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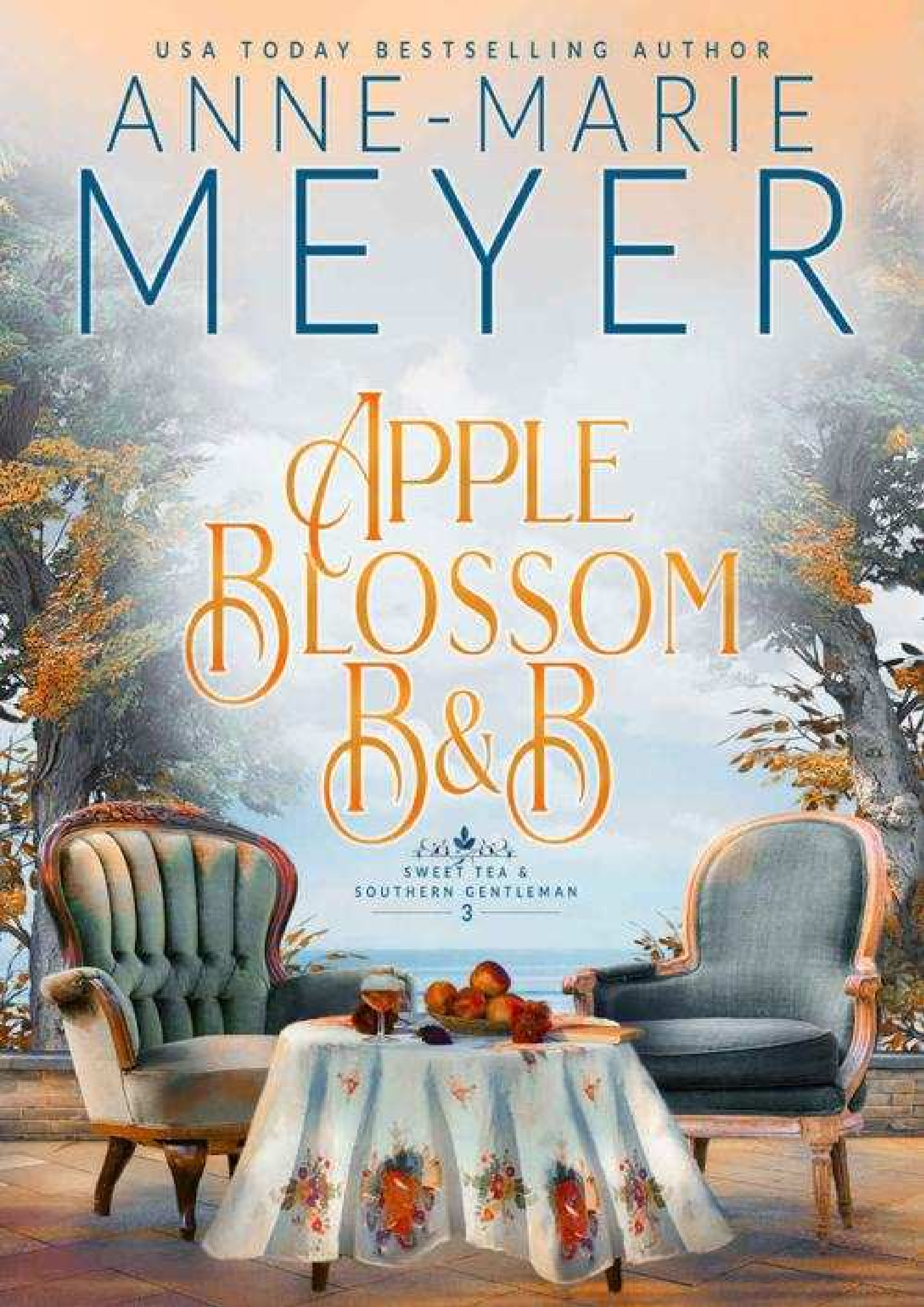
ANNE-MARIE  
MEYER

APPLE  
BLOSSOM  
B&B



SWEET TEA &  
SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

3



# APPLE BLOSSOM B&B

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A SMALL TOWN, SOUTHERN ROMANCE

SWEET TEA AND A SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN SERIES

BOOK 3

ANNE-MARIE MEYER

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*For my reader who fell in love with Bash.  
I hope I did his story justice.*

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# PROLOGUE



Bash

*This is not your problem.*

I stared at the closed door in front of me. I could still see the shocked look on Abigail's face as she stared at me through her puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks, and it ignited my desire to slay any dragon that dare hurt her. The thought of her in distress caused my heart to pound, so I closed my eyes for a moment, willing myself not to care.

