

MARIANA ZAPATA

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALL  
RHODES  
LEAD  
HERE

A person with long brown hair, wearing a green knit beanie and a plaid shirt, is sitting on a wooden bench. They are looking down at a map or document they are holding. The background is a vast, scenic view of a valley with dense evergreen forests and rolling hills under a clear sky. The overall tone is adventurous and scenic.

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Book Cover Design by RBA Designs

Editing by Hot Tree Editing and My Brother's Editor

*I don't know how I could have gotten through this last year without you.  
Eva, thank you for everything.  
Especially your friendship.*

## CHAPTER 1



*M*y eyes burned. Then again, they hadn't *stopped* stinging since it had gotten dark a couple of hours ago, but I squinted anyway. Coming up ahead, on the very, very edge of my car's headlights, there was a sign.

I took a deep, deep breath in and let it right back out.

**WELCOME TO  
PAGOSA SPRINGS  
*World's Deepest Hot Springs***

Then I read it again just to make sure I hadn't imagined it.

I was *here*. Finally.

It had only taken an eternity.

Okay, an eternity that fit into a two-month period. Eightish weeks of me driving slowly, stopping at just about every tourist attraction and two-star hotel or vacation rental along the way from Florida through Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Spending time in Texas and then skipping to Arizona, exploring towns and cities I hadn't had time to check out in the past when I'd come through. Even visiting an old friend and his family too. I went to Vegas while I was at it because it was somewhere else I had been to at least ten times but had never truly gotten to see. I spent almost three weeks in Utah. Last but not least, I took a week to check out New Mexico before circling back up toward the mountains. To Colorado. My final destination—I hoped.

And now I'd made it.

Or just about made it.

Letting my shoulders sink down, I pushed them back against the seat

and relaxed a little. According to the navigation app, I still had another thirty minutes left to get to the place I was renting on the other side of town in the southwest part of the state most people had never heard of.

Home for the next month, or maybe longer if everything worked out the way I wanted it to. I had to settle somewhere after all.

The pictures online of the rental I'd booked were just what I'd been looking for. Nothing big. Not in town. Mostly though, I'd fallen for it because the rental reminded me of the last house Mom and I had lived in.

And considering how last minute I had reserved it, right smack at the start of summer and tourist season, there hadn't been a whole lot left to choose from—as in, there had been next to nothing. I'd come up with the idea of going back to Pagosa Springs two weeks ago in the middle of the night while the weight of every choice I'd made in the last fourteen years rested on my soul—not for the first time either, more like the thousandth—and I'd fought not to cry. The tears weren't because I'd been in a room in Moab all by myself with no person who gave a shit about me within a thousand miles. They had sprouted because I'd thought about my mom and how the last time I'd been in the area had been with her.

And maybe just a little because I had no clue what the hell to do with my life anymore and that scared the hell out of me.

Yet that was when the idea had struck.

*Go back to Pagosa.*

Because why not?

I'd been doing a lot of thinking about what I wanted, what I needed. It wasn't like I'd had anything else to do being by myself nearly nonstop for two months. I'd thought about making a list, but I was done with lists and schedules; I'd spent the last decade listening to other people tell me what I could and couldn't do. I was over plans. Done with a whole lot of things and people, honestly.

And just as soon as I had thought of the place that had been home once, I knew that was what I wanted to do. The idea just felt *right*. I'd gotten tired of driving around, looking for something to set my life back into some semblance of order.

I'd figure it out, I had decided.

New year, new Aurora.

So what if it was June? Who said your new year had to start on January 1<sup>st</sup>, am I right? Mine had officially started with a lot of tears on a Wednesday afternoon about a year ago. And it was time for a newer version of the person I'd been back then.

That's why I was here.

Back in the town I'd grown up in, twenty years later.

Thousands of miles away from Cape Coral and everyone and everything in Nashville.

Free to do whatever I wanted to do for the first time in a long, long time.

I could be whoever I wanted to be. Better late than never, right?

I blew out a breath and shook my shoulders to wake myself up a little more, wincing at the ache that had taken them over, back when I'd gotten the rug pulled out from under me, and never left. Maybe I had no *real* idea of what I was going to do long term, but I was going to figure it out. I couldn't find it in me to regret my decision to drive here.

