obligated to reach out. She was kind, and she was waiting for her one and only. If we did talk again, I knew I would fall in love with her, and that wasn't something I'd be able to do while she waited for her soul mate.

CAN I TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENED FROM MY POINT OF VIEW?

AHYOKA'S TURN

I heard a motorcycle pull up, and when the rider killed the engine, I looked at my phone to see who it was. There was no sound on the camera feeds, and the person wasn't familiar to me, so I decided to go and see if the man who had squatted down as he spoke into his phone was okay.

I closed the app, trying not to be nosy, and when I was able to see him with my own two eyes, I watched him bottom out—clearly upset. I caught the voice on the other end of his call, listing out things, trying

to convince him that he was lovable, but when I got closer, his energy nearly knocked me out.

It was like a lava lamp. He was all over the place, but nothing in him gave me cause to worry. I could see that he was good, but I could also tell that he was torn between giving up and pressing on. I knew it had nothing to do with the motorcycle that brought him to me. This man, who was crying with all he had in him, was losing his will to live.

He was gorgeous. It felt weird for me to think that, but it was true. In all of my nearly twenty years of living, I never felt what just looking at him stirred up inside of me. I chalked it up to the fact that I was in the middle of nowhere and barely got the chance to see new faces. Even though it wasn't completely true, I had social media and even spent time with my brother in North Carolina a few times, but none of it mattered in that moment.

The fact that I was feeling things I couldn't name so strongly only caused me to play up the helpful, stranger role I forced myself into—emphasis on the stranger part to remind myself that he was just passing by.

Looking at his energy and trying to figure out what I was seeing felt almost like an intrusion. He was so clearly in a dark place, which, even without overhearing his sister, his energy revealed; he was torn between wanting someone to see and hoping that no one would.

The thing that threw me off most were the colors I saw woven in and throughout his spectrum. I knew he was overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness because of the way his force was pulsating, and instead of being bright, it was growing dim. The only other time I had seen anything like it was when people were close to dying. I may have just met him, but I knew I didn't want this world to miss out on his otherwise beautiful soul.

I was surprised when he looked at me because the second our eyes met, his energy became strong and bright, and the colors that were the strongest were the same as the ones that made up my grandfather and my brother. No matter what else I was being shown on the outer rim, deep down, the gorgeous

man in front of me was kind, and I knew with all I had in me that he was good.

I had no idea what I was supposed to say, but I knew I wanted him to eat and get out of the suppressive funk he was being bogged down by. Getting him to talk was easier than I thought it would be, but as he continued to share, I felt this overwhelming feeling to make things right, which was completely BONKERS. I had no right to this man. He was a stranger passing by and yet, something in me felt drawn to him.

A sudden burst of angry disgust formed inside of me at the thought that he was so distraught over women who made him believe he was anything less than a gift. As I listened to him recall some of the hurts from his past, I fought the anger their actions caused within me, knowing there was nothing that could be done to take any of it back. I fixed my face to remain neutral and tried my best to give him freedom to purge and process, while hopefully providing enough room for him to see and then pick a different path as he shared parts of his life with me.

No matter how many times I tried to keep the conversation centered around him, he kept asking about me. I didn't want to shut him out, but I felt if I opened up, I would find myself hoping he would stay. Who was I to believe that I would know what to do with someone who was used and abused by people? I wasn't exactly experienced in anything beyond running the shop and killing time, pretending to be obedient to my Heavenly Father when all I was really doing was hiding.

Yeah—I just said that. At the time when my subconscious was being awoken to it, I wasn't sure that's what was happening, or even that I was doing it. I had no clue that I was using my seclusion to keep myself protected while being afraid of so many things I just ignored hoping that the fears weren't truly there.

In walked this incredibly attractive man, so mixed up in his own mess that while I stood there, I could feel my own start to make its way to the surface. What did I do about it? That's simple, I poured everything I had into helping him. My stuff could

wait until I was all alone once again for me to pay it any attention.



We talked for close to an hour after we finished eating. Clearly trying to stretch, he lifted his arms and rocked his head back and forth, causing him to catch sight of the jewelry display just off to the side of where he was sitting. He stood and walked over to get a better look, and once he was within reach, his face lit up with obvious approval. As he ran his fingers over each of the pieces, my heart quickened, and I felt as if a smile was forming on the inside where it reached out to brush against my very soul.

"These are incredible. Each one, so beautiful—it's like they are telling a story of the one who crafted them. Where in the world did you get these?" He asked, and his eyes widened in surprise when I answered, "I made them."

"Ahyoka, these truly are amazing. I feel like they call out to me. This one..." he said and paused as he held a turquoise piece up to make a point. It was one of the only keychains I ever made, and when I looked at him, he continued, "I know my sister would love

it. It's like it's meant to be close by where she can revel in its beauty each time she looks at it.

"And this bracelet would look perfect on my Me Maw Julie, who I just know would not only see the beauty you've so expertly crafted, but she would cherish it forever. I would like to buy these, and that necklace as well. That one is definitely going to my mom." He praised as he placed the first two pieces he picked on the counter before turning to grab the silver necklace with a citrine gemstone in the shape of a teardrop floating loosely within a heart-shaped, cage-like pendant.

I took in a deep breath as I watched him inspect the jewelry while he ran his fingers over each of the remaining pieces. I slowly released the breath I was holding as he moved over and fixed his gaze on the clothing and shoes next to the jewelry, which had mostly been made by my grandfather.

"Wow. I am impressed. These are clearly hand-crafted as well. Don't tell me that you made these, too." He asked with a raised brow, pulling a smile

right out of me while also forcing me to release the breath I'd taken but had yet to let out.

"My grandfather was the one who made those," I informed, only to let out a chuckle when he pulled out a vest—the only item of clothing I made that was for sale —and thoroughly looked it over.

"What's so funny?" He asked and looked my way, waiting for me to answer.

"That one is the only one here that I made," I explained, holding his gaze for a few seconds before I ran my fingers over the buttery soft leather of the vest. My mind easily filled with memories of when my grandfather taught me how to work with each of the different animal hides. I was lost in the past when a spark snapped me back to the present, where I immediately felt overwhelmed.

Shocked by the spark I felt when our fingers touched, I pulled my fingers away, but the young man just looked at me with one of the warmest smiles I had ever seen. So warm I swore I could feel heat radiate throughout my body as I forced myself not to do or say anything stupid.

“I hope you have an online store. The things...the treasures you have here are too special to keep locked away.” He pushed, clearly hoping I knew it was a true compliment.

Needing to lighten the heaviness I was feeling under his gaze, I teased, “Isn’t that what you do with treasure? You keep it hidden.” My words seemed to have caused him to think about my perspective with more confusion than I intended, so I smiled and explained, “I have thought about listing things online, but they take time. I enjoy making both the jewelry, as well as the clothing. Each time I allow myself to get closer to selling online, I end up worrying if I will begin to regret or dread making them if my market grows.”

“I suppose I can see how that may be a concern, but what you have here is custom, and the details are meticulously crafted, unlike anything I have ever seen before. You could create an online store and only sell what you want when you want. In fact, doing so would drive up the value since what you offer would essentially be limited.”

Listening to his ideas as he shared them with so much enthusiasm switched my mind from the heaviness I was feeling, brought on by the emotions I couldn't quite figure out, and over to trying to see what he was laying out there. I agreed to give it more thought and switched the focus back to him when I asked what he did for a living.

I stared at the honey-colored speckles in his hazel eyes while I listened as he talked about working on a ranch. The more he shared, the more I studied his features and found myself wishing I could look at him every day. He spoke with such loving admiration about his home and the people in his life that his face revealed a pure innocence, and his smile genuinely lit up his whole face.

His eyes twinkled, and his energy was nearly blinding when he told me about his mom and sister. He shared things he didn't have to, like the years that were wasted because he allowed a girl to come between the bond that was forged from way back when he and his sister shared a womb.

"I am so glad you were able to work things out. It's a special thing to have a relationship like that that

you can depend on. I don't get to see my brother as often as I would like to, but I know he is someone I could trust with my life if it ever came down to it."

My initial concern that I would easily be swept away was valid. As much as I tried to remind myself that our time was limited, I couldn't help but feel a desire ignite deep down in my soul. What I felt was far beyond my wildest dreams, and it was terrifyingly wonderful, so natural—I thought I was out of my mind.

The more we talked, the more it felt as if I had known him my whole life. Okay, maybe that is an exaggeration—I didn't even know his name, and I forced myself not to ask him, hoping that when he left, I wouldn't drive myself crazy trying to find him like some crazy stalker.

What I knew was that I wanted what he had. I wanted to be surrounded by people I could depend on as much as I would hope they would also depend on me. I found that I wanted it all so much the more

he spoke that I was dismissing things I later believed were meant to be the signs my grandfather used to tell me about.

You know those things that all the best romance stories are about?

The sparks, the feeling that your soul has truly come alive and is now begging you to finally take that chance. Your heart begins beating a brand new tune because it has found the one whose heart beats in sync, and let me say, it feels euphoric. It's knowing deep down that this person is supposed to be in your life forever because they were made especially for you.

I felt all of those things and so many more that I can't even figure out, but I also thought that was insane. In the time we spent together, I kept telling myself that I would never see him again and what I was feeling was just fantasy brought on by someone new and incredibly good looking.

It was when we hugged that I allowed myself the freedom to think, what if it's all real and that's why people write about it. What if soul mates, just as my

grandfather believed, weren't fairytales at all. Perhaps the truth was they were so rare because people walked in their flesh and settled for what felt good in the moment, effectively diluting the bond that was meant to be?

I asked myself—what if the very thing I was waiting for, that I was saving myself for, was the man who smelled like home even though I wasn't sure how or if that was even possible.

When he took his place beside me on the bed, I closed my eyes, leaned into Yahuah, and almost as if He was offering me a respite, I fell asleep with the final thought that in the morning, I'd let him in. I felt peace wash over me and I knew it was Yah, as much as I also felt it was the man sleeping next to me in my bed.



I woke up when I heard the sound of a motorcycle starting up. I wasn't sure what I expected to happen, but not getting to say goodbye felt a lot like heartbreak, or maybe regret. I got out of bed and went to grab my phone off the charger to watch him drive off, but I was distracted when I noticed a note

on the table. Grabbing it, I read what he wrote and felt my heart pick up its pace when I read his name after being moved to tears at the thought of his kind words.

“Christopher,” I said out loud, and for some reason I brought the paper to my chest and held it as if it were him, and I was in his arms when he hugged me right before we went to sleep. I wanted to ask him so many times, but my main concern was keeping him with me long enough to be certain he wouldn’t give up. I hated the way he shared the things that happened to him with so much belief that he was unlovable or that he wasn’t enough for women who clearly had no business even having access to him.

The more we talked, the more I found him to be refreshing. The things he enjoyed, and as I’ve already shared, the love that flowed from him when he spoke of his family and friends. The way he focused on me until he’d look away once he realized I caught him, all made me want to know everything about him. We talked, and I so easily shared things about myself that I had never talked about with anyone.

I knew before I offered for him to stay with me that he wouldn't do anything inappropriate, even though I had this desire to kiss him pretty much all night. Actually, I wanted him to kiss me, but he was heartbroken. When I asked him for that hug, it was for two reasons. One was because I wanted to know what it felt like to be in his arms, and the other was because I knew the benefit of human touch, and I wanted to make sure he knew someone cared, even if I was someone he had just met.

When I told him I believed we all had a soul mate, I was being truthful. The way I felt right before I had fallen asleep, I truly believed that he was mine. I planned on asking him to stay for another day, only he was gone. Instead of allowing myself to lose hope, I told myself that it was the intensity of his feelings that caused mine to overreact. And then I doubted what I believed to be a gift from my Heavenly Father. I tried to dismiss it, claiming there was no way Yah would bring him into my life only to have him drive away as if I had been invisible.

I chose, in that moment, to be grateful that the Most High used me to help remind one of His children who they were and not to lose hope. I then lifted Christopher in prayer, asking for safe travels and a love that is so pure and strong it would have the ability to not only heal the damage he suffered but also make him forget he ever believed he was unlovable.

“Ahya, are you in here?” I heard my uncle call out to me as he made his way toward the trailer. Before I could answer, he had already begun to open the door.

“What is it, child? Are you okay?” He asked. I wasn’t the only one who was able to see things, and I was definitely not the only one who knew the Creator’s voice. I was convinced he had been led to me, and as much as I didn’t want to face the reality of what had happened, I knew even more that avoiding it would serve no purpose.

"I never really wanted a different life. Of course, I never wanted my mother to be shunned as the villain, but I loved being here with my grandfather. Learning who I am, and being taught to live as I was called to are gifts more valuable than the precious stones and materials I have learned to craft with." I began.

"But?" my uncle pressed, hoping I would trust him enough to get to the point so we could rob it of any power it may have to affect me negatively.

"I met the one I was made for. His eyes were exactly as they were in my dream, and we clicked so easily. My heart hurts so much. You know, I always loved the fated mate stories grandpa would tell me growing up. When I first told him about my dreams, he assured me that I was being shown my gift so that I would wait for the one that was mine. I wasn't prepared to meet him when he was ready to leave this world. His spirit was barely a spark. The color was right, but it was the dullest I had ever seen. It was the same as the moment when the ruach knows it's time here has come to an end. He gave up before he ever met me, while I have waited each day as if he would come."

“He did, child. He came. I am sure you remember that Yahuah doesn’t make mistakes.”

“I do, but I also know that we all have free will. I don’t know if I will ever see him again. He left this morning, and while the whole time I wanted to tell him more, hoping he would feel the pull of what Yah had planned by crossing our paths, something inside me kept telling me to wait.” I took a breath and wiped away a tear that had fallen before I shared my mixed emotions with the only other one, I had left that I trusted completely, apart from Sunny.

“It’s not so much that he didn’t wait. I get how rare that is. Listening to him share the horrors of what he has gone through was hard. Other women stole the strength from what was meant to be mine. I have waited to love him my whole life, and I am not sure if he will ever trust again.”

“Ah-Ya, no! You must see that whatever it is that caused him to come here was all a part of the Father’s plan. If he had had successful relationships, then you wouldn’t have met him, or worse yet, he would have settled and robbed himself of being loved by the one

who is his soul tie. Loving a wounded person isn't easy, but you will have Yahuah to guide you.

"When I met Auntie, I had already given my body to others. I didn't want to believe in any part of the soul ties. In fact, I was even a little cruel when she first showed up. Ri (pronounced Re) waited. She was kind, and her patience was what ended up reaching my soul. I can assure you that he will be thinking of you."

"But that is it, Uncle, I don't know anything about him apart from his name, which is Christopher."

"Oh, my forgetful girl. Do you think Yahuah made a mistake? The way you are speaking and the doubts you are giving far too much attention to are a waste of your time. Have you given any thought to the idea that this meeting was more for him, so he finds the will to carry on now that he has met you? Of course, you have to have realized that your part of the meeting is so that you can see what you've held on to and trusted for all of these years would come to pass. Yah is laying the path before you; you just have

to keep your eyes on Him, and your feet must remain on His path.