She wasn't my girlfriend. She was Anders'. She wasn't mine to protect. It was Anders' job to protect her. All of the muscles in my body felt like springboards and any slight movement would set them off. But it didn't change the fact that she'd come here looking for her boyfriend...not me.

She'd made that pretty clear. I could still hear the bite to her tone when she said, "It's a job for my *boyfriend*."

My fingers curled into a fist. I wanted to punch Anders for not being here. For not fielding that for me. I wasn't in Harmony to connect. I wasn't here to make friends or be part of a community. I was here to hide away, and Abigail was making it impossible for me to do that.

I didn't need people. I didn't need Anders, and I certainly didn't need Abigail. If she was in trouble, that was her problem. Not mine...

*You're an idiot.*

I growled as I opened my eyes and headed for my bedroom. In one swift movement, I swept my keys and wallet into my open hand and grabbed my cap and hoodie from the chair next to my open door.

I'd find her sister and nephew, make sure that they were okay, and then I would walk away from Abigail forever.

There was no way Anders was going to help. He told me that he was headed to the pub to drink away the stress of the day. I should have stopped him. I would have had I known that Abigail was going to show up. And now her problems were mine.

I pulled my cap onto my head as I headed out into the parking lot. Once I climbed into the driver's seat, I slammed the door and shoved the key into the ignition. I threw the car into reverse and sped out of my parking spot.

As soon as I got onto the main road, I rolled my shoulders and took in a deep breath, forcing my tense body to relax. It didn't work. I was stressed, and the only thing that could calm me down was finding her sister so I could get Abigail out of my life for good.

I drove to the outskirts of town. The first place I would go if I wanted to disappear was a different town. You go where people don't know who you are.

The sign for Powta came into view, and a few seconds later, I spotted a gas station. I clicked on my blinker and turned into the parking lot. I drove past the pumps and between two very faded white lines. I turned off my engine and climbed out.

The bell on the door jingled as I pushed into the small shop. The smell of day-old hotdogs and soda syrup filled my nose. There were two older men in trucker hats sitting on faded red benches with a table between them. The noise drew their attention over to me. They frowned as their gaze drifted from my shoes to my cap. Not wanting to start anything, I tipped my head forward, making sure that my hat covered my face... really, my scar. I turned away as I shoved my hands into the front pockets of my hoodie and headed to the cash register.

"Good even' to you, darling." A plump woman with greying hair pulled up into a messy bun and a front tooth missing greeted me as I approached. She had on a name tag that said Tabitha. "What can I get for you?"

I glanced out the window toward the gas pumps and then back to Tabitha. Her overly lined eyes narrowed, and I could tell she was sizing me up. So I forced a smile, knowing how my appearance came across.

"I'm looking for my sister," I said.

"Who's your sister?" she asked as she smacked her gum between her teeth.

"She's about, yea high," I said as I stuck out my hand. I knew how tall Abigail was, and I prayed that they were similar.

"Okay." Tabitha continued to stare at me. "You're going to have to



give me more to work with.”

I nodded. “She has dark hair. Pale skin.” At this point, I was just describing Abigail.

Her eyebrows went up.

“She had my nephew with her.” I brought my hands out in front of me like I was carrying a baby.

A spark of recognition passed through her eyes. “You men and your lack of attention to detail.” She tapped her long fingernails on the counter. “I saw your sister. About thirty minutes ago.” She blew out her breath. “She looked a little worse for wear. And that baby? He was non-stop screaming. Right, Earl?” She tipped her face toward one of the men in the back, who just grunted his response.

“That’s her,” I said, praying that it was, in fact, Abigail’s sister and I was not about to head out after some strange woman. I glanced through the front windows. “Did you see which way she went?”

Tabitha waved her hand toward the road. “She headed north.”

I nodded as I turned to head toward the door.

“You ain’t going to buy anything?” Tabitha’s voice stopped me short.

I shook my head and pushed through the door before she could say anything else. The door closed on her muttering breath. I quickened my pace as I headed toward my car and slipped onto the driver’s seat. I could see Tabitha glaring at me through the window as I peeled past and took a left onto the road. It was good that I was going in the right direction, but houses were quickly being replaced with trees. And with all of the random side streets, the chances of finding Abigail’s sister were becoming slimmer and slimmer.