There were plenty of things in my life I regretted, but I wouldn't let this choice be one of them. Even if I didn't end up staying in the area long term, the month I had reserved in Pagosa Springs was going to be nothing in the grand scheme of life. It was going to be a stepping stool for the future. Maybe a Band-Aid for the past. A boost to the present.

*It's never too late to find a new road*, as my friend Yuki sang. I had driven all this way to Colorado for a reason, and nothing was going to be in vain—not my butt cheeks hurting, my shoulders aching, my sciatic nerve acting up, or even how much my eyes needed a light bulb and a nap.

And if I could feel the start of a headache right above my eyebrows, then that was just part of the journey, a building block for the fucking future. No pain, no gain.

And if I didn't get into my car again for another month, that would be great too. The idea of being behind the wheel for another minute made me want to puke. Maybe I'd buy another car while I was at it now that I thought about it. I had the blood money for it. Might as well use it for something I would actually need and use since my existing one didn't have four-wheel drive.

Now. New. Present.

The past was staying where it was, because as much as I would've liked to light it on fire and watch it burn, that couldn't happen.

Mostly because I'd go to jail for double homicide, and that kind of thing was frowned upon.

Instead, I was moving on without a criminal record, and this was the next step. Bye, Nashville and everything there. See you later, Florida, too. Hello, Colorado and mountains and a peaceful, hopefully happy future. I was going to will that shit into existence. Like Yuki would also sing, *if you put things out into the universe, hopefully someone will listen*.

The hard part was over. This was my future. Another step in the next



thirty-three years of my life.

I should thank the Joneses for it, really. Maybe not for taking advantage of me, but at least I knew now what I'd been in—who I'd been surrounded by. At least I had gotten out.

I was free.

Free to go back to where I'd spent the first part of my life, to see the place where I'd last seen my mom. The same place she had loved so much and that held so many good memories, as well as the worst.

I was going to do what I had to do to keep going with my life.

And the first step was to make a left down a dirt road that was technically called a county road.

Gripping the steering wheel as hard as I could as my tires drove over one pothole after another, I pictured the last blurry memory I had of my mom, the image of her greenish-brown eyes—the same ones I saw in the mirror. Her very medium brown hair, not dark but not light, was another thing we shared—at least until I'd started coloring my hair, but I'd stopped that. I'd only started coloring it because of Mrs. Jones. But mostly, I remembered how tightly my mom had hugged me before she had given me permission to go to my friend's house the next day instead of going with her on the hike she had planned for both of us. How she had kissed me when she'd dropped me off and said, "*See you tomorrow, Aurora-baby!*"

Guilt, bitter and sharp, as fine and deadly as a dagger made out of an icicle, jabbed me in the stomach for just about the millionth time. And I wondered, like I always did when that familiar sensation came over me, *What if? What if I'd gone with her?* Like every other time I wondered, I told myself it didn't matter because I would never know.

Then I squinted hard into the distance again as I drove over a bigger pothole, cursing the fact that none of these roads had streetlights.

In hindsight, I should have stretched this last part of the drive over another day so that I wouldn't end up wandering through the mountains in the dark.

Because it wasn't just the ups and the downs of elevation that came at you. There had been deer, chipmunks, rabbits, and squirrels. I'd seen an armadillo and a skunk. All of them decided at the last minute to run across the road and scare the living shit out of me so bad I slammed on my brakes and thanked God it wasn't winter and there weren't many cars out on the road. All I'd wanted to do was arrive to my temporary home.

To find a person named Tobias Rhodes who was renting out his garage apartment at a very reasonable rate. I'd be the first guest. The apartment didn't have any reviews, but it fit every other thing I wanted from a rental,

so I was willing to go for it.

Plus, it wasn't like there had been anything else to choose from other than renting a room in someone's house or staying in a hotel.

"Your destination is approaching on the left," the navigation app spoke up.

I squeezed the steering wheel and squinted some more, just barely catching sight of the start of a driveway. If there were more houses around, I couldn't tell in the darkness. This really was in the middle of nowhere.

Which was just what I wanted: peace and privacy.

Turning down the supposed driveway that was only marked by a reflective stake, I told myself that everything was going to be okay.

I would find a job... doing something... and I'd go through my mom's journal and attempt to do some of the hikes that she'd written about. At least her favorites. It was one of the biggest reasons why coming here had seemed like such a good idea.