“No part of living your life for Yahuah is easy, you know that, but it is always worth it. And the love that is forged, shared, and lived with the one meant for your ruach is indescribable. You are partners for life, and as one, you trust in the Most High to show you the way and keep you together.”

I wanted so badly to believe in what he was reminding me of that I leaned into Yah and asked for Him to remove the hope I wanted to cling to if I was wrong; and Christopher wasn't meant to be mine. Instead, He made it crystal clear when I went into the shop and found another note with two, hundred-dollar bills under it.

Christopher let himself in through the back door we locked up together and bought the leather bracelet I made when I was younger that at the time, I jokingly claimed was for the one who was made for me. It had sat for all those years in the same place I put it when I spoke those words to my grandfather, and now it was purchased by the one I could vividly picture spending the rest of my life with.

His note was sweet and a little ridiculous, but it brought a true smile to my face. He apologized for not having any more cash than what he left, and he promised he would make it right one day. After I read his note for the third time, I looked upward and said, “Yahuah, thank You. I trust that You will work it all out in Your perfect timing. I am so grateful that You loved me enough to bring him to me. Please, take care of him and let Him see just how much You love him.”

SOMETHING FEELS OFF

CHRIS

I let Riley know I would reach out once I was checked in at the airport. I could have talked to her while I drove, but I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts. I knew I wouldn't be able to say goodbye to Ahyoka, so taking off so I could make the flight my sister arranged for me was the perfect excuse to cut and run. Or so that's what I kept telling myself.

There was something about her that reached a part of me I didn't even realize was there. Whatever had me seeking the Most High with such raw sincerity wasn't exactly clear; I just found myself talking to Him the entire drive back to Vegas.

I thanked Him for sending me one of His messengers. I don't care what anyone else had to say about everything that happened during the past thirty hours, give or take an hour or two—I 100% believed that it was all divinely orchestrated.

Not the horrific acts themselves per se, but the feelings they evoked, and then being led to one of His finest creations—which I just knew was all His doing.

Ahyoka was out-of-this-world beautiful. Her skin was a shade that clearly came from her family's genes as well as from being out in the sun. She didn't have even a speck of makeup on, and yet she was flawless. Her hair was long and so dark I believe it was truly black. It was thick and hung down her back, ending right in the middle of her perfect rear (which I only got to see while she cooked because she pulled her hair up and covered it with a hairnet—even then, she was perfect.)

I hated that I couldn't trust myself because I thought two other people were the one, so I pushed her into the most obvious box. Ahyoka was a gift

from the Most High, and she was sent to offer me a glimpse at one of His masterpieces. Knowing there were women out there like her was all the motivation that I needed to get my life together.

Even if, for some crazy reason, I were ever gifted someone even sort of like Ahyoka in the future, I'd be nothing more than a booby prize if I didn't figure out how to get my head dislodged from my butt.

There was this moment when we touched briefly, where I thought I felt a surge of energy flow between us, but things like that didn't happen in the real world, so I explained it away as static electricity. The state my mind was in made it easier for me to believe that the woman I spent the night talking to in the middle of nowhere was an angel instead of an actual person with no relation to me, who cared enough to be there.

When I got off the motorcycle, I rubbed my fingers over the bracelet I knew I would never take off. It's nothing major, just a multi-strand, multi-colored, woven leather piece. It was more of a tighter, cylinder shape instead of lying wide and flat. There

were two silver, hand-hammered cuffs on both sides of a fixed centered bead. That bead reminded me of Ahyoka's eyes so much I had to have it, and when I slipped it on, it felt as if it had been made just for me. I wrote her the note and left the cash I had in my wallet. The bracelet had a tag just like all the other pieces only it was worn out so much I couldn't figure out what it said, so I guessed.

I informed Riley when my flight was expected to land, even though she already knew since she was the one who booked the flight; and then I thanked her for making sure I'd get home okay. I was just about to call my mom when a feeling of jealousy caught up to me from out of nowhere with such a strong force I didn't even think about trying to fight it off. Giving in to the feeling had me sending a text to Wyatt instead.

Does everything you touch
turn to gold?

What's that supposed to mean? You lost me

It means that, from where I am sitting, you just lived your life, and everything worked in your favor. I was no different than you, and yet life likes to piss all over me instead

I hated that he called in response, so I hit ignore. He called again, but I texted him back.

I can't. I just thought that since you are married now, you could let me in on how it was always so easy for you.

I'd rather talk about this, but since you aren't answering my calls, I need you to know that nothing just fell from the sky into my lap. I went through stuff too. I'm not sure when we stopped being real with one another, but I am hoping this right here is the first step in fixing it.

I didn't reply. I had no idea what to say. I wasn't sure if there was anything left that could be fixed. I hated that I was somehow still jealous of Wyatt when all I really wanted was to go back to the time when he was one of my best friends. I was able to fix things with my sister, and since she and Mikey were married, he and I have grown a little closer, too.

But none of it was like it was when we were younger. The bond the four of us shared, I'd swear, was orchestrated by the Most High if it would help drive home my point. The feeling that the people beside you were meant to be there was incredible.

At the time, I naively believed nothing would ever come between us until it did. And then I thought it would all work itself out on its own; only in time I learned that I was nothing more than an outsider looking in. They worked it out. They got that bond back, and it was stronger than it ever was when we were children, but I didn't have a true place in our foursome anymore, and that sucked big time.

I called my mom and somehow managed to convince her that the weirdness she sensed was just me being tired. Talking to her usually helped, but I wasn't really talking, so trying to place the blame on her for my mood being one more acceptable coming from a toddler was pointless. Thankfully, I was able to shove those thoughts aside while I assured her I would be home soon enough, and in no hurry to take off again any time soon. Once we disconnected and I was getting ready to board the plane, I found myself being dragged back into all things Wyatt.

I thought about the friendship he and I shared before Marybeth and allowed myself a moment of truth—I missed him. Mikey was great, but he was mostly agreeable. As much as he didn't see it, I knew he and Ri had something from the beginning. Sure, he took a little longer than she did to understand what was meant to be begun the second we met in the nursery. When Wyatt came, he fit right in with the three of us as if he was there all along. The two of us liked the same things, and he was more outgoing like me. Wyatt lived his life in such a way that made

it seem as if he was fearless. I felt, simply by being his friend, that I could be more than I had ever thought possible because he had our back and encouraged us no matter what.

The more I walked down memory lane, the more I hoped there'd be a way to salvage what once was. As I sat in the plane as it flew me back home to North Carolina, I admitted to myself for the first time that I was the one to blame for falling out of touch with the people who meant the world to me. At first, I was overwhelmed by the heaviness that realization had caused. But then, as I literally sat with that knowledge and tore the idea apart, the heaviness began to lift as I thought, If I caused it, then I may be able to fix it.

I'm willing to give you three guesses who was waiting for me when I landed, but I bet you wouldn't need that many. Riley was the one I was looking for, and yet it was the one I basically tortured myself thinking about for most of my flight home.

I hated that I was a complete jerk when he smiled and said, “Welcome home.”

Even though I had just figured out what my deal was, I knew that reclaiming my life and fixing my friendships wouldn’t be easy. Wyatt and I were still broken, and I knew I was the one who needed to do something about it, only I had no idea what to do. Sadly, I let my frustration and fear roll off me as if Wyatt were a perfect pitch and I was itchin’ to hit it out of the park.

Wyatt didn’t say anything when I rolled my eyes and mumbled, “Great. Where’s my sister?”

He waited until we were in his truck before he even answered, even though there was no reason for him to. It was easy to see that he was hoping our ride home would give us time to reconcile things between us. Or at the very least it would force me to talk. As much as I wanted that very thing, I acted like a wounded animal, snapping and fighting, afraid that if I let my guard down, I’d still end up hurt and without my friend for good.

“You had to have thought there’d be a chance I’d be the one to pick you up—yeah?” Wyatt asked after he pulled the door shut, effectively closing us in.

“Honestly...no. I’m not even sure why you’re here? I just asked for your handbook hoping I could find a way to get off the path I’ve been on for way longer than I should have.”

“And you didn’t think I would come? Chris, I have been waiting for years for you to reach out. To say something. I hate this...” he said with a rawness in his voice that seemed to squeeze my heart before he paused to wave his hand between us as a means to make his point.

Before he could say anything else, I spat out, “If that was true, then why didn’t you say anything yourself? Why did I have to be the one to say something when I was already the loser—I was the pathetic joke?”

The way he shook his head, and then calmly, as if he was doing everything in his power to keep us both grounded, answered, “You were never pathetic, and not at all a loser. You’re my best friend, and I just wanted it all to go away because every time I

tried to say something, you wouldn't even look at me. You haven't looked me in the eyes since that night, and I hate it. You are one of the best people I know, and watching you shrink down and pull away killed me inside. That time in the barn when I first came back—I hoped it would open the door that had been slammed shut between us for far too long. I prayed it would be enough for us to finally figure it out together, but I only made things worse. I didn't—hell, Chris, I don't know how to do this or what to say to you so you will believe me, but I am no longer willing to do nothing. Tell me how to fix it.”

“Pull over,” I demanded when his words caused all the things I tried to suppress for years to resurface, making me feel sick. I opened the door and hopped out of his truck, where I then puked in the grass on the side of the road. As my stomach rid itself of its contents, my emotions further decided to show up as tears. I already felt like a worthless piece of garbage, and yet there I was crying and barfing like a complete and utter loser, in front of the one person in the world I didn't want to see me.

“Don’t,” I got out weakly when I heard Wyatt’s footsteps getting closer, only he didn’t stop.

“Great, another thing to add to the list of how you are so much better than me,” I added, while slowly shaking my head, but Wyatt wasn’t having any part of it.

“What are you talking about? I never, for a single second, thought I was better than you. Right now, it’s really hard for me not to believe that you hate me, but I don’t know what I did. Whatever it is...I promise you, I never tried to hurt you. Tell me. Tell me what I did so I can figure out how to fix it, please.” He was so sincere as he pleaded his case; his voice remained steady yet strained- revealing his own pain.

“You were always better than me at everything. I tried to love her, and all she ever said was I was almost as good as you. You didn’t even want her, and I still wasn’t good enough. Then I tried to be like you and keep it strictly physical, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t just do that to someone and then walk away as if nothing happened.” The memory of how I felt when I was doing the player thing was unpleasant enough for me

to pause just long enough for Wyatt to declare, “See, you *were* better than me.”

“No. I wanted to be you, but I couldn’t. You took what you wanted from everyone with a smile on your face. Girls knew you would never date them or even give them a second thought, and yet they all but fell into your bed like you were a god or something. Sports—you were stronger, faster, and better than me in all ways. Even with my family and at the ranch.” Wyatt sucked in a breath and winced, causing me to turn my head toward him to see what had happened.

I didn’t have to wait to figure it out; he looked at me, causing me to stare back at the ground as if it was covered in something more interesting than crushed-up gravel and cigarette butts, and in a weak tone he said, “I always thought I was a part of that family, but I guess I was wrong. You know, from the very first day I met the three of you, I felt like an outsider. We were little, but I showed up, and at first I thought it was cool that there were kids my age, but that very same night it was clear that you three already had your bond. You let me in, and I

was floored, but as time went on, it was you who treated me as if I belonged. You made me feel as if I was a part of your family. I remember that summer when I was nine, I actually started to believe that I belonged—that I was a true part of your group.” Wyatt paused to chuckle, and then he brushed his hand over his chin before he continued.

“Whenever Marybeth came around, I remember thinking that *she* was the odd one out. I felt this confidence that it was us four against the world forever, and she was just an interloper that we were forced to hang out with because her mom was friends with yours and Miss April.” He paused, and when he began again, I knew he was hurting just as much as I was.

“Chris, I never meant to hurt you. I really didn’t know how you felt about her until that day, and then I tried to make it right. I hated what she said to you. As soon as it all went down, I never touched her again—man, I never even talked to her again. I think the reason I missed how much you cared was because I thought she was the outsider. I know that probably makes it worse, but I promise, I really thought we

would go back to how things were because I believed *we* were solid. The longer it took, the more I couldn't figure out what to say, but I never wanted us to morph into barely more than two people who were on the same team and worked at the same place."

"What is wrong with me? Why am I not good enough? I give all I have and yet what I have is worthless." I admitted, a bit surprised by how easily it came out, while completely missing that we both felt as if we were the ones on the outside looking in.

Wyatt pulled me into his arms and assured me, "That's not true. What you give is not worthless; you just cut yourself and bled for the wrong people. Even a diamond would be undervalued or completely dismissed if it showed up when a person was dying of hunger. Marybeth wasn't your girl. She was toxic and instead of getting help, she spread her poison. Snow, I don't know enough about the two of you, but I know what that industry is about, and again, that's not a reflection of you."

"I wanted to make it better. I wanted to be the person Kimberly could depend on when everyone else let her down. When she was mad, sad, anything

other than happy, she would say so many of the same things Marybeth would say. It's hard not to believe those things when both of the people you tried to love felt and acted the same way."

"That's why I said it was the people, not you. You have a savior complex. You mean well because you are a good guy. For some reason, you are drawn to and want to fix the broken, but sometimes the ones you are trying to save need to be loved from afar." Wyatt looked at me and suggested we get back on the road. When I nodded, he patted my shoulder and rounded his truck so we could go home. I knew he wasn't trying to end our conversation, and I knew he planned to continue it the second he clicked his seatbelt into place.

"You said you wanted to be me, and all along I just wanted to prove I was good enough to stay in the circle. I'm no better than you, Chris. I never once thought it, and I am sorry you entertained the idea of it even for a second." Wyatt addressed. It was clear he was sharing what he truly believed, so I nodded slightly. Things were awkward, but we were no longer avoiding them. For the first time since the

summer before he started High School, we fought alongside one another to tear down the walls that had been erected between us.

I wasn't sure what things would be like, and I didn't think anything would change instantaneously, but after close to twenty minutes of the two of us not saying anything, I decided I wanted to ask him about his life just as much as I wanted to open up about mine.

"How long did it take for you to know that Jackie was it for you?" I asked while looking out the window as we drove back to Spring View.

"The moment I saw her, I felt something. I don't know how to explain it, but I just knew she was different. Why?" He asked, his tone suggesting he would offer more if that's what I wanted, but he'd rather know if my question had more to do with me.

"On the flight, I felt this urge to type out a text to Riley about a girl I met yesterday," I began, and

caught a slight smile begin to work itself onto Wyatt's face.

"What?" I questioned, causing him to shake his head while his smile grew, before he supplied, "If you told Silver about her, then she matters." The look I gave caused him to further explain, "I drafted emails telling your sister all about Jackie. I didn't send them right away. I actually waited until Jackie showed up, and then I sent them to her all at once, but I wanted Silver to know about her. So, tell me about your girl."

"I hardly believe she is my girl, but she's..." I answered, and paused because I knew I would never be able to describe Ahyoka adequately.