People cried over endings, but sometimes you had to cry over new beginnings. I wouldn't forget what I'd left. But I was going to be excited—at least as much as I could be—about this start and however it would end.

One day at a time, right?

A house loomed up ahead. From the number of windows and lights on, it seemed smallish, but it wasn't like that mattered. Off to the side, maybe twenty, maybe fifty feet away—this night driving bullshit was crap on my astigmatism—was another structure that looked an awful lot like a separate garage. There was a single car parked in front of the main house, an old Bronco I recognized because my cousin had spent years rebuilding one just like it.

I turned the car toward the smaller and less lit-up building, spotting the big garage door. Gravel crunched under my tires, rocks pinging and hitting the undercarriage, and I reminded myself again of why I was here and that everything would be okay. Then I parked around the side. I blinked and rubbed at my eyes, then finally pulled out my phone to reread the check-in instructions I had taken a screenshot of. Maybe tomorrow I'd go and introduce myself to the homeowner. Or maybe I'd just leave them alone if they left me alone.

I got out then.

This was the rest of my life.

And I was going to try my best, just like my mom had raised me to do, like she would have expected from me.

It only took about a minute with my camera's flashlight to find the

door—I'd parked right beside it—and the lockbox hanging from the knob. The code the owner sent me worked on the first try, and one single key sat inside the tiny box. It fit and the door squeaked open into a staircase on the left with another door perpendicular to it. I flipped on a light switch and opened the door directly in front of the one I'd just come through, expecting it to be the entrance into the garage and not being disappointed.

But what did surprise me was that there wasn't a car inside.

There were various forms of padding along the walls, some of it the kind of foam I'd seen in every recording studio I'd ever been in, and other parts of it, blue floor mats that had been nailed in. There were even a couple of old mattresses pressed against the walls. In the center, there was a big, black, four-by-four speaker with a banged-up old amp, two stools, and a stand with three guitars on it. There was also a keyboard and a basic, starter drum set.

I swallowed.

Then I noticed two posters taped to the mats and released my breath slowly. One was for a young folk singer, and the other was for a big tour of two rock bands. Not country. Not pop.

And most importantly, no need to overthink it. I backed out the way I'd come in and shrugged off the practice space, closing the door behind me.

The stairs turned once, and I made it up, flipping on more lights and sighing with relief. It was just like the pictures had advertised: a studio apartment. There was a full-sized bed tucked against the wall on the right, a heater made to resemble a wood-burning stove in the corner, a small table with two chairs, a fridge that looked to be from the 90s but who cared, a stove that also had to be from the same decade, a kitchen sink, a set of doors that looked like they might be a closet, and a closed one that I hoped was the bathroom that had been in the listing. There was no washer or dryer, and I hadn't bothered asking. There was a laundromat in town; I'd looked it up. I'd make it work.

Scarred wood floors covered the layout, and I smiled at the small mason jar sitting on the table with wildflowers in it.

The Joneses would have cried that this wasn't the Ritz, but it was perfect. It had everything I needed, and it reminded me of the house I'd lived in with Mom with wood-paneled walls and just the... warmth of it.

It really was perfect.

For the first time, I let myself feel genuine excitement over my decision. And now that I did, it felt *good*. Hope sprang up inside of me like a Roman candle. It only took three trips to carry my bags, box, and cooler

up.

You would figure that packing up your life would take days, even weeks. If you had a lot of belongings, it might even take months.

But I didn't have a lot of stuff. I'd left Kaden just about everything when his lawyer—a man I'd sent Christmas cards to for a *decade*—had sent me a thirty-day notice to move out of the house we'd shared, the day after he'd ended things. Instead, I'd left hours later. All I'd taken with me were two suitcases and four boxes worth of belongings.

*Good.* It was good it had happened, and I knew it. It had hurt then, hurt like a son of a bitch, and afterward. It didn't anymore though.

But... I still sometimes wished I'd sent those traitors a pie made of shit just like in *The Help*. I wasn't that good of a person.

I had just opened up the fridge so I could put the sandwich meat, cheese, mayo, three cans of strawberry soda, and single beer inside when I heard a creak from downstairs.

The door. It was the door.

I froze.

Then I grabbed my pepper spray from my purse and hesitated—because the owner wouldn't just walk in, would they? I mean, it was their property, but I was renting it from them. I'd signed an agreement and sent a copy of my license over, hoping they wouldn't do a search of my name, but oh well if they did. At a few of the rentals I'd stayed at, the owners had come over to see if I needed anything, but they hadn't just strolled in. Only one of them had done a search and asked a lot of uncomfortable questions.