"You know, I thought Marybeth was the one. Obviously that was not the case, and then I met Snow. Funny thing about her is that I didn't think anything would come of us. I should have stuck by that initial assessment, but I got caught up in Kimberly. I was never a fan of Snow apart from her appearance, and even that grew old fast. But I actually thought that the girl who showed up every now and then would eventually come around and let me love her. Now I

see that was more about me wanting to fix things for her. I saw a bit of Marybeth and thought maybe, just maybe, I could help make things right. It makes even less sense as I say it, but that's how I felt, I think."

Before I could go any further, Wyatt turned his head and looked at me for a brief second to say, "No, I get it. It makes sense that you wanted to try to heal something you saw in Snow. *Especially* after everything with Marybeth."

I nodded and frowned a bit at the sadness of it all.

"What about this new girl? Would you tell me about her?" Wyatt asked so full of hopefulness, I couldn't help but smile.

"I don't think she is meant to be mine—I mean, she lives a bit far, and we spent less than twenty-four hours together. But she was like this breath of fresh air, reminding me that people like her exist. Don't get me wrong, I know they are out there; we are surrounded by them on the ranch and within our little piece of perfect, but none of them were for me. I'm not saying she was all about me, but she was kind, and I felt as if she genuinely cared about my well-being. I enjoyed spending time with her. And

Wyatt, I was in a really dark place when I pulled up, but the second I looked at her, my heart started beating out a rhythm I had never felt until that moment. I'd swear that she was an angel if I didn't have this..." I confessed while I rubbed my fingers over my new leather bracelet.

"Did she make that?" He asked, clearly hoping I would tell him more.

"She makes all sorts of things; each expertly crafted, like nothing I've ever seen. Shoes, jewelry, vests, belt buckles. What I need to do now is figure out what I am supposed to do with myself. And I want to figure out how to forgive Snow for killing our unborn child." Wyatt sucked in another harsh breath upon hearing the last part, and offered, "I'm so sorry to hear this, Chris." I nodded, appreciating his offer of sympathy.

"One day, when I figure out how to get my life together, I want to go back and see her again. Even if it's only to thank her for being there, and of course, to buy out all of the things she has for sale. I just don't want to go until I am a little less of a mess." I shared and watched as a muscle in Wyatt's jaw ticked.

We were quiet for a bit. There was music playing softly, but neither of us said a word.

As soon as Wyatt merged onto the highway that would lead us back to Spring View, he said, “I hope you spend some of your time learning how to forgive yourself. None of it was your fault, and yet you walk around as if you’re the one to blame. I also hope you know I don’t want to ignore things anymore. I want you to build your home right where you are supposed to, and I want it to be the four of us again, only we added a Jackie and my little princess. It won’t be complete, though, until your wife joins us.”

“My first impression of your wife was a good one. I am looking forward to getting to know her and your daughter better. I will say this—Riley and I making up didn’t make much sense while I was in L.A. Sure, we talked, but it was like more time was being stolen from us. Our trip was a gift I hope to never overlook, and our much-needed healing happened almost as easy as blinking my eyes.” I shared as I asked myself if the same thing could happen between the two of us. Would we be able to find the

connection we once had, or would it be something altogether different?

As much as the question worked its way around inside my mind, I couldn't help but feel as though things between us had already changed for the better. I no longer felt the dread that used to settle in my stomach whenever we were near one another. As we drove home in his truck, I felt okay. I wasn't happy or sad, or any of the countless emotions out there. I was simply at peace with a person I missed more than I'd ever liked to admit; even to myself—until then, that is.

WHAT'S MEANT TO BE WILL BE

AHYOKA

I thought about Christopher each day. At first, it was with urgency. I wanted desperately to find him but had nothing but his first name to go off of. Talking to my uncle helped. He never dismissed what I was feeling, he actually encouraged me to hang onto hope and trust that the Most High would make a way. One day, about two weeks after he left, one of our regulars suggested that I write down everything I would say to him if he showed up. My uncle built upon her suggestion only added that I should tell him all about myself; starting with the dream I had that led to me making the bracelet that Christopher was led to.

I wondered if he thought about me.

I talked to Yahuah about him all the time and found myself hoping that we'd cross paths soon somehow but trusted that Yah would make a way and as always, His will would be done. I ended up finding myself back in the place I spent my whole life; trusting that it would all work out as I waited for the one my Aluah created for me. Only this time, I knew what he looked like and I found myself trying to sketch him from memory. Don't let yourself be fooled—my art was far from perfect, but I wanted to remember all the details I purposefully inventoried during the fourteen hours we spent together.



A few months passed when my brother invited me to come visit for Passover. I was used to spending the set apart times with my grandfather and always wondered what it would be like to honor Yah's Feasts alongside other brothers and sisters in the Mashiach, so I agreed. Sunny was excited for me to meet all of his friends as well as his girlfriend that he started begging for me to come earlier. Knowing I could trust the shop with the Wilkerson's as well as my

uncle, I agreed. Besides, there were a few places close by the reservation I wanted to look into to see if I could work something out to sell some of the things I had made. The one I was most interested in was a little country store called *Taste & See*. Sunny knew the owner and I figured that connection might work in my favor.

I wanted to grow my customer base like Christopher suggested, only I didn't have the time to. I had to run the store, make the things, and take care of myself, leaving me all of half passed never to work on building an online store.

Maybe, just maybe, a bit of my attraction to Christopher was the fact that he arrived on a motorcycle. I loved the feel of straddling all that horsepower and drove nothing else when I needed to leave the shop. The risks involved in riding a bike were lower when you lived out in the desert. Sure, you could still get yourself killed if you were an idiot driving recklessly,

but that could be said of any vehicle, and any location.

I ended up renting a bike when I landed in Charlotte. I wasn't a fan of city driving, but I knew what I was doing. Thankfully, the time I was traveling would only have me dealing with potential traffic until I made my way out of the city and its surrounding towns. Once I was on the road making my way west, I'd be in my zone, knowing I'd be able to soak in all the beauty the drive had to offer.

I wasn't sure why I felt this sudden surge of true contentment as I made my way through Spring View and was nearing the one-time church, now community center, on the outskirts of town. I appreciated the views west-central North Carolina had to offer, and I loved my brother, but I never felt such a strong pull or feeling of belonging as I had in that moment.

As much as the town wasn't the problem, nor was the land of the reservation, I still usually had to fight off feelings of rejection whenever I came to visit

Sunny. Our dad tried to be decent, but since Sunny's mother was still in the picture, that only meant he'd nod his head and offer a weak *bello*.

My feelings on that weren't ones I cared to think about and instead, I looked over and saw who I believed to be my brother playing football with a bunch of people his age on the field of FCC.

While Spring View had a much larger population than my hometown, Whisper Valley, Utah, it was still a small town. That meant, as I pulled into the parking lot where I confirmed it was indeed Sunny I saw, all the heads out and about turned to see who was there.

"Ahya!" my brother called out while he jogged over to me. A smile worked its way onto my face the moment I heard him call my name, and when he wrapped his arms around me, it was clear how much he had grown since the last time we'd seen one another in person.

"Who in the world is the giant holding me right now?" I returned playfully, calling out the fact that

my little brother was head and shoulders taller than me, and that was saying a lot since I was 5' 9".

"What are you, like six-two now, baby brother?" I added once he put me down, and with a grin that hadn't changed a bit regardless of how much he had grown, he corrected, "Six-three," before he hugged me again. After he pulled away and took a few steps back, he shook his head slightly and said, "I'm so glad you are here. I hated the idea of you all alone during the Feasts—well, anytime really, but especially now. I'm sorry to hear about the loss of your grandfather. I know I said it already, but it's still true. Ahya, it's really good to have you here."

"I'm glad you offered and then insisted. I think a break is just what I needed. I always forget how beautiful this place is. I am convinced it's intentional, too. I mean, look at all of this." I said while I once again took in my surroundings with genuine appreciation.

"It doesn't hurt that I have a brother who is pretty awesome here as well," I added and reached up to flick his upper arm playfully.

“Is the girlfriend here?” I asked when I noticed a beautiful female in a group looking over at us with more interest than anyone else. The smile that lit up my brother’s face and actually made his eyes seem as if they were shining from within answered me before he even said a word.

With one nod of his head toward the group of girls standing off in the distance, the one I thought might be Sunny’s girlfriend was making her way over. Sunny turned to fully face the direction she was coming from, while motioning for us to walk to shorten the distance.

“Yes, as I’m sure you already guessed. That’s Emmalynn,” he told me, and when she was close enough to hear, Sunny introduced me.

“Em, this is my sister, Ahya.” I didn’t mind that he used the nickname he has called me since he could speak, so I smiled and reached out my hand. The beautiful young woman beamed at me while completely dismissing my outstretched hand, and instead, she walked right up to me and wrapped her arms around me in a hug.

“Sorry. I feel as if I already know you. Sunny talks about you all the time. I’m so glad you made it, and I really hope we get to spend some time together.” Emmalynn explained while offering a truly warm welcome.

I loved that my brother was surrounded by so much love. I may not have had the numbers but knowing we both had a good support system growing up, people we could depend on meant the world to me.

It was hard not to feel as if my arrival was the cause of the football game coming to an end, but the moment we went inside and the large group of teenagers all started doing their own thing in what appeared to be a room meant for them, I let it go.

Sunny introduced me to the group, and the more I took in my surroundings, the more that feeling of contentment began to work its way into my awareness again. I wasn’t sure what the feeling meant, but I figured the reason didn’t matter. All I knew was that I wanted to embrace it for as long as it would last.

“Sunny, will you and Ethan play your song? Has your sister ever heard how good you guys are?” Emmalyn encouraged my brother, who looked at me and blushed before he nodded his agreement.

I knew my brother had a nice voice, and he had shared with me that he and his friend Ethan had started coming up with their own songs to honor Yahuah. I wasn’t expecting the song they sang to be on the level it was. And the more they sang, the more I was impressed.

It was really good. The quality and talent matched anything you’d hear professionally, but the thing I was most intrigued by was the way they sang the same song twice, only completely different. The first time, my brother was the lead vocalist, and that version was a little more upbeat than the second one. Not too much, but as Sunny sang, I couldn’t help myself from moving along with the beat. I wanted to get up and dance; I felt the beat throughout my whole body, similar to the way I would feel on the reservation and found myself smiling the whole time.

Then, his friend Ethan began singing the same lyrics; only the way he sang them reminded me a little of Justin Bieber. My body still wanted to move in response to another well-played bop. The slight changes almost made it feel as if the two separate renditions were completely different.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be a nosy Nelly. I just heard you two, and I love that song as much as I love whenever you sing together.” A voice called out from the large entryway.

“Wait. Riley, I want you to meet my sister. And, you know you are always welcome. No matter what your cousins have to say about it.” Sunny teased, and before he made the introduction, the young woman played back in pretend shock, “I knew it. I’m literally the old maid now. That’s not fair.” She then turned her attention to me, and the smile she offered was somehow familiar, even though I knew we had never met before.

“You must be Ahya. Wow, you are stunning,” she began, literally shaking her head as if trying to make sure I was real or something, before quickly added, “I

have heard only good things about you. It's so nice to meet you. I'm Riley, and I'm glad you're here."

Once again that feeling made itself known, only it seemed to be growing in intensity. What felt like contentment seemed to be morphing into something I couldn't quite name. All I knew was that for the first time, I felt like I was meant to be there. I felt as if I was somehow *home*.

Hoping to give my brother a little privacy so he could say goodbye to his girlfriend, I got up to check out the pictures hung up throughout the room. I really enjoyed seeing all of the candid shots of my brother with his rather larger group of friends. Each one seemed to tell stories of fun times had, and as I studied each one, I was grateful my brother had such a strong group of like-minded people around him.

My heart felt as if it were being squeezed inside my chest, so tightly it caused a literally gasp to escape when I spotted a familiar face. Riley and a cute little

redhead holding a baby were close enough to hear, causing Riley to ask, "Is everything okay?"

"This picture. This man right here." I tried to explain, and then at the same time I uttered, "Christopher," as Riley and her friend both said "Chris" in question. I looked at them as if they were playing some sort of prank, only I knew there was no way they were.

My heart pounded as I reached up to touch the image of his face frozen in the picture on the wall. As I brushed my fingers over the photo, my hand began to shake uncontrollably. I turned to look at the two young women standing beside me, clearly waiting for me to say more. Riley stared back at me with a look of confusion on her face and asked, "Do you know my brother?"

"Your brother?" I repeated, and that feeling that kept creeping up almost took me out. This time, it came with an overwhelming need for me to finally start putting all the pieces together.

"You're the twin. Oh my goodness. I heard all about you. Your brother loves you and your mom so much." I started, and for some reason I began to look

her up and down, as if I was trying to see her with all the love and respect Christopher had for her. As I took her in, I noticed the keychain I made hanging out from the front pocket of her jeans.

I reached out, a bit jerky as I pointed to it, and smiled before explaining, “I am the one who made that. Christopher took one look at it and told me that he knew you would love it.” I could feel my face had turned a deep shade of red, and all of a sudden I felt as if I should pray for a hole to open under my feet so I could be spared the sudden rush of embarrassment I was feeling in that moment. *Way to be weird, Ahyoka!*

“Ahyoka. My goodness, I can’t believe you are here. Oh, and you are Sunny’s sister. This is perfect,” Riley got out in a rush as she literally pulled me in and squeezed me as if she was trying to prevent me from getting away. When she pulled back a little, she looked at me and added, “Chris told me everything he could about you. I can’t wait for him to see you again. He had this plan that he was going to—Oh, never mind, I’ll let him tell you,” she paused to grab a hold of her keychain while insisting, “But this, this

is gorgeous. I absolutely love it. So thank you. You are extremely talented.”

“Thank you,” I returned as my tightly wadded ball of nerves hesitantly began to loosen.

“Hold on, let me text him and see where he’s at. He is going to be thrilled.”

“Hi. I’m Jackie, and this sleeping little one is L.A. It’s so nice to meet you, Ahyoka. I’m newer to this whole group, but I feel like I need to tell you that there isn’t a better group of people in the world than the ones right here. I met Chris at Riley’s wedding reception, and let me just say that I am so glad—thank You, Yahuah, that you are here. He’s a good guy, and he deserves a chance at happy.”

I found what she said to be a bit weird. Not the words themselves, but the way she just assumed things. Before I gave myself a chance to overthink, I laughed, internally, at the absurdity of it all. Hadn’t I just been going on and on about this crazy vibe that made me feel as if I were home? So then, who was I to think she was anything more than a refreshing little ball of excitement, clearly hoping to welcome me in?

“I can give you a ride over if you’d like.” Jackie offered kindly after Riley let us know her text had gone unanswered. Not wanting to bail on my brother, who had just returned and learned that I found my mystery man. I looked over and knew he was on board as his face just beamed.

“Go. I am headed over to the Edwards’ anyway with the boys. We can meet up there. I’ll see you soon.” Sunny insisted, and when I walked over to hug him, he added, “I can’t believe it was Chris Morris all along. I love this for you. Actually, I love it for both of you, Ahya.”

“Thanks. Keep us in your prayers. I mean, he has free will, you know?”