“Hello?” I called out, finger on the pepper spray trigger.

The only response I got was the sound of feet on the stairs, these loud clunks that sounded heavy.

“Hello?” I called out a little louder that time, straining to hear the steps continuing up the stairs and making me clench the pepper spray in my hand just a little tighter.

In the time it took me to hold my breath—because *that* was going to help me hear better—I caught sight of hair and then a face a split second before the person must have taken the last two or three steps in a leap because they were *there*.

Not a *they*. A *he*. A man.

The owner?

God, I hoped so.

He had on a khaki-colored, button-down shirt tucked into dark pants that could have been blue, black, or something else, but I couldn't tell because of the lighting.

I squinted and laced my hands behind my back to hide the pepper spray just in case.

There was a gun at his hip!

I threw my hands up and squealed, “Holy shit, take whatever you want, just don’t hurt me!”

The stranger’s head jerked before a raspy-rough voice spit out, “*What?*”

I held them up even higher, shoulders around my ears, and gestured to my purse on the table with my chin. “My purse is right there. Take it. The keys are in there.” I had insurance. I had copies of my ID on my phone, which was in my back pocket. I could order another debit card, report my credit card as stolen. I couldn’t care less about the cash in there. None of it was worth my life. None. Of. It.

The man’s head jerked again though. “What in the hell are you talking about? I’m not trying to rob you. *What are you doing in my house?*” The man shot out each word like they were missiles.

Hold on a second.

I blinked and still kept my hands where they were. What was going on? “Are you Tobias Rhodes?” I knew for a fact that was the name of the person I’d made my reservation with. There had been a picture, but I hadn’t bothered zooming in on it.

“Why?” the stranger asked.

“Uh, because I rented this garage apartment? My check-in was today.”

“Check-in?” the man repeated, his voice low. I was pretty positive he was scowling, but he was under a gap in lighting and shadows covered his features. “Does this look like a hotel to you?”

Ooh, attitude.

Just as I opened my mouth to tell him that, no, this didn’t look like a hotel but I’d still made a legal reservation and paid upfront for the stay, a loud creak came from downstairs a split second before another voice, a lighter, younger one, shouted, “Dad! Wait!”

I focused on the man as he turned his attention down the stairs, his upper body seeming to expand in a protective—or maybe defensive—gesture.

Taking advantage of his change in focus, I realized he was a big man. Tall and broad. And there were patches on his shirt. *Law enforcement patches?*

My heart started beating loud in my ears as my gaze focused back on the gun holstered at his hip, and my voice sounded oddly loud as I stuttered, “I... I can show you my booking confirmation....”

*What was going on? Had I gotten scammed?*

My words had his attention swinging back toward me right at the same moment that another figure appeared with a wild jump to the landing. This one was a lot shorter and thinner, but that was about all I could tell. The man's son? Daughter?

The big man didn't even glance at the new arrival as he said, anger definitely seeping from his pronunciation, from his entire body language really, "Breaking and entering is a felony."

"Breaking and entering?" I croaked, confused, my poor heart still beating wildly. What was going on? *What the fuck was happening?* "I used the key someone gave me a code to get." How did he not know this? Who was this? *Had I really gotten scammed?*

Out of the corner of my eye, because I was so focused on the bigger man, the smaller figure I'd barely paid attention to muttered something under their breath before basically hissing, "Dad," again quietly.

And *that* had the man turning his head down toward the figure that was his son or daughter. "Amos," the man grumbled in what sounded an awful lot like a warning. Fury there, active and waiting.

I had a terrible feeling.

"I gotta talk to you," the figure said in almost a whisper-hiss before turning to me. The smaller person froze for a second and then blinked before seeming to snap out of it and saying in a voice that was so quiet I had to strain to hear it, "Hi, Ms. De La Torre, umm, sorry about the mix-up. One sec, uh, please."

Who the hell was this now?

How did they know my name? And this was a mix-up?

That was good... wasn't it?

My optimism only lasted about a second, because in the dim lights of the studio apartment, the man started to shake his head slowly. Then his words made my stomach drop even further as he muttered, sounding deadly, "I swear, Amos, this better not be what I think it is."

That didn't sound promising.