Jackie jerked her head to the side, letting me know which vehicle was hers, and then I matched her pace as we walked toward her dark-red Chevy Tahoe.

“This still smells brand new,” I said as I hopped into the passenger seat while she clicked her daughter’s baby carrier into its base in the back.

“It is. My husband, Wyatt, wanted me to have something of my own—just in case. Which is ridiculous seeing as there’s four options I could use just between Mikey and Ri alone, not to mention Wyatt’s truck, but...she sure is purdy.” Jackie shared, and the way she was just unapologetically herself was refreshing.

“So, I can’t believe that the one who stole Chris’ heart is actually here. I am so glad for it too. He deserves so much better than what he previously settled for—that’s for sure. I don’t mean to be gossipy or anything; I just hated the way his ex treated him. Old news. How crazy is it that you are Sunny’s sister? I mean, I know I told you I am new here, and I just started leaning into Yah, but even I can see this was part of a much bigger plan. Wow!” She rambled as she drove us to the place she called home.

“Wyatt, LA, and I are staying over at the Edwards while the guys build us our home. You know there is a lot already set apart for Chris, too. Maybe now that you are here, he will start building. As it is now, he has his grandparents’ trailer set up.” She informed. I didn’t mind listening to her, but the more she

shared, the more I found myself questioning if any of it mattered if Christopher wasn't as excited as I was when he learned I was here.

I couldn't help but feel as if Yahuah was offering me a sign when we pulled up to the driveway and I noticed the store I was most interested in was just across the street from where we were headed.

"I can't believe *Taste & See* is across the street from where you live. I was hoping to meet with the owner to see about selling some of my jewelry on consignment." I said in more of a thinking-out-loud tone, but Jackie promised she would make the introductions I needed as soon as possible before she parked in front of a three-car garage.

"I'm going to go and bring Lena inside. You are more than welcome to head over by yourself, or wait. If you want to head over now, just follow that path right there. They will either be at Ri and Mikey's or over at Chris's trailer. Either way, the path will take you there." Jackie instructed, and I smiled before letting her know I would be starting alone.

I almost began to think that I somehow missed where I was supposed to be going, or maybe was on

the wrong path, when I walked quite a ways before I caught a glimpse of people off in the distance. When I got a little closer, I heard voices. Once I realized one of them was Christopher, I slowed down and then froze when it was clear he was upset.

“Wyatt...I was supposed to have more time. I am still a mess, and she is even more beautiful than I remembered. I’m going to blow it. I just know I am, and I can’t, man. What am I supposed to do? How do I tell her that I haven’t stopped thinking about her since the second I left?”

“I’d say that’s a good place to start. Chris, don’t overthink this. You are more than ready. I mean, come on, a part of her was here all along. You have to know that was Yahuah. I, for one, am here for you. You’ve got this.”

“I don’t, though. Wyatt, I don’t know if I can trust myself. I am a crap judge of character. What if I tell her how I feel and all along, to her, I was just some traveler she was kind to because that’s who she is. I spent less than twenty-four hours with her, and I’m...”

“Stop, don’t do that. You’ll never know if you don’t try. You said you felt something you never felt before, right? So, trust there’s a reason for it. Yahuah has clearly crossed your paths. I promise, I will sound the alarm if she is bad news, but my gut is telling me she’s your girl.”

I didn’t want to listen in on what was meant to be private anymore, so I made a little noise with my feet, and then I called out, “I don’t mean to interrupt,” before my breath caught in my throat when they turned to look at me.

“Christopher...” I managed to get out, in a much breathier voice than I had planned. The smile that spread across his face the moment it registered that I was there—or at least that’s what I assumed he was thinking —was even more gorgeous than I remembered.

“Ahyoka.” He returned and took a few hesitant steps my way.

I didn’t want hesitant; I wanted to run and throw myself into his arms, so I did.

It was probably messy to watch, but the instant I knew I could reach, I threw my arms around him.

Instantly, he wrapped his around me and lifted me off the ground a little before he placed me down and pulled back to look at my face.

“I have come outside every single night we’ve been apart to talk to Yah about you. I’ve asked Him to keep you safe, and I have asked that one day I would be able to see you again. What brought me comfort was thinking that you might be looking up at the same time I was. I thought you were an angel. I mean, I know you are one of Yah’s finest creations...” Christopher kept talking, and what he was saying was, in fact, wonderful, but I needed him to let go of the doubtful parts that seemed to worsen as he kept rambling, so I kissed him.

I heard his friend chuckle out, “I like her, and that’s my cue to leave,” and then Jackie called out, “We’ll be swimming at the Edwards if you two love-birds want to join us after you’ve caught up.”

Christopher cupped my face, clearly afraid I was going to stop if he answered, before he pulled back just enough to groan out something I think meant he understood his friends. The look in his eyes when

he stared into mine searching for something caused me to smile at him.

He licked his lips while pulling them into his mouth for a second before he said my name again. I leaned into the hand he was sliding into my hair. When his thumb reached my ear, he stroked my face. I felt my smile grow as I took in a deep breath, reveling in the way his touch seemed to bring my entire body to life.

For a moment, I thought he was going to talk more, and I wanted that—later. I was relieved when he tilted his head to the side as he stared at my lips, before he closed the distance and kissed me much slower than the frenzied kiss I shut him up with.

Christopher's kiss was intense. It was as if he was pushing all of his feelings for me into it, hoping it would be enough for me to understand, and perhaps, reciprocate. Of course, I could sense the emotions he was feeling; I felt them, too, so I tried my best to match his passion as best as I could.

This was my first kiss (well, technically, second), and I have to say, it was all I hoped it would be and

still so much more than I ever dreamed. We were close in height, so I didn't have to lean my head back too far for it to strain. In fact, it was so comfortable being in his arms and kissing him that it almost felt as if we'd done it a million times because it felt so right.

I was a little out of breath when he pulled back and whispered, "I'm sorry," before pecking my lips two times real quick and a third that lasted a little longer.

Confused, I lifted my brow and asked, "Whatever for?"

He smiled and kissed me again before he answered, "I saw you at the center, and I ran away. I wanted nothing more than to see you. I prayed, like I've told you already, but when I saw you there with Sunny, I panicked. I wanted it to be perfect, and I didn't want everyone I know to witness the complete fool I would have been if I had stayed."

"Christopher," I tried to pull him back to me and away from the worried, doubtful man begging his friend for help, but he just shook his head.

"Ahyoka, I need to say this part. I need to thank you for everything. I need you to know just how sorry I am that I didn't wait for you." I wasn't sure

what he meant, so I pulled back and asked, “Wait, what? Did you find someone else, or go back to your ex?”

Completely confused, he scrunched his face up, took both of my hands in his, and then lifted our joined hands to kiss my knuckles.

“No. No one could ever compare to you once I met you. Every single cell inside my body knows that, and I knew it the second our eyes met. I know it sounds crazy, but,”

“Stop overthinking this.” I said, and I kissed him again before I pulled back and added, “This has always been Yah’s plan; that’s why it’s so strong. The pull, the feeling as if we’ve known one another for much longer than a day—well, technically, a night. You are mine, Christopher, and I am yours, as long as you agree.”

“Of course I do. I just feel like you ended up taking home second place while I got the prize.” As much as I knew he was complimenting me, I hated that he felt the need to do so at his own expense.

“Stop, don’t talk about *my* Christopher like that.” I warned, and the look he offered when he rested

his forehead against mine had me chewing on my bottom lip, fighting back a chuckle.

"I love that you just called me *your* Christopher. Ahyoka, I am yours," he said in the sexiest voice I ever heard, but something was missing.

"Why didn't you say that I am yours?" I asked, hoping it wasn't because of his self-doubt, but feeling nevertheless that it might be.

"Because I can't make that choice for you." He answered, and shifted his eyes slightly to look away.

"Christopher, I just threw myself at you and told you that you are mine—you must know that I am yours. I promise you that I have waited my whole life for you. I'm not willing to let you go." I said with as much conviction as I could force into my words, hoping he would hear the truth and accept them as such.

That's when I saw it. His energy, along with his longing expression, told me everything I needed to know. Christopher wanted with all he had in him to believe me; only his past was causing him to feel as if it was all too good to be true.

I wouldn't scold him for that. No, I would simply show him that his fears were nothing but lies. Christopher believed deep down inside that he was unlovable, so that just meant I had to love him completely. I needed to show him just how wrong he was, and I intended to do so, so thoroughly that he would one day forget he ever felt that way at all.

I was the one who would be with him for the rest of our Yah-given time on earth, and I was the one who would make sure he never felt unlovable again.

"I'm torn. I want to have you all to myself, but I also want you to meet everyone," Christopher admitted, and I understood completely how he felt. I, too, wanted to be with him, but I also knew that he was caught up in his feelings and overthinking.

Figuring that being around the people he was comfortable with might help him get out of his head, I said, "Why don't we go so you can introduce me to your friends?"

WAIT FOR ME

CHRIS

I thought about hijacking Ahyoka's part, but that felt a bit like a jerk move. However, I need to tell you what happened the day I saw her at Faith Community Center.

I made my way downstairs at my grandparent's house. My Grandpa Drew asked for my help, so I had been spending the week there to make it easier. Not like the commute was impossible or anything, but time driving to and fro, is time wasted. Anyway, he was building a new covered shelter for the animals,

and having a helper meant that the job would be finished in half the time. Besides, some jobs are better suited for two or more people.

I know that you have already met Grand-mom Atalia (and if you haven't then why in the world are you reading this?). That's means you probably figured out that she has some serious spiritual gifts. She was given visions, if that's what they are. Whatever you call them, she saw things that most people couldn't. It wasn't creepy or anything, at least I never thought so, but that day, she was hitting me with some not-so-subtle hints that had me tossing things around in my mind that I had begun to dismiss since the last time we had spoken when I first came home.

"Hello, my boy. I love to see that handsome smile on your face. Tell me, what good have you been met with lately?" She greeted me the moment she walked into my grandparents' kitchen and saw me sitting at the table.

I stood to hug her and answered, "It's good that I am alive and healthy. How are you, Grand-mom Atalia?" She tisked at my response, greeted her friends, and then called me out.

"So polite and yet evasive all the same. Do you remember when we talked all about your encounter with Ahyoka?" She paused long enough for me to answer and continued once I nodded my head, "Your time is coming. I know you're struggling and have given so much of yourself to the wolves, but hang in there, my boy. The Most High has big things in store for you." Grand-mom Atalia took my face between her hands and stared into my eyes as if she were offering over strength and comfort through her stare.

I wanted to believe her, and a part of me figured that when I finally figured out what I was going to do with myself for real, I would go and visit Ahyoka to tell her how much her kindness helped me.

I was no longer an active participant in Snow's manipulative games like I had been. That was easy when I altogether blocked the places, she once had access to the second I arrived at the airport after spending the night with Ahyoka. And yet, I was far from believing I was good enough for anyone apart from my family to truly love. Even that love I explained away by telling myself they had no choice.

I was working with my grandpa when I purposefully willed my mind to recall the conversation I had with Grand-mom Atalia that she had brought up that morning.

It was a few days after I had returned, when she sat beside me at one of the Friday fires and said, “You sit on the outside as if you don’t belong, but you weren’t placed there.” I turned my head to look at her, only the half-smile she offered was too intense, so I returned my gaze to the fire.

“I saw what the first one did to you. Even more, I saw the bond she tried to break between you and Riley, and you and your brother.

“You know, it’s a rare thing to be accepted fully by people for the person you are. These people, they aren’t just friendly—they are family. Sure, you are related to a good portion of them, but here, in this group, there’s a bond that goes far beyond genes or marital ties.

“I knew for years that I would have a huge family around me, and I believed it, even though I was all

alone and it didn't make sense at the time. Abba Yahuah gave me the vision, so I would hold on to it and never lose hope.

"The moment I arrived, so much love was poured into me that I nearly forgot all the heartache I endured. Marcus, my blood, had formed the ties that would make that vision of our family come true. Danny was the same as Marcus and me in a sense. He was the outsider who was taken in by people who offered their love unconditionally, and let me tell you, that's not easy to trust when the world has already taught you otherwise.

"Danny shared his past, all of his struggles with me, and we bonded much like a mother and son. He needed that connection as much as I did, and the two of us crossing paths was a beautiful gift I will forever be grateful for. Not only did we fill a hole in each other's hearts, but Danny offered me a new name. It felt as if I was given an opportunity to wipe away the pain from my past when I became an Evans. The memories are still there, but they no longer have the power to steal my joy. Now, they simply remind me of all I have and show me what love really looks like.

“You are a part of this family no matter what lies your fear is feeding you. All of these people love you. I love you as if you were my own grandchild. Wyatt is just as broken as you are and has missed what you had, too. I see there is some new healing taking place there, and I will continue to lift you both until there is no more uncertainty. I also know there is a young woman on your mind. Would you tell me about her?”

I wasn't prepared for her to see through me enough to find Ah-yoka, so I began telling her about Snow. She listened and placed her hands on me, where she petitioned the Most High on my behalf for healing and cleansing. Once she finished, she looked at me and made it clear that Snow wasn't the one she was asking about.

I felt like a fraud as I filled her in on the little I could of Ah-yoka. I downplayed my encounter because I was too afraid that I was making a bigger deal out of it than it was. But something in me began to awaken as the woman next to me squeezed my leg while she hung on to every single detail I shared, so full of hopeful joy I began to feel it myself.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” was the last thing she said before Wyatt took a seat beside me and Grand-mom Atalia was called away.

“Did she get you?” Wyatt asked, bumping his shoulder into mine.

“Yeah. I think I did.” I uttered, feeling a sense of peace more than confusion, but they were both there.

“Was it about your girl?” he pressed, and I felt a smile begin to work its way onto my face at the thought of Ahyoka being my girl.

“You know you blush each time I call her that. I hope you know, I am lifting you. It seems impossible right now but Chris, think about my life. Jackie and I broke up and I moved even farther away from her than the distance between you and Ahyoka. I tried more than I should have to pretend that all the covenant living stuff wasn’t meant for me and then Yah finally said—enough. I know you’ve been seeking, but why don’t come and dig into His Word with us?” A part of me wanted nothing more but the still sour side grunted out a refusal.

“I’m not into being the odd man out. I already feel it, that would just make things worse. You know?”

“No. No, I do not know because no one treats you that way. You and your sister are all spooky twin thing again. You and Mikey have never had a problem apart from her, but we already covered that. Jackie is fed up with the two of us, as she puts it, *acting a fool because we are afraid of our feelings*. I agree with her, by the way, and I am trying.”

That he was. Each day, since he drove me home from the airport, Wyatt made an effort. Part of that effort was to make me look him in the eye. I actually broke down the first time he did it. My messed-up psyche wanted me to believe he was doing it to emasculate me. How wrong I was. He was forcing me to hold my head up to see for myself that he wasn’t the one who broke me.