"Did you post the apartment for rent after I literally told you not to the fifty times you brought it up?" the man asked in this crazy still voice that hadn't gone up at all in volume, but it didn't matter because somehow it sounded even worse than if he had yelled. Even I wanted to flinch, and he wasn't even talking to me.

What the hell did he just say though?

"Dad." The younger person moved under the ceiling fan, light striking him, confirming he was a boy—a teenage boy somewhere more than likely

between twelve and sixteen based on the sound of his voice. Unlike the broad man who was apparently his father, his face was lean and angular, and long, thin arms were hidden mostly by a T-shirt two sizes too big.

I got a bad, *bad* feeling.

The reminder that there hadn't been anywhere else to stay within two hundred miles popped up front and center in my brain.

I didn't want to stay in a hotel. I was over those for the rest of my life. The idea of staying in one made me feel sick.

And renting a room *in* someone's house was a hard no after that last time.

"I paid already. The payment went through," I pretty much shouted, panicking suddenly. This was where I wanted to be. I was *here* and tired of driving, and suddenly the urge to settle down somewhere filled just about every cell in my body insistently.

I wanted to start over. I wanted to build something new. And I wanted to do it here in Pagosa.

The man looked at me. I was pretty sure his head reared back as well before he focused again on the teenage boy, hand flying through the air once more. This sense of anger exploded across the room like a grenade.

Apparently, I was invisible and my payment meant nothing.

"Is this a joke, Am? *I told you no.* Not once or twice but every time you brought it up," the man spat, straight-up furious. "We're not going to have some stranger living in our house. Are you shitting me, man?" He was still talking in that inside-voice way, but every word seemed like a quiet bark somehow, tough and serious.

"It's not technically the house," the kid, Amos, whispered before glancing at me over his shoulder. He waved, his hand shaking as he did.

At me.

I didn't know what to do, so I waved back. Confused, so confused, and worried now.

That didn't help the pissed-off man. Like at all. "The garage is still part of the house! Don't play that technicality game with me," he growled, making a dismissive gesture with his hand.

That was a big arm attached to that hand now that I got a look at it. I was pretty sure I'd seen some veins popping along his forearm. What did those patches say though? I tried to squint.

"No means *no*," the stranger went on when the boy opened his mouth to argue with him. "I can't believe you did this. How could you go behind my back? You posted it *online*?" He was shaking his head like he really was stunned. "Were you planning on letting some creeps stay here while I

was gone?”

*Creeps?*

Me?

Realistically, I knew that this was none of my business.

But.

I still couldn't keep my mouth shut as I tossed in, “Umm, for the record, I'm not a creep. And I can show you my reservation. I paid for the whole month up front—“

Shit.

The boy winced, and *that* had the man taking a step forward under better lighting, giving me my first real good look at his face. At the whole of him.

And what a face it was.

Even when I'd been with Kaden, I would have done a double take at the man under the lights. What? I wasn't dead. And he had that kind of face. I'd seen a lot of them, I would know.

I couldn't think of a single makeup artist that wouldn't call his features chiseled, not pretty by any means but masculine, sharp, highlighted by his mouth forming a tight scowl and his thick eyebrows flat across his remarkable, heavy brow bones. And there was that impressive, strong jaw. I was pretty sure he had a little cleft in his chin too. He had to be in his early forties.

“Rough handsome” would be the best way to describe him. Maybe even “ridiculously handsome” if he didn't look about ready to kill someone like he did right then.

Nothing at all like my ex's million-dollar, boy-next-door looks that had made thousands of women swoon.

And ruined our relationship.

Maybe I *would* send that shit pie eventually. I'd think about it some more.

Basically, this man arguing with a tween or teenage boy, with a gun on his belt and wearing what looked to me to be some kind of law-enforcement-type uniform, was unbelievably handsome.

And... he was a silver fox, I confirmed when the light hit his hair just perfectly to show off what could have been brown or black mixed in with the much lighter, striking color.

And he didn't give a single *shit* about what I was saying as he snapped words out in the most level, talking-voice volume I'd ever heard. I might have been impressed if I wasn't so worried I was about to get screwed.

“Dad...,” the boy started again. The kid had dark hair and a smooth,



almost baby face, his skin a very light brown. His limbs were long under a black band T-shirt as he slid into place between his dad and me like a buffer.

“A whole month?”