Just as much as I missed my best friend, Wyatt made sure I knew that he felt it, too. I missed it all those years because I was hurt and my pain wouldn’t allow me to see it; I truly believed I was all alone. When my eyes filled with tears as I struggled to meet his gaze, Wyatt pulled me into a hug and held me as

we both cried; releasing years of hurt that we ignored. Oddly enough, as he held me, I felt as if I could finally breathe.

“You want to know something...If I didn’t know better, I would have guessed that my wife was your twin. The two of you are so much alike it’s a bit weird at times. If you started coming around more, you might even see it for yourself,” Wyatt finished, and almost as if to prove his point, Jackie walked over and took a seat on his lap.

“Whatcha talking about all tucked away over here?” She asked after some sort of silent conversation took place between them.

“That you are the female version of Chris, only pint-sized. I mean, he is short, but you almost make him look tall,” Wyatt teased his wife, and faster than what should have been possible, she maneuvered her way onto his back and twisted his ear, just like my sister loved to do to me.

“That’s a Riley move.” I protested, but then Jackie belched so loud I looked at her with true admiration.

“Would you look at that—her burps are just as heartfelt as yours. She belts out songs with her made-up lyrics. Knows everything there is to know about everything, and when she is wrong, she will argue with you until you either believe her or give up in frustration. She claims she likes the candy that no one other than the two of you eat” Wyatt started to rattle off some of the things he found to be similar between his wife and me, and was cut off by Jackie, who, much like me, didn’t seem to be feeling all the warm and fuzzies with what he had to say.

“Can’t you find something nice to say. I mean, you make me sound like a burden you are forced to put up with.”

“No, Darlin’, you are not a burden at all. You keep me on my toes, and I love you for every single second of it. But if you want the sugary stuff, then both of you are fiercely loyal, love like it’s the only thing keeping you alive. You have the good kind of jealous in ya that makes people know not to mess with what’s yours, and I would trust either of you to watch my back.”

I might have become emotional, but Jackie hopped off of her husband after she pinched his cheek and winked. Then she looked at me and declared, "I will not accept second best in burping without a fair shot. And I don't care how much he claims we are alike; if you don't start showing up and proving it, then I am calling bull."

I really liked her.

Jackie reminded me of the person I was before Marybeth. As I looked at Jackie and nodded, she seemed as if she was trying to ask me something with her eyes. I wasn't sure what it was, but when I lifted my brow, Jackie leaned down, hugged me so she could whisper near my ear, "He misses you. It's crazy stupid if you two don't fix it. If it's true, and we are alike, then I will see you when we all go fishing, Sunday."



Are we all caught up—not a chance, but I have filled in a bunch of gaps. Enough that I am comfortable bringing us to where Ahyoka left off—our walk over to the Edward's pool.

A part of me was frustrated with myself for wanting a buffer, but I was completely overwhelmed with the things I was feeling that told me I was going to blow it.

“Christopher, do you think that maybe we could go get my things from the center before it gets too late? I don’t know these roads well enough to want to ride my bike back when it’s pitch black.” Ahyoka asked, and I already agreed before what she said hit me.

I did a double-take, and shot back, “Wait, that was your motorcycle?” Causing her to chuckle.

“It’s rented, but yeah,” she answered, still grinning, only there was a blush working its way up her cheeks.

I blew out a breath, shook my head but not in disapproval, and admitted, “I didn’t think it was possible for you to become any hotter or more desirable, and yet here you are, proving me wrong.”

I took my sister's Jeep, knowing she wouldn't care, and that there would be a key under the mat. We pulled up to the center just in time to catch my dad walking out, with a huge smile on his face.

"Hey, son. This must be Ahyoka. It's so nice to meet you. I'm Lucas." He greeted. I was a bit impressed that he knew who she was already, but not really surprised. It *was* a small town, and everyone at the center who knew were close.

"I'm going to go pick up Mom and head over to the Edwards. Are you two going to be joining everyone?" My dad asked and gave a little nod while hitting us both with one of his huge grins. The second he saw Ahyoka slip the helmet on her head, he let out a whistle and warned, "Your mother is going to hate this. Don't worry, my lips are sealed."

"You've got great taste in bikes...and," I started and paused to take her in, making sure she knew what I was about to say *again* was true.

"You are all of my dreams come true. So freaking hot; you're smoking."

I followed Ahyoka to the motel just on the outskirts of town. It wasn't far from the center; about halfway between FCC and the reservation, so it made sense why she had picked it, but I wanted no part of her staying there.

"Are you opposed to staying with me? And if you are, then would you consider staying in one of the many options I assure you you'll have to choose from?" I asked the second she took her helmet off.

"I'm not opposed to it. I just didn't want to make any assumptions. This is all new to me. I know what I want, but I don't want to push things too far too fast." I didn't say a word, I just smiled and asked if she wanted to lead us back or follow me.

"I'll follow this time. I think I know how to get there, but I'm not certain." She admitted and then she restarted her bike, dropped her helmet, and waited for me before she took off.

I ended up calling Mikey.

"Hey, Mike. Could you ask your mom if there are any units available. I am trying to have options for Ahyoka after telling her I didn't want her staying at

The Solar. I'm hoping she stays with me, but I have no clue if that's a good idea or not." He let me know he'd talk to his mom, and then I asked, "How did the youth coming to swim end up with my parents joining?"

"Do you really have to ask. My mom told yours, of course, and word spread faster than the speed of light that your girl is Sunny's sister, so it's a big deal, Chris. There's food, my dad is making a fire, and I think the youth are all planning on crashing since this happens all over again tomorrow for Friday Fireside which is at the ranch." Mikey informed, and I let my thoughts out before we hung up.

"That's a lot. I hope this isn't too much."

"So, this little get-together at the pool has seemed to have turned into a thing," I warned as I pulled Ahyoka into my arms and kissed her temple.

"Okay. I'd hate to sound self-centered, but does this have anything to do with me, or is this the norm?" She asked and wrapped her arms around me

in return, where we stood face to face, as she waited for me to further explain.

“Both. It’s not uncommon for there to be people hanging out. That always happens on Fridays, at someone’s house, but this has everything to do with people wanting to meet you. If it gets to be too much, just blink three times, or squeeze my hand three times, and I will get us out of there.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I am sure I will be fine.”

Ahyoka slipped her hand in mine, and just like with our kiss, moment’s ago, holding one another, felt right. I wish I would have allowed that to be enough to get me out of my head, but instead I felt panic begin to rise the second we rounded the corner and everyone there came into view.

I locked eyes on my sister, and the second Sunny rushed over to greet his, I grabbed mine, lifted her, and jumped into the pool.

“What the heck did *I* do?” she spat out when her head surfaced, but the second she looked at me, she

wrapped her arms around my neck and whispered, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It all feels right. I want this so bad, but there's this voice inside that keeps telling me that I am not good enough for her. I'm so afraid that she is going to see the same things that Marybeth and Snow did. Ri, I can't do that again." I admitted, while my tears fell freely, only they remained hidden because of the pool.

"Oh, Chris. They are the past, and they were the problem, not you. You know how to love people, and this time, brother, it will be different because *she* isn't them. She isn't broken like they are. Remember what she told you when you first met. She is waiting..." Riley tried to comfort me, but I looked at her and reminded her, "She is waiting for her soul mate."

"Yeah, so why don't you think that's you? Don't you dare tell me you aren't good enough. You are my brother, so trust me when I tell you that you are *more* than enough. I promise.

"What happened when you two first saw each other?" Riley pushed, changing the subject just enough to switch my focus from feelings to facts.

“She kissed me to shut me up when I started rambling, and then she kissed me again, or maybe I kissed her. She said that I belong to her.” I informed, and Riley made some sort of grunting sound before she shoved my head under the water while she jumped on my back.

“Dingus...did you even listen to what you just said to me?” She spat out, clearly frustrated but still hoping I’d get it.

“She made it crystal clear, how are you missing it? You are hers. If you want this, then trust the One who put the two of you together and allow Ahyoka to love you the way you deserve to be loved. The guy you wrongly believe yourself to be isn’t really who you are. Love her the way Yahuah created you to. The way you tried so hard to with the wrong people, and trust that this time, it will be all you need it to be, and so much more.” I nodded, willing her words to be enough. After she gave me, a look flowing with her undeniable, unconditional love, Riley nodded and wiped away my tears with her thumbs.

“I love you, Crissy. Now would you please introduce me to your gorgeous woman for real?” My sister

asked while taking my hand and pulling me toward the steps where her husband was waiting with towels.

“Your phone was in your pocket again, wasn’t it?” Mikey questioned and let out a sigh of almost relief when she threw back, “No, I forgot it at the center,” as if he were a fool for even asking.

I LOVED EVERY SECOND OF IT

AHYOKA

I watched Cristopher jump into the pool with his sister but decided to focus on my brother, who shook his head, getting water all over me. I wasn't mad at all. In fact, there was so much going on around me, I felt a bit giddy.

Being there was something else.

I was used to my grandfather. Sure, there were others, but I don't think I had ever been with more than seven people at one time; and if I had, it was when I was much younger and it wasn't for very long.

"Did Emmalynn come?" I asked my brother when I didn't see his girlfriend. Sunny gave me a half smile

and explained, “Her parents still aren’t sure about us. Well, that’s not true. I don’t think they have a problem with me. I just think it’s the overprotective thing, and I get that. They have loosened up a bit, at least.”

“That’s too bad. I would have liked to spend a little more time getting to know her.” I said, honestly, to which Sunny turned his head to the side and looked at me as if I had just said the dumbest thing.

“Ahya, you will have plenty of time to get to know her, unless you are leaving in the morning and haven’t told me. Aren’t you here for at least two weeks? You are staying for the Feasts, right?” Just as the question left his mouth, Christopher walked up with his sister, both of them smiling.

I wasn’t sure why Christopher and Riley were just standing there looking at me; neither of them saying a word until my brother shot me a look while calling out, “Hello—Ahya, are you there?”

“Oh, well, yes, of course I am here. You wanted to know if I am staying...for the Feasts? Yes, that was my plan. You know that.” I managed to get out, unsure

why I was feeling completely out of it. Was it all of the people? Perhaps, but I wasn't convinced.

Christopher was smiling at me, but there was something there, hidden, or maybe he dealt with it, and that was the reason he jumped into the pool with his sister. I was about to ask him if everything was okay when he slid his hand across my lower back and kissed my temple.

"Ahyoka, Riley said you two already met at the center, but I would like you to introduce you to my sister, officially" he said, and I no longer needed to ask how he was. Whatever happened between them, they dealt with. What I could see for myself was that his energy, the moment he leaned into me, was steady.

Christopher held his head high and had an adorable smile on his face as he introduced me to each of the people there with us. His smile remained, but his demeanor changed the moment he met his mother's gaze. She looked back and forth between us before focusing on her son, and then, much like

a small child, he placed his forehead on her shoulder while she held him in her arms.

Before any introductions could be made, I smiled and said, "You are clearly Christopher's mom. I heard so much about you. It's as if I already know you," Christopher stood back up to his full height and took his place by my side. His mother looked between the two of us again, returned a warm smile, to which I added, "I would have known who you were anyway."

"Really? What gave it away?" she questioned, her smile remaining as she waited for me to admit what she must have already known.

"The eyes," I answered, just as a woman I had yet to meet joined us, saying the same thing.

"Hey, Ahyoka, I'm Miss April—or Momma Edwards. I think it's pretty much interchangeable at this point," and then she pulled me in for a hug.

"April..." Christopher's mom scolded in a whisper.

"*Elizabeth*," the reprimanded one threw back, and I was glad Christopher brought me back to his side, where he held me close while the two of them

continued as if they believed I couldn't hear; or I suppose, they didn't care if I did.

"This should be good." Christopher mumbled as he scanned the many faces I just met, clearly searching for someone.

His dad caught his gaze and made his way over to where we were standing just in time for Miss April to offer a look of exasperation as she let out, "Lizzy, it's only weird because you are making it weird. You just made me sound like your husband. Are you happy now? Ahyoka, welcome. I hope you like crazy because we serve it up around here like it's imperative for keeping people alive. Lucas, please take your wife away before she scares off your future daughter-in-law and forces your son to chase after her in the desert."

I laughed at that. The people around me were wonderful. They were all uncensored and having fun the way only true acceptance allows.

“So, what do you think?” My brother asked after he plopped down beside me when Christopher left to get me a drink.

“I think it’s incredible. I love that you have had this sort of love around you for so long.” I answered while ruffling his hair teasingly. I then scooted beside him and rested my head on his shoulder.

“Ahya, I’m almost too afraid to ask. What happens now? You aren’t going back to Utah, are you? *This* is all for you, too, you know?” It was easy to see that Christopher overheard what Sunny asked because he froze, mid-step, waiting to hear what I was going to say.

“I *think* I just got here. Who knows what comes next? I know that I belong with him. The rest, we will have to decide together. I will say, though, I could get used to this.” I answered, making sure Christopher knew how I felt as well.

I stood, took the lemon water from Christopher, and asked my brother where he was staying for the night. He let me know he was sleeping at the ranch with the Morris boys, and then I looked at Christo-

pher and asked where I was supposed to be staying. He leaned in closer to me, clearly trying to offer a little privacy in an otherwise open space, and let me know it was up to me.

“You have options...” he began, but I cut him off.

“I just want to be wherever you are. If that’s okay.” Funny, the very thing he tried to offer seemed pointless when all eyes were on the two of us as if I was being tested.

“Was I not supposed to say that?” I asked, unsure what was going on.

“You can say whatever you want, and I want that, too. They want to know which option. As I said, you have many to choose from. We can stay right here, go to the trailer. I have been staying at my grandparents’ this past week, so that’s an option.”

I think to help prove Christopher’s point, Miss April added, “There’s an empty Yurt, and one of the semi-permanent all-season tents. There’s also his parents’, the main house over at the ranch, and a fully furnished apartment that’s also on the ranch.”

“Well, that’s overwhelming. Can you choose for me, please?”

“Wait, why don’t you come home with us, and you can decide over some coffee, tea, or cocoa?” Riley offered, and I nodded, totally on board.

“I’m definitely not complaining, but it is a lot to get used to all at once. Is it okay if I leave the bike here so that I can ride over with you?”

“Or... hear me out. We can take the bike?” Christopher suggested, as he hit me with one heck of a tempting grin.

“I thought your mom hates bikes?” I questioned with an upturned brow, thinking it was way too early to get on his mom’s bad side.

“Good catch. Ri, are you walking over?”

It all felt so natural. The back and forth. The ease in which everything seemed to flow. Just like the first time Christopher and I met, the pieces seemed to click in place between us.

I squeezed Christopher’s hand three times, and he turned to look my way. “Thank you for all of this. It’s nice that I can look up at the stars with you beside me tonight.”

“Thank you, Ahyoka. Thank *you*,” he returned before he claimed my lips with a kiss.



We ended up walking over to the trailer, which is what I was hoping for all along. It sort of fit, you know?

The closer we got, the more I felt my nerves switch to overdrive. I wanted everything, and I swore I was ready in that moment. I already knew I was in it forever, and Christopher claimed he wanted the same thing.

I get what most people think, but their thoughts have nothing at all to do with me. I already committed myself to this man, so waiting for something else was a waste of time in my opinion. In fact, coming together physically, I knew, would strengthen our soul ties—that's one of the reasons people are meant to wait for *their* person. Yahuah intended for Christopher and me to meet and live as one, so it seemed silly to wait.

If for some reason, Christopher wanted to take things slow, I'd respect him, but I would also hope that we could talk about his reason for it. The claim that we should get to know one another first is only valid if you are unsure, or I suppose too young. The

way things work and what is deemed acceptable now are traditions of men and have nothing to do with the right rulings of Yahuah. Christopher and I were both adults, and we had a lifetime to get to know one another. I knew who he was at his core, and I knew that I would stay beside him until my time here was through.

“I am not going to stay in my own space tonight,” I warned after I gave his living space an approving look over.

“That’s good, but if I remember correctly, I woke up with your arm wrapped around me and your head on my chest, last time” he teased as he stepped behind me, moved my hair from my neck, and placed a kiss right behind my ear. With his lips close enough to tickle, he added, “I have missed the feel of you beside me each day since.” His words were said in such a way that caused goosebumps to spread all over my skin. Lost in anticipation of being in his arms once again, I closed my eyes and allowed myself to just feel all the emotions as they washed over me.

Way too fast for my liking, Christopher broke the brief silence and killed the mood.

“Ahyoka, I am sorry to tell you this, but I have to be up and at my grandparents bright and early. I would love for you to come with me, but it’s completely okay if you’d rather sleep in and hang around here,” he informed, revealing a hint of sadness mixed within his tiredness.

He stroked his fingers gently down my cheek, still holding me from behind, before he turned me around and kissed my forehead. He kept his lips pressed against my skin, and I felt as if my body was somehow simultaneously the most sensitive it’s ever been, while also feeling a wave of peace so blissful I didn’t want him to ever let me go.

With my eyes closed and my head now rested on his shoulder, I asked, “How early are you leaving?”

“My Grandma Lynn will have breakfast on the table by six.” As much as I was ready to give myself to him before we stepped inside the trailer, learning how early we’d have to leave helped dampen that desire. In that moment, I knew being in his arms would

be enough. After all, there was always tomorrow. And that was only *one* sleep away.



Breakfast was delicious, even though I seldom ate large meals.

I grew up learning to pay attention to my body and allow *it* to tell me what I need, and when I need it. Most of the population eats way more than necessary and ends up with sluggish, unhealthy bodies as a result. That being said, I didn't require much food because I didn't typically burn fuel the way I suspected I might when I went out to help Christopher and his Grandpa Drew.

The guys made it clear that I could hang back, and I planned to for a little while. I enjoyed getting to know the Walkers, as well as Grand-mom Atalia, but I also wanted to help. I found the way they lived their lives to be just as the Creator planned for His children, and I wanted to find my place within my new family as soon as I could.

“Your name is beautiful, Ahyoka—*she brought happiness* and have—you—ever.” Grand-mom Atalia mentioned after she placed her hand over mine.

“Is that what your name means?” Grandma Lynn asked, and I could only shrug. I hadn’t known until then.

“I didn’t know, but it makes me like my name even more now.”

Atalia squeezed my hand and nodded, and then she looked up and shared, “I can’t help but give praise to Yahuah for just how fitting your name is. It’s right, especially now that you are here.” There was a look that I couldn’t quite name that I saw in her eyes. It felt urgent. Almost as if she was implying my timing was nearly overdue.

For some reason, I nodded, perhaps to let her know I understood she meant more; and it seemed to be enough, because she continued, “I’m drawn to the meaning behind names. We are shown in Yah’s Word that He takes them very seriously. Even gives us new ones when we change.”

“That *is* true. I am not sure why my mom picked my name—it’s nice to think it was purposeful

though. My grandpa has called me *Ahya* since the first time he heard my brother say it when he was learning to speak. What does your name mean, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My name means the Most High is exalted. I never knew it was a Hebrew name until I dug deeper after being given eyes to see. I only knew it to be Jamaican."

"That's incredible," I said, truly intrigued by the thought that Yahuah was proving that He is indeed still the same today, just as He was in His Word.

Statistically speaking, it would make sense for me to come across at least one person who didn't make me feel as if I already belonged, but that wasn't the case. Each person I met treated me like they already knew me and were just waiting for me to come home. It was wonderful. So much so, I needed to excuse myself so I could splash some water on my face when I felt myself fighting to hold back tears that so desperately wanted to fall.

I knew they were coming from a good place, but there was also a bit of sadness trying to surface that I hadn't been ready to face. I was there because my grandfather was no longer with me. For the most part, I was okay with the reality of it because I trusted Yahuah and knew that it was all a part of His plan.

Another thought tried to steal away my attention, but I wanted to dig deeper into it with Christopher. What I was going to do with the store and trailer back in Utah was something I wanted to discuss and together go over all of my options before I made any moves. I may have been okay with relocating to Spring View, but I had no idea if that's what he wanted. I knew he lived in L.A. for a little while, so I didn't want to assume anything.

Christopher and I were so tired after getting the shelter finished that we fell asleep as soon as we got back to the trailer. When I woke, I was immediately moved by the sight of the sleeping man beside me. I somehow ended up as the big spoon and was glad for

it because I was able to easily rest my head on my fist where I studied his face without waking him.

Christopher was a cross between an innocent boy and a gorgeous man. He looked so peaceful, lost in a dream or just caught up in a rejuvenating rest after working hard all week. His hair was light brown with golden highlights, clearly a gift from working out in the sun. It was long enough to have messy, loose curls on top, but none fell below his chin.

Those curls seemed to call out, begging for me to run my fingers through them, so I did. At first, I just took one of the strands blocking my view of his face and moved it back into place. Then, I ran my fingers through it, enjoying the softness while losing myself in the moment of realization—this was the one I was created for.

With his eyes still closed, Christopher reached up, wrapped his hand around my wrist, before turning his face into my arm. He breathed in so deeply, as if he was taking in my scent before he placed a gentle kiss on my forearm. A warm grin spread across his face as he mumbled, “Just when I was starting to

think this was all a dream, your intoxicating scent proves otherwise.”

His eyes opened and fixed on mine before he continued, “You are perfect, Ahyoka, so much so I even dream about you when I close my eyes. No matter how many times I tell myself you aren’t real, I am pleasantly surprised when your touch proves me wrong,” he said, causing my heart to catch in my throat.

The way he looked at me, the rawness of his confessed feelings, before he reached up to pull me down where he claimed my lips as if the feel of them alone kept his heart beating was like nothing I had ever experienced before. The intensity of the sexual energy that was coming off the two of us caused a primal urge to take over my body.

I didn’t just want to offer him my body. In that moment, I felt as if we didn’t complete our bond, becoming one as the Most High designed; I’d go mad and lose a part of myself I couldn’t afford to lose.

“Ahyoka, wait...” He tried to pull back, but I moved so I could straddle him and reclaim his lips

to show him I didn't want to wait. He yielded, met my kiss with his own, the need between us building for a few moments before I felt him tense beneath me, clearly overthinking or worrying about things I wanted no part of.

"Christopher," I began after I pulled back just enough to look him in his eyes.

"I want this. I want you. I want you to take me as your wife—right here, right now. I have waited for you all of my life, so if you want to spend the rest of yours with me beside you, please..." I begged and noticed the very moment the meaning behind my spoken intentions clicked in his mind.

He offered a knowing, sultry grin, and then he lifted me just enough to switch places. Christopher held my gaze and was so gentle I nearly cried tears of joy and complete exhilaration. I thanked Yahuah for gifting me such a wonderful partner, whom I knew I would cherish for the rest of my life.

Christopher kissed my face all over when our union before Yahuah was forged in a promise of forever.

“I am yours forever, Christopher. You will never have to wonder whether I care or whether I will be there. It is you and me, with Yahuah as our guide, until our time here runs out.”

Christopher closed his eyes; a lone tear escaped as a smile worked at the corner of his mouth when he returned, “I have never felt more cherished—more highly favored in all of my life. I am yours, Ahyoka. Forever and always, I am yours.”

“Is tonight going to be similar to last night?” I asked as Christopher and I lay, still tangled up in one another.

“Yes, and no. There will be a lot more people and food. It’s still a bit cold to swim in the lake, but I won’t be surprised if someone jumps in anyway. The pool at the Edwards being heated is definitely a bonus.” Christopher answered while he lazily brushed his fingers across my collarbone, up my neck, and around my face.

“Oh my. I had no idea how late it was.” Christopher mentioned in a tone far calmer than his words implied.

“That doesn’t sound good. Should we get moving? Do I have time to shower?” I asked, all of a sudden feeling my nerves trying to work themselves into a tizzy, only that was not me, so I did my best to ignore it.

“You can take as much time as you want. There is no set time or any real rules to it. I just noticed the time; that’s all. Ahyoka...” Christopher assured, before he intertwined our fingers and waited for me to look at him. Once I did, he leaned up so his head was above mine and said, “I can’t wait for you to meet everyone. I just know they are going to love you. You are the missing piece,” and then he leaned down and kissed me.



There was so much going on that I felt a little off or maybe overwhelmed, but once I stopped trying to figure things out and instead forced myself to live in the moment, it was nice.

I met all the people from the ranch across the street. Which I ended up learning was really all a part of a symbiotic system that not only fed off of one another but supported and, in turn, thrived together. Stolt Ranch may have been established first, but it was clear mutual respect and appreciation were the key to the success of both.

Betsy, the owner of *Taste & See*, was thrilled to learn I not only heard of her store before I even came to North Carolina, but that I also wanted to sell my things there. The way they supported local vendors was what really piqued my interest when I was searching for the best option for getting my stuff out there.

“It’s incredible hearing all of this. It truly is a testament to Yahuah’s handiwork, that’s for sure.” Christopher’s Aunt Beth said with a smile so bright and welcoming, I could almost feel the warmth reach my insides.

“Ahyoka, I saw the things Chris bought. Your work is beautiful. Do you have a lot of items ready to

sell?” Lily asked, and all eyes were on me as each of the people made it clear they, too, wanted to know.

“I have a few things. I would really like to get back to making more clothing and shoes—to honor my grandfather. Do you process here or sell the cattle off?” I answered, and two people, Butch and Josh, were all ears.

It was clear they were interested; only Christopher’s uncle Josh let me know that business isn’t talked about during Friday Fireside, so we agreed to pick it back up again soon. The more people I spoke to, the more I felt as if I belonged. Not only with the man I tied myself to for the rest of my life, but with the people Yahuah surrounded him and my brother with. These people felt like family.

I sat next to Christopher on a blanket near the fire. It was so natural being near him that I missed when his parents took a seat beside us on their own blanket. Christopher’s mother looked as if she was glowing.

The fire lit her face in a warm orange hue, but that wasn't the only thing responsible for her beauty.

There was so much love flowing from her whenever she looked at her son or husband. A couple of times I felt her gaze set on me, and I wondered what she was thinking. I didn't assume anything, but I was curious if there was something she wanted to ask, or if maybe she was just taking it all in.

Almost as if she could hear my inner thoughts, Elizabeth grabbed Christopher's hand and said, "I love that she calls you, Christopher. It's so nice to hear your full name. I'm sorry I made it so hard for so long. I love you, son. I am so happy for you."

When Christopher pulled his mom into his arms, I looked away, wanting to give them privacy. It was clearly a moment they needed to have, but just before I tried to find something to look at, Elizabeth reached her hand out and grabbed my hand, saying, "Ahyoka, thank you for loving my son. I already know that you are good for him. I don't want to overstep, so I will follow your lead, but I just want you to know, you are a daughter to me now and always."

I smiled until her words registered in my mind and I thought about what they meant.

I don't think I ever moved as fast as I did when I excused myself and took off. Well, that isn't true. I didn't run the second I stood. I told them I needed to use the bathroom, walked a few steps as if I was completely normal, and *then* I took off.

I knew what love was. My grandfather loved me as if I was his own child. My uncle loved me, and so did Sunny. I even believed that a part of my mother loved me, but I was four when she left, and so I can't tell you what it feels like to be loved by a mom. What Christopher's mother offered should have been a welcomed thing that made my heart all happy—and it did in a way. It also lit up a part of me that I had hidden so well, I didn't even know it was there.

I made it to the bathroom, and I splashed cold water on my face. I hadn't realized I had taken as long as I had and was surprised when I opened the door and the woman who unintentionally spooked me was there—apologizing.

"The very thing I was trying to avoid, I managed to do anyway. I am so sorry. I wasn't thinking.

Chris—Christopher just told me about your mom,” she got out, looking so awkward; I felt bad for her.

“I was just caught off guard. I am the one who should be apologizing. It’s been a crazy day or two. I mean, who would have thought that I would find *my* Christopher and get this huge bonus family when I was coming to see my brother?” We both laughed a little before I reached for her hand and added, “Please, don’t think I am ungrateful for what you offered, and I want that, I really do. It was just unexpected.”

Elizabeth pulled me in and hugged me. I wasn’t sure why I began to cry again, but it felt as if I was meant to. In her arms, I felt as if a weight was being lifted. When she pulled back, she took my face between her hands and wiped my tears away with her thumbs.

“Ahyoka, I’m here. We all are, but I am promising you, right now, *I* am here for you.” I nodded and knew she was telling me the truth.

“Thank you,” I returned, and then she lightened the mood when she teased, “I suppose we should

get back to our men before they get themselves into some sort of trouble.”

It was easy to see why the Friday Firesides were loved by everyone. After my first one, I was already looking forward to the next and was pleasantly surprised to learn it would be at Samuel and Ruth's. The Adair's were the ones who would take me in whenever I came to visit my brother. Staying with them was something I looked forward to just as much as seeing Sunny.

“I can't believe that we were so close at times and yet we never knew it,” Christopher said right before he leaned over and kissed the top of my head that was resting on his shoulder.

Both Wyatt and Riley asked us if we wanted to catch a ride back to the trailer, but Chris let them know we were going to be spending the night in the main house with the Stols.

“Each new thing I learn points to Yahuah, and I can’t help but feel as if He is so much closer. It’s like when I look up at the stars right now, even knowing His throne is set above Polaris, it feels like He is almost close enough to touch in a way.

“Whenever my grandfather would tell me about the Creator, I believed him, but more like a child listening to bedtime stories. Sure, I knew the instructions were important, but I felt as if the things that were spoken of were for a generation that would come long after my time here. I soaked in all he had to say because I wanted to ensure my children, and then their children would live set-apart.

“It’s getting harder to deny that the writings are happening, the remnant is awakening, and this may be the time they spoke about. My heart and soul are full of gratitude we found one another. Whatever is meant to happen will, of course, but I thank Yahuah for you, and now all of the people I have because of you.”

Christopher and I helped clean up after the fire, but it wasn't hard and didn't take too long because everyone there all seemed to have a role. It made sense, seeing as they met every week for years.