Yeah, he’d heard that part.

The kid didn’t even flinch as he replied, very quietly, “You won’t let me get a job. How else am I supposed to make money?”

That vein on the man’s face popped again, color rose up along his cheekbones and ears. “I know what you want the money for, Am, but *you know what I said too*. Your mom, Billy, and I all agreed. You don’t need a three-thousand-dollar guitar when yours works just fine.”

“I know it *works* fine, but I still want—”

“But you don’t *need* it. It isn’t going to—”

“Dad, please,” the Amos kid pleaded. Then he gestured at me with a thumb over his shoulder. “Look at her. She’s not a creep. Her name’s Aurora. De La Torre. I looked her up on Picturegram. She only posts pictures of food and animals.” The teenager glanced at me over his shoulder, blinking once before shaking himself out of it, his expression turning almost frantic, like he too knew this conversation wasn’t going well. “Everybody knows sociopaths don’t like animals, you said, remember? *And look at her.*” His head tilted to the side.

I shrugged off his last comment and focused on the important part of what he’d mentioned. Someone had done his research... but what else did he know?

But he wasn’t wrong. Other than those and some selfies or shots with friends—and people I used to think were my friends but weren’t—I really did only post pictures of food and animals I met. That reality, and the bags and boxes sitting on the ground close by, were just another reminder that I wanted to be *here*, that I had things I needed to do in this area.

And that this kid either knew too much or really had fallen for the façade that I’d presented to the world. For all the lies and smoke and mirrors I’d had to employ to be around someone I’d loved. A reminder that I hadn’t deleted pictures off my Picturegram of a life I used to have. I had been careful on my account to never take any romantic-looking pictures—or fear the wrath of Mrs. Jones.

Maybe I should make my page private, now that I thought about it, so that the Antichrist didn’t snoop. I had only posted a handful of times over the last year and hadn’t tagged any place I’d been. Old habits died hard.

The man’s eyes flicked to me for maybe all of a second before they went back to the boy, and he said, “Does it look like I care? She could be

Mother Teresa, and I still wouldn't want anybody here. It isn't safe to have some stranger hanging around our house."

Technically, I wouldn't be "hanging around." I'd stay *here* in this garage apartment and never bother anybody.

Seeing my opportunity disappearing with every word that came out of the man's mouth, I knew I had to act fast. Luckily for me, I liked fixing things and was good at it. "I cross my heart I'm not a psycho. I've only gotten one ticket in my whole life, and it was for going ten over, but in my defense, I had to pee really bad. You can call my aunt and uncle if you want a character reference, and they'll tell you I'm a pretty good person. You can text my nephews if you want, because they won't answer even if you blow up their phones."

The boy looked over his shoulder again, eyes wide and still frantic, but the man... well, he wasn't smiling at all. What he was doing was glaring at me over his son's shoulder. Again. In fact, his expression went flat, but before he could say a word, the kid jumped on my train of defense.

His voice was still low but impassioned. He must really want that three-thousand-dollar guitar. "I know what I did was shady, but you were gonna be gone a whole month, *and she's a girl*—" There were female serial killers out there, but now didn't seem like the right time to bring that up. "—so I figured you wouldn't, like, have to worry. I bought an alarm system I was gonna install on the windows anyway, and nobody was gonna get through the deadbolts on the door."

The man shook his head, and I was pretty sure his eyes were wider than they normally would have been. "No, Amos. *No*. Your sneaky shit is not winning me over. If anything, it's just pissing me off even more that you'd lie to me. *What the hell were you thinking?* What were you going to tell your uncle Johnny when he came over to check on you while I was gone? Huh? I can't believe you'd go behind my back after I told you no so many times. I'm trying to protect you, man. What's wrong with that?"

Then that intense face focused down as he shook his head, shoulders dropping so low I felt so obtrusive for witnessing it, for being here to notice the sheer disappointment that was so apparent on every line of this father's body as he stood there, processing this act of betrayal. He seemed to exhale before glancing back up, zeroing in on me that time, and said, gruffly, and I was pretty sure genuinely hurt by the actions of the teenager, "He'll get you a refund the second we get back in the house, but you aren't staying. You shouldn't have been able to 'make a reservation' in the first place."

I choked. At least inside I did. Because *no*.

No.

I hadn't even realized when I'd dropped my hands from the position they'd been, still in the air, but they were down and my palms were flat on my stomach, the pepper spray in my fingers, the rest of my body consumed by a mixture of worry, panic, and disappointment at the same time.

I was thirty-three years old, and like a tree, I'd lost all of my leaves, so much of what had made me *me*; but just like a tree, my branches and my roots were still there. And I was being reborn with a whole new set of leaves, bright and green and full of life. So I had to try. I had to. There weren't any other rentals like this.

"Please," I said, not even wincing at just how croaked that one single word sounded out of my mouth. It was now or never. "I understand why you're upset, and you have every right to be. I don't blame you for wanting to take care of your son and not risk his safety but...."

My voice cracked, and I hated it, but I knew I had to keep going because I had a feeling I was only going to get one shot at this before he kicked me out. "Just... *please*. I promise I won't make a peep or bother anyone. I took an edible once when I was twenty and got so high I had a panic attack and almost had to call an ambulance. I took Vicodin once after my wisdom teeth got removed, and it made me throw up so I didn't take more. The only alcohol I like is really sweet Moscato and a beer every once in a while. I won't even look at your son if you don't want me to, but *please*, please let me stay. I'll double the rate the listing was set for. I'll send it over right now if you want." I took a breath and gave the man what I hoped was the most pleading face ever. "Pretty please."

The man's facial expression was hard and stayed that way, that square jaw locked tight even at this distance. I didn't have a good feeling. I didn't have a good feeling at all.

His next words made my stomach drop. He was staring straight at me, those thick eyebrows flat on his absurdly handsome face. He had the bone structure you could only find on old Greek statues, I thought. Regal and defined, there was nothing weak about any part of his features. His mouth—his full lips the kind of inspiration women went to expensive doctors to try and replicate—became a flat line. "I'm sorry if you got your hopes up, but it's not happening." Those hard eyes moved toward the maybe-teenager as he growled in a voice so low I almost couldn't hear it—but I had great ears and he didn't know that—"It's not about the money."

Panic rose up inside of my chest, steadily, and I could see this opportunity disappearing before my eyes. "Please," I repeated myself.

“You won’t know I’m here. I’m quiet. I won’t have any visitors.” I hesitated. “I’ll triple the rate.”

The stranger didn’t even hesitate. “No.”

“Dad,” the boy cut in before the older man shook his head.

“You have no say in this. You aren’t going to have a say in anything any time soon, are we clear?”

The kid gasped, and my heart started beating faster.

“You went behind my *back*, Amos. If they hadn’t found another warden last minute, I would’ve been in Denver right now without a fucking clue you did this!” the man explained in that murderous, not loud or quiet voice, and honestly... I couldn’t blame him.

I had no kids—I’d wanted them, but Kaden had kept putting it off—but I could only imagine how I’d feel if my child went behind my back... even if I understood his reasons. He wanted an expensive guitar, and I guessed he was too young to work or his parents wouldn’t let him.

The kid made a weak, disgruntled noise of frustration, and I knew my time was just about to run out.

Rubbing my fingers together because they suddenly felt clammy, I tried to clamp down on my panic because it was more powerful than my strength. “I’m sorry about all of this. I’m sorry this wasn’t done with your blessing. If some stranger moved into... well, I don’t have a garage apartment, but if I did, I wouldn’t be a fan of it. I value my privacy a lot. But I don’t have anywhere else to go. There’s no other house for short-term rental nearby. That’s not your problem, I get it. But please, let me stay.” I sucked in a breath and met his eyes; I couldn’t tell what color they were from this distance. “I’m not a drug addict. I don’t have a drinking problem or any weird fetishes. I promise. I had the same job for ten years; I was an assistant. I got... divorced, and I’m starting over.”

Resentment, bitter and twisted, rose up over the back of my neck and shoulders like it had daily since things had fallen apart. And like every other time, I didn’t brush it off. I tucked it into my body, real close to my chest, and babied it. I didn’t want to forget it. I wanted to learn from it and keep the lesson for myself, even if it was uncomfortable.

Because you had to remember the shitty parts of life to appreciate the good.

“Please, Mr. Rhodes, if that’s what your name is,” I said in the calmest voice I was capable of. “You can make a copy of my ID, even though I already sent one. I can get you character references. I don’t even kill spiders. I would protect your son if he needed it. I have teenage nephews who love me. They’ll tell you I’m not a creep too.” I took a step forward