The main house was everything I could have dreamed of for myself if I ever thought about things like that. It was exactly what one might expect to find on a successful ranch; lots of wood giving off a feel of country living. That wasn't all, though. There was just the right amount of modern functionality that made it perfect. It was by far the largest home I had even been in, and I caught myself, more than a few times, looking off, appreciating something new to find my mouth had fallen open in awe all on its own.

Christopher and I joined Butch and Betsy in their den once the house was emptied of all the excitement. Sitting there felt familiar in a way that didn't make sense, but I had no interest in trying to find another word to describe it because it was right.

Being curled up against Christopher on a love seat that was comfortable enough to sleep on while unwinding with people I met only hours before was,

oddly enough, part of the peace I could feel in my very soul. I loved that Christopher had the trailer, and I even looked forward to living there while we decided what to do with his part of the land, but the moment the Stolts offered for us to stay with them, my heart squeezed in my chest, begging me to say *yes*.

“The offer is for however long you would like to stay, too,” Butch insisted.

After Chris placed a kiss on my head and ran his hand up and down my arm, Betsy added, “You know where everything is, and you are more than welcome to pick from any of the spares upstairs. If you would like to stay until your place is finished, then the upstairs master is all yours. Butch and I officially live in the downstairs one now that the guys finished the ensuite and closet renovation.”

Before we could say anything, Butch asked, “Have you seen it since they finished? I can’t believe I ever fought my wife on switching rooms.”

Christopher and I followed the couple into their bedroom, and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t keep my thoughts inside. As it were, it was proving to be all I

could do to keep my eyes in their sockets. The room was perfect. There was a huge four-poster bed with each of the posts so large one might struggle to wrap their arms around them, set in the center of the room just off the wall enough for a person to walk behind.

There was a stone fireplace was in the corner, crackling with the sound of burning logs that brought warmth as well as a beautiful glow. The most interesting thing about the room was that even though it was ruggedly masculine, it still felt homey enough that one might find it hard to ever want to leave.

The attached bathroom was brighter than the bedroom itself. It was mostly soft white with slate gray towels and accents that matched perfectly with the dark stone wall that served as the focal point, but was also where the bathing area was located. There were no glass walls or shower curtains, just an open space with multiple shower heads and a tub, large enough to be fully submerged. I never would have believed a person could fall in love with a bathroom until I walked into theirs.

Christopher and I slept in a room he called *Mikey's room* that first night we stayed.

"What are we supposed to do now?" I asked the second Christopher slid into bed beside me.

"What do you mean?" he pressed, lifting his arm so I'd know he was waiting for me to come closer.

"I mean, I thought we were going to stay in the trailer, and I would be happy to do so, but this house, and the Stolt's..."

"We can stay here. I love everything about this house, its owners, the location; it's hard not to, but we can also stay in the trailer whenever we want as well. I really want to sit down with Mikey and Josh and come up with a plan for our place that makes your face light up the way it does here." He informed me, and I couldn't help but smile at just the thought of it.

"Miniature version, though. I can't imagine living in something this big. Besides, I like the idea of knowing this is here and being given an open invitation to come and go as we please. There is a part of

me that is thinking maybe we just stay for a bit.” I shared feeling true contentment.

“Then we stay.” Christopher returned just like that. And we did.

PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE SEEN THAT COMING

BOTH

Christopher

Ahyoka fit in so perfectly that it almost felt as though she had always been here. My sister and Jackie both loved her, and the three of them, each completely different, yet they got along and spent much of their time together.

As you already know, Wyatt swore that his wife and I were similar and better suited as twins than my sister and I were, and I have to admit, he wasn't wrong. Jackie was the female version of me. We would often blurt out the same thing, look at each

other, and then either shoot off a death glare or just laugh.

That fishing trip that happened the first weekend Ahyoka arrived was just what we needed to fix our one-time friendship circle, which I had begun to think would never be as it once had been again. Turned out Wyatt was right; it needed Ahyoka to get things back on track. What was once a bond of four could only be as strong as it had been when it became a bond of six. Our bond of six, though, was so much stronger.

“Um...slight problem,” Ahyoka said when she realized we were headed to the stables. All of us turned to look her way, and when it was clear we were waiting to hear what the problem was, she announced, “I have never ridden a horse before, so...is this place close enough I can learn on the fly?”

“Hum, I didn’t even think to ask. You can ride with me.” I offered more than okay with having her close.

“I’m riding with Wyatt. I haven’t ridden since I was a kid, so I didn’t want to chance riding solo yet

either.” Jackie added, and it was clear that hearing that she wasn’t alone helped Ahyoka relax.

Ahyoka was an experienced fisher and shared with us that Samuel was the one who taught her when she would come and stay with him on the reservation. We were each getting to know her just as she was learning about us, when all of a sudden Jackie asked, “Is there anything you can’t do, Ahya?” meaning it as a compliment.

Ahyoka squinted up half of her face as she tilted her head in an exaggerated look of confusion and answered, “I obviously can’t ride a horse, silly.”

“That isn’t true. You never rode a horse. Chris or anyone here can teach you that. I mean, Marcus learned, so I’d say you’ll be up on your own next trip. I wasn’t trying to be mean, I am amazed hearing of all the things you know how to do, is all.” Jackie clarified, even though it hadn’t been necessary.

“Well, in truth. I can’t hunt. And before you tell me I can learn, the issue isn’t about my lack of skill, I just don’t have it in me to end a life. I have no problem taking care of the body and making sure it is respected and used once it is no longer alive, but

I can't kill it." Ahyoka admitted and even though I just learned what she shared about herself, it made sense. Ahyoka was a kind and empathetic person. She respected and understood energy and life force beyond what most people did.

"That is so interesting. I feel that way about chickens." Riley added, and a silence fell upon us that had nothing to do with awkwardness. It was comfortable, and it was in that moment I realized that things were good. I had my inner circle and knowing Ahyoka fit and helped make things feel right once again, was incredible.

Ahyoka

(A few months later)

I wasn't the type of person who went looking for trouble when there wasn't anything there. I was more of the one people struggle with in the beginning, only to learn they appreciated me in the end because I called things as I saw them. If I felt something was up, I asked, so when I noticed Christopher acting off all day, I said something.

“Hey, will you come walk with me for a bit?” I suggested more than asked after he finished taking care of his horse. Christopher nodded and tried his hardest to offer me one of his easy smiles, but his energy flashed the exact thing my gut was telling me. Something was up.

“I know we are still trying to figure things out, and it hasn’t been all that long on the grand scheme of things, but I want to make something clear in case you aren’t sure, or have forgotten. I am here for you no matter what. You can tell me anything, and nothing will change between us.” I started, hoping he’d get the point and open up.

“I do know that. Thank you.” He returned, and I was honestly floored. Not the exact second he answered because I waited for him to continue; it was when there was no follow-up.

Christopher and I had a rule we stuck to whenever things we needed to talk about were tough, or if we were upset with one another—a part of our bodies needed to be in contact with the other person the whole time.

No. Matter. What.

So I reached for his hand and linked our pinky fingers together—knowing something was up.

“Then will you tell me what has got you all up in your head?” I asked and stopped walking so he’d look at me. He didn’t, though. Instead, he looked down and flexed his hand as if he wanted me to let go.

“I don’t want to talk about certain things with you. Especially when it may not even be a thing at all, but Ahyoka, my past isn’t something I want to talk about in general, but with you, even less.” He got out, barely, after taking a shaky breath.

“You told me about your past the first night we met, and at the time it was still your present. Whatever it is, I am here however you need me to be. All of it made you the man that I am in love with, so don’t worry about me. I am your now, and I am your future—nothing will change that. Do you hear me?”

“That’s just it. I know that. I love you so much it hurts sometimes to even think that there was a time before you where I screwed up royally every chance I got. In the beginning, my past haunted me because

I couldn't understand how you could want to be with me, but you just kept loving me until I had no choice but to believe you," he started, slipped his pinky finger out of mine so he could intertwine our fingers.

Christopher looked into my eyes briefly but shifted his gaze to something behind me when he continued.

"You loved me so completely that I nearly forgot there was anyone else. When I went over to my parents this morning, the radio was on. I didn't think too much about it because I was in my sister's Jeep, but then there was an announcement that my ex was going to be in this state performing." At that, his body tensed; he struggled to swallow, so I pulled him in.

"Okay. Thank you for telling me. Can we talk about what's got you feeling this way? How can I help you?" I offered, hoping he'd see that there was nothing we couldn't handle if we faced it together.

I was relieved Christopher shared what he was most concerned about, and then, like a catty little school girl (whom, might I add, I never was until that moment), I sent a text in a group chat that Jackie named *Girl-Talk* about a week after I arrived in North Carolina, asking where she and Riley were because I needed my sisters. That's what they became so easily, too. Riley, was simple; she was grateful I made her brother happy, and Jackie, well, she was so much like my husband; it was sometimes weird, but still easy. Regardless, they were my people, and I needed them.

Riley offered for us to meet up at her place, and Jackie and I agreed with OMW's.

The second I walked through the door, I blurted out, "I need to know all there is about Snow, and then I need you to be real with me. How bad is it going to be if she shows up? Do you really think she will?"

Riley took in a deep breath. Jackie rolled her eyes and answered first, "She is the worst. I was never a fan. But Ahya—right now, I have never been more

surprised and grateful that you are, in fact, a human.”

I laughed a little, shaking my head at the silliness that was Jackie. Christopher teased me all the time, claiming I was superhuman, or he would revert to his original thought that I was an angel. I looked at my sister-in-law and began to chew my lip, waiting for her to give me something.

Before she could say anything, I added, “I just want to make something clear. I know that Christopher and I are good. I know he loves me. What I am hoping to figure out is what this is going to do to him? He was a wreck, and I hate that just hearing she was going to be hours away did this to him, after he finally started to trust what is here—now.”

“Well, for starters, my brother despises Snow. It was the broken Kimberly who he tried to fix that I’m sure he is up in his head about. I haven’t talked to her in so long—her choice—even though I was totally on board and didn’t want to speak to her anyway. I never blocked her, though. There’s a part of me that believes if she reaches out and finds no one, that could be bad in ways I pray never happen. I know

he shared some of it, but he never sees himself as a victim when that's the truth of it. Both of the people he thought he loved abused him. It didn't really matter so much because you came and showed him what love truly was and helped him finally believe that he deserved it.

"I am seventy-five maybe eighty percent sure that she may try to find him since she is here. She always had this sick sort of need to feel as though he approved of her regardless of her fame."

"Ugh," I grunted as I threw my head against the back of the couch and looked up. I closed my eyes and prayed for all of it before I said, "I knew what I had to do for him from the moment he pulled up-whether or not I wanted to admit that to myself at the time. This, though, I'm going in blind because I don't have that feeling. It's radio silence. I am convinced it's a test for not only me, but him as well as our relationship itself. I just hope he remembers how much I love him, and that he has no obligation to revisit the past."

And then, I cried, truly feeling every ounce of uncertainty as if it had the power to undo what Yahuah

put together. After only a few seconds, I wiped my face and spoke the truth with intention into the space around me.

“What Yahuah has joined will stand whatever might come. No weapon, no person, no evil that tries to harm me or my marriage will prosper. I am a daughter of the Most High—Yahuah. Abba, I know that You have not given me a spirit of fear. Oh, Yahuah, please keep Your mighty hand on my husband and help him never forget that he is Yours and he is loved. Please, Yahuah, regardless of what happens, bring Kimberly peace. Let her soul be free so she can heal whatever is broken within. Thank You. Your will be done, and may my ruach rest in the promise of that truth, and Your perfect peace.”

It didn't take long before what might have been became this *is* happening. Snow did take the opportunity to swing by Spring View just as Christopher and Riley thought she might, only she chose to catch

everyone off guard and come before her shows instead of waiting until she was finished performing.

I was never more grateful that Yahuah surrounded me with such reliable people who cared, because I wouldn't have been able to sit and watch my husband walk out of Benny's and then watch his ex follow after him. Wyatt made it clear he would take care of things, and Riley and Jackie tried their best to keep me distracted.

She hadn't fought fair. Granted, Snow had no idea Chris moved on when she showed up during karaoke night at *Benny's* and put on a little show. The crowd enjoyed having a celebrity in their midst, but the one she was trying to make her move on sat perfectly still, preventing all emotions from making an appearance on his face. Those of us sitting with him at the table knew.

My heart pounded in my chest. I knew my husband was battling ghosts from his past, but he made it clear when we talked that he would let me know if and/or when he needed me. I tried to convince him that he didn't have to do anything alone anymore,

but he made his case when he explained, “If I don’t do it alone, she will just assume you are controlling me. I need her to know that there is no chance of us ever being together again, Ahyoka. If she comes, I need it to be a final goodbye. Trust me. I don’t want it to be this way. I’d rather leave town for a week or two, but if I don’t let her know the door is shut and locked, she will show up again when we least expect it trying to bust the thing down.”

I let him know I understood as much as I hated all of it.

Christopher

All three ladies were supposed to be at Benny’s when Wyatt, Mikey, and I arrived. I saw Riley who was training our cousin Ezra and his girlfriend, Stacy, to take over. I walked over, said hello, and then looked around to find the other’s when my sister leaned in to let me know that Ahyoka and Jackie ran home for something and would be back soon.

I smiled and then made my way over to where my friends were sitting, looking through the millions of songs, pretending they were going to sing. They

did this every time we came and usually ended the night doing the same thing they were doing—flipping through the songs.

“Hey man. Jackie and Ahya went to take care of something for Lena. They should be here in a few minutes. I’m surprised you didn’t see them in the parking lot.” Wyatt explained, saying pretty much the same thing Riley had, but something in me felt off. I looked at my phone and saw that Ahyoka had sent a text, so I sent her one back, letting her know I was there and told her to be safe.

My phone let me know there was a text from my sister at the same time both Mikey and Wyatt mumbled something. Mikey said, “This can’t be good,” and Wyatt let out a made-up explicit, “Oh, freak of fudge cracker, speak of the devil and she comes,” which caused me to look up.

There she was.

The one from my past who had been haunting me since I learned she would be close enough to show up. I felt my body tense as the familiar face of the girl

I once thought I loved stood on the small stage and the crowd cheered.

She smiled as she locked eyes with mine, and my stomach tightened so much I had to force myself to breathe. I didn't want her to see any reaction coming from me, so I just froze.

In my mind, I kept begging for Ahyoka to come, but then a part of me prayed that it would all be over before she returned. This mess from my past needed to be cleaned up so it wouldn't make what Ahyoka and I had dirty. A part of me was afraid to find out what I would feel if I ever saw Kimberly again. I knew I was in love with Ahyoka, and would never do anything to jeopardize what we had. But I had this soft spot for Kimberly for so many years and just wanted her to believe she was lovable. I knew what that felt like and hated the idea of another person struggling with the heaviness of feeling worthless.

"Chris, are you okay? Do you want to go?" Wyatt asked, but I just sat there staring at Snow. She worked that stage, acting as if she was singing from her heart only for me, but I knew with each word she sang, Kimberly was nowhere to be found. Just as I learned

in Vegas, Kimberly sold her soul to the devil, and all that was left was the woman I wanted nothing to do with from day one.

I shook my head to answer my friend while I held contact with the ghost from my past. Something shifted, causing my heart to regain its normal pace while my body eased. I knew before she even sat down that my wife was there, and when she placed her hand on the inside of my leg, she gave me the strength I needed to face whatever would happen once the song ended.

“They don’t grow um anywhere else in the world as they do right here in North Carolina, that’s for sure. Thank you all for your warm welcome and continued support. I just love it here. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a cowboy that I haven’t seen in far too long.” Snow hammed it up for no one, really.

Sure, people knew who she was and they liked that someone with a huge following was in the same place they were—that was about it. Besides, the only music the people in Spring View listened to was anything my sister sang (gotta love their support of a

local), country, and Christian; maybe, just maybe, they might like a little rock or mountain music, but pop—not so much after they left middle school.

I turned to look at my wife and begged her to trust me.

“I need to kill this. I am so sorry. Please, trust me. If I need you, I will let you know. I love you,” I said and stood up, placed a kiss on Ahyoka’s forehead, and made my way out the door.

I walked into the parking lot and moved just far enough away from the door that we wouldn’t cause trouble or disturb any of the customers. My back was toward the door when I heard Snow’s fake southern drawl call out, “Hey there, Sexy. Fancy meeting you here.”

I turned around, flashing a look that said I wasn’t amused, and cut right to the chase.

“Is it? I mean, you showed up knowing I would be here, but I am not sure why. I made it clear when I walked away that we were done. You even agreed when you reminded me how much of your time I

wasted. I blocked you on everything, so why in the world would you think this was a good idea, Snow?”

I noticed the shock on her face when I called her by her stage name, but it did nothing to change the reality of what I had just said.

“Chris, babe, I missed you. I can’t get you out of my head no matter what I try or how long it’s been—it’s always been you,” she tried to plead her case, taking purposeful steps my way, but for each one she took toward me, I stepped further away.

“I know I had a crap way of showing you how much I love you, but please, let’s talk about it. Let me show you how much I missed you. Let me remind you of how good we are together,” she doubled down, switching into what I’m sure she believed was alluring, only it was pathetically heartbreaking. She was so broken, somehow even more than the last time I saw her, but I no longer believed it was my job to fix it for her.

She must have caught on to my rejection before I got a chance to say anything because she flipped her cruel switch on, clearly hoping she would hurt me enough that I’d crumble before her.

“Oh, so you were full of it. You swore that you would always be there. You told me how much you loved me, that as long as I needed you, you’d be there. You’re just like the rest of them. You’re a liar, only you’re much worse because you pretended to be the good guy. Well, I must say, you were rather convincing, Mr. Morris.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I have nothing to say other than there is nothing left between us. I don’t live in my past, Snow. What we had was something that would have never worked because we weren’t meant to be. We live in two completely different worlds, but I will always hope that you find peace. I pray you heal enough to love yourself.” I made clear, holding my head high, making sure she knew I meant every single word.

“There’s no way. Let’s just go somewhere, alone. It’s been too long. We do work, babe. Let me show you.” She begged, tears staining her face with the makeup that had been on her eyes before they began to fall.

“No. I have moved on. I am happy, and while it does hurt me to see you like this, we are over. Now,

I wish you well, but I need to go. Please, make good choices and move along. There's nothing left for you here."

I sent my wife a text that said,

I need you

She didn't respond in text; she just walked out the door, and the second she found me, she froze—waiting to see what I wanted her to do.

I took long strides, and the second I could reach her, I pulled her into my arms and told her just how much I loved her.

"Do you want to go home?" she asked after I kissed her with enough passion— I think we would have gotten arrested if we didn't stop.

"Yes, but...I would like to have our date first."

"Okay. That sounds like a plan. Fair warning, your sister is a wreck," Ahyoka warned, causing a huge smile to work itself onto my face.

"Then—I have just the thing," I assured, walked my wife to the table, and excused myself. I hurried over to let my cousin know to put Riley and me

down, told him what we would be singing, and then I returned as if everything was normal.

“I’m okay, Sissy, I promise,” I whispered in my sister’s ear and then pulled back just enough so she could examine my face to see if I was telling the truth.

“Hey, Mike—I’m going to steal your wife, but I promise she will be in a fantastic mood once we are done.” I let my brother-in-law know as I lifted his pregnant wife and led her to the stage. It was karaoke, and yet I needed to explain something, so I did.

“This song is supposed to be a couple—well, at least in the terrible movie they were together, but my sister loves cheesy movies, and she loves singing with me for some reason, so, Ri, what do you say we show them that *Wouldn’t Change a Thing* can work for siblings if we change a few of the words?” Her face lit up, proving, I did the right thing.

My sister’s love language was singing horrible songs, but she was really good at it, and I loved watching her come alive while she performed, so I gave her the very thing she begged me for.

Every single person we knew recorded us. Mikey went live on my phone so our parents could watch, and my wife beamed. She witnessed the silliness between Riley and me before, but this was different. Sure, Jackie showed her the videos we posted in the past, and she was caught up on all of our socials, but watching it happen in person must have been an experience in and of itself.

The smile she kept on her face as our group cheered along with the rest of the people out to have fun was priceless and fed my performing bug just enough to think about doing it again in the future. Let's be real, when you find something that makes your wife, your momma, and your sister all happier than a kid all alone in a candy store, you cave and do it.

I was so caught up in singing with my sister and the smile lighting up my wife's gorgeous face, I didn't see Snow standing in the back, taking it all in. I truly believed she left when I made it clear I wasn't an

option. I suppose I should have known better. Snow never did handle rejection well.

Ahyoka and Mikey stood as Riley and I made our way back to the table. I wrapped my arms around my wife and kissed her neck all over before I claimed her lips. Just when I lifted her feet off the ground, the sound of slow, hard clapping along with a loud taunting voice called out, “Bravo—the brother-sister duo does it again. It’s amazing how ridiculous you both are, but it’s even more embarrassing. Adults singing children’s songs gets creepy after a while, in case you missed the memo.”

Snow wanted an audience, so she made sure she was loud enough for people to hear, but it was clear she didn’t want to be thrown out so she was holding back—at first, at least.

“You said you moved on, but you failed to mention the lack of competition,” I squeezed Ahyoka’s hand at Snow’s deliberate jab. She didn’t need me to do that, though, and assured, “I’m okay. She is hurt and lashing out. Tell me what you want me to do.” I couldn’t, though, because Snow stepped closer and just before she opened her mouth, Jackie explained,

“You’re right, there is no competition. She is his wife, and you are yesterday’s news.”

“Oh, really? How cute. Is it real or just one of your cult rules? Refresh my memory, Riley, was it sex that binds you...” The look Snow shot at my sister as she threw what Riley believed at one time to be friendship in her face was as pointed as the tip of a knife. The heartbreak that flashed in my sister’s eyes caused me to flinch.

Snow turned back to me and bit her lower lip before she continued in a sickening voice meant to rile up my wife, “I had him first, so I guess that makes me wifey number one—or two—no wait, I am wife number four. That doesn’t really matter though because I’m the one he promised to never leave. I’m the one who he is thinking about when you fail to meet his needs...” I winced inwardly. I wanted to tell her to stop; I wanted to take Ahyoka back to the ranch, but Ahyoka just proved that she didn’t need me to defend or save her.

In a voice that remained strong and steady, Ahyoka replied, “You are right about something. He did think of you and how you made him feel unlov-

able. I showed him how wrong you were and helped him find his inner strength so he could hold his head up high. What you offered him was poison. Your body was a drug, and the games you played were killing him, but what I offer heals. What we have is something that grows stronger each second that ticks by. I hope you will find the same thing one day, and the sooner you move on, the sooner it can become a possibility for you.”

There weren't any cruel undertones or hidden meaning in the words Ahyoka spoke. She said what needed to be said; however, Snow wasn't having it. She began shouting out words that would make a sailor do a double-take, maybe even blush, while making a scene unbecoming of a family establishment. Wyatt and Mikey stepped between Snow and the table just as Benny walked over and asked her to leave.

“Do you know who I am?” She shot back at Benny, who looked at her and answered, “Yes, that's exactly why I am giving you a chance to walk out of here on your own before I call the law and have you trespassed. You came here looking for something

that you won't be finding, so it's time to move yourself along."

Snow turned when she realized she had no other choice and walked out the door.

"I'm sorry, Benny." I offered sincerely, only to be told, "No need to be sorry. You did nothing wrong. I'm sorry it took me so long to get her out of here."

I turned to look at Ahyoka, placed my hands on the sides of her head, and said, "I love you."

"I love you, too." She returned with a grin that I covered when I claimed her mouth with a kiss.

HAPPILY, EVER AFTER

EPILOGUE

Chris

Let's see.

You know that my sister had twin boys. That Wyatt has a daughter, and that we all found out the same day—we were pregnant.

You know how they say, new house—new baby? Well, our home was just finished being built when Ahyoka and her brother flew out to Utah to get the rest of her stuff and sign off on the paperwork to make the Wilkerson's in charge of the gas station. Since Sunny went with her, I was able to stay back and get the finishing touches completed so we could move in completely when she returned.

They were only going for a long weekend—four days total, and I, of all people, knew the benefits of sibling bonding time, so I was happy they had a chance for the two of them to spend time with one another alone. The only thing that was a bit of a bummer was learning she was pregnant on a video chat while they were away. And that was only because I wanted her in my arms the second she showed me the positive test on our video chat.

I need you to hear me. I loved everything about being an uncle. Ahyoka and I took the kids, including L.A., because Wyatt's my brother, so, yeah, I'm Uncle Crissy to his daughter, too. By the way, you can thank my sister for that. I wasn't a fan, but when little people call you whatever they choose to call you, it's good.

To my nephews, I was Uncle Ca-Wiss (a sweet reminder of my sister once again—only that one took me back to when the two of us struggled with our L's and R's).

So, back to it.

Having all three of them pregnant together was pretty neat. Granted, there were some things that

weren't great. Like the way they would play off of each other's emotions. Again, that worked wonders when it was the fun feelings, but let me tell you, when a pregnant woman feels slighted in any way, and her two best friends are around, you end up with three moms-to-be sulking right along with the one who started it all.

Even those moments weren't bad, though. In the tough, crazy, bizarre times, Mikey, Wyatt, and I leaned on one another, strengthening our own bonds. I may have wanted what we ended up having, but in no way did I ever believe it would be all that it became. We dreamed we'd have something similar to what we grew up seeing over at the ranch, and we not only had it for ourselves, we had so much more.

Ahyoka was the first of the three to go into labor. She was perfect. I know that sounds ridiculous when I'm talking about the day our son was born, but she really was. I believe the way she was taught to listen to her body had everything to do with her ability to allow things to work themselves out on their own. She breathed through her contractions, went for a walk with my sister and Jackie and apart from the

times she stopped to close her eyes and breathe as her body did what it was meant to, you'd never know she was in labor. She even finished making the matching vests she had been working on for the babies on the way.

The moment our son was born, she looked at me and cried; completely overwhelmed by everything that had taken place over the course of fifteen hours.

"I love you." She said before she closed her eyes and tucked her face into my neck. I turned my head just enough to kiss the top of hers, and returned, "I love you, too." Lily placed our little boy in my arms, and that's when I felt the first of my own tears slide down my face. Holding him with his mother still resting on my shoulder was undeniably the most miraculous feeling I'd ever felt. Life, after all, was a precious gift and my son was living proof that the Creator was indeed still very much in control. And His creation, that He entrusted me with, was a true masterpiece, just like my wife.

We named our boy after the man who loved my wife as if he were her parent—her grandfather, Chayton (pronounced with more of a "d" sound at

the end than the written “t”). The middle name we chose honored both my late biological father as well as my sister, whose name, like my own, was given for the same reason. His name—Chayton Riley Morris—and he was born with a full head of thick, straight, dark hair that wouldn’t lay flat with all the hair gel in the world (not that we tried).

Riley went into labor a week after our son was born, and she gave birth to a little girl who we all were certain would look exactly like her momma when she grew up—not Riley exactly but her short-lived alter-ego, Tara. My niece did look like my sister, but she had her father’s eyes. She was given the name Erianna Elizabeth Edwards but was quickly nicknamed Triple E by all of the men who fawned over her.

Three days after Erianna was born, we got to meet Jackie and Wyatt’s second child. Jackie swore the whole time she was pregnant that they were having a boy, claiming everything about her pregnancy was different from when she carried Lena. Wyatt, however, wasn’t convinced. Every time she would say something about their son, he would smile and tell her their daughter would hold it against her for

telling everyone that she was a boy. Turned out, Wyatt was right. Jackie even claimed his mother told him, but she was only teasing, of course. Their little one was named Kayla Lily—their own play on calla lilies and, surprisingly enough, it came when Wyatt’s dad held her right after she was born and said, “You are as beautiful as a flower. Just as tiny, too.”

Wyatt and Jackie had originally planned on Lily if they had a girl but were trying to figure out if they wanted it to be a middle or a first name. They also narrowed the names they liked down to Michaela, only they chose the shortened version after the scene played out that caused the pieces to fall into place.

Life was good when Riley and I were little, and it was even better as our children reminded us of all the best times we had growing up. Being able to have the life Yahuah had gifted us was something we each cherished, and each day—each moment filled my heart with immeasurable amounts of joy and gratitude.

Ahyoka

Hey—It’s me, Ahyoka.

Christopher only got you so far, but it's my turn to tell you that eleven months after we had our son, we were gifted a little girl who, even I was convinced at times was an angel. For far more reasons than her beauty. Our daughter, Shysie Maria (referred to as Shy since the first time my husband held her), was nearly other-worldly. Everything about her radiated peace that was so calming it was clearly a divine gift. You know those rare people out there who you can't help but breathe out an "Ahh" as your body completely relaxes in their presence? That was what it was like to hold Shy, or even just look at her while she slept. She was another treasure from above, and within our group alone we were overflowing with gifts from Yahuah.

Jackie and Wyatt had another little girl about eight months after Shy was born, and her name was chosen by their oldest, Lena, who let them know she would be calling her sister Tullie, short for Talulah, regardless of what they had to say about it.

Lena picked it because it was the name of her favorite character from a children's book series about set-apart living for kids. It had become rather popular in the set-apart world and was created by my brother's wife, Emmalynn.

Being gifted the life we had with so many other people to live it alongside of us while following the Right-Rulings of Yahuah, honoring His Shabats, and keeping His set-apart times was unheard of on the level we had within our family. Sadly, when Yahuah said "few," He meant it, but you'd never feel it was so within our tribe because we had more than most when they find the Narrow Path and choose to walk it. We were living how the Most High instructed us to, while He kept us all under His wing. Highly favored was a gift He bestowed upon us, and in return we offered Him our never-ending praise.

The End

~There will still be new installments over at The Awakening, as well as a whole new section where you will find scenes that didn't make into the series, the songs that were written and spoken about in

the books, and some other things that you may find interesting. This section will be labeled as Bonus so be on the lookout.

Thanks again for seeing this through. It means far more than words can say—Much love, and Yahuah's peace!!