I slowed as I came to the first street and peered down it.

Nothing.

I continued down until I came to the next one.

Fifteen minutes later, I still hadn’t found her.

On a whim—or out of complete frustration—I turned off on the next side street and sped down it. I cursed myself when a dead-end sign loomed in the distance. *Stupid*. I pushed my hands through my hair and prepared to make a U-turn when a figure up ahead caused me to stop.

A woman was sitting on the curb. She was hunched over her knees, and her dark hair hung across her face. I straightened out my car and slowly drove until I was right next to her.

She startled and looked up, and when I saw a baby in her arms, my heart began to pound. I threw the car into park and opened the door. By the time I rounded the hood, the woman was standing. She tilted her body

away from me as if she were trying to shield the baby, who was screaming.

“What do you want?” she asked. Her face was dirty, and her cheeks were tearstained. I could feel her pointed gaze as she stared at me through her hair.

“I’m a friend of Abigail’s,” I said, keeping my voice low. I raised my hands in an effort to show that I wasn’t going to hurt her.

Her eyes widened. “Abigail?”

I nodded. “She’s dating my roommate, Anders.” Those words tasted bitter on my tongue, but I shoved those thoughts from my mind. It was the truth, and I wasn’t going to get anywhere by ignoring the facts.

“Anders,” she whispered. I could see her body relax.

“Are you okay? Is the baby?” I nodded toward the screaming child.

She shifted, and the baby came into view. His face was so scrunched up that I couldn’t see his eyes, and his mouth was open, his face bright red. She bounced him a few times and then glanced over at me with a look of desperation. “I can’t get him to stop crying.” Tears filled her eyes, and my heart ached for her.

“May I?” I asked as I extended my hands.

She looked skeptical for a moment before she nodded and handed him to me. I brought him to my chest, not really sure what I was doing. I bounced him a few times, and his wail faded to a whimper.

“Why don’t you two come with me?” I asked as I motioned toward my car. Then I glanced up to the sky. Grey clouds were rolling in, and I feared that any minute now they were going to open up and downpour on us.

She glanced over at my car. I could see that she wasn’t sure what she wanted to do, but then she closed her eyes for a second before she opened them back up. “Okay.”

I smiled, hoping to come across as supportive instead of creepy, as I headed toward the passenger door. I pulled it open and held it as Abigail’s sister started to climb in. She paused.

“What’s your name?” she asked. Her gaze was tired when it met mine.

“Bash.”

She studied me before she nodded. “Sabrina. And this is Samuel,” she said as she settled down on the seat and reached out to take the baby.

Once they were both buckled in, I shut the door and jogged around the car. From the way Samuel was crying and how tired Sabrina looked, a trip to Harmony Medical Center seemed to be in order. There was no way I was going to just leave her with the baby alone in their apartment. And I didn’t know where Abigail was.

I knew that I couldn’t rest until Sabrina and Samuel were safe. Then I

could leave. Then I could walk away from Abigail and never look back.

It wasn't until we were just about to pull into the emergency room parking lot that the sky finally opened up. I dropped Sabrina and Samuel off at the front doors and then hurried to find the nearest parking spot. I sprinted through the rain and in through the sliding doors.

Sabrina was hovering near the entrance with Samuel, who had calmed and was quietly staring up at the lights above him.

"I don't—I don't have insurance," Sabrina whispered. Her eyes were wide as she stared up at me. I could see the fear in her gaze, and it made my heart squeeze. I wanted to protect her. She was important to Abigail, which meant, no matter how hard I fought my feelings, Sabrina was important to me.

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of the bills," I said as I moved my hand to her back and gently led her over to the reception desk.

It didn't take long for them to call her back. I remained seated while Sabrina stood. She took a few steps forward before turning to look at me. "Aren't you coming?" she asked.

I raised my eyebrows and then nodded. "I can come."

Relief flooded her face. She turned, and I kept pace with her as we followed the nurse through large swinging doors and into an empty room. I kept to the corner as the nurse ran the vitals on both Sabrina and Samuel. Then she settled them down on the bed and motioned for me to follow her to the hallway.

I glanced over at Sabrina, but her eyes were closed. Samuel was happily sucking on a bottle the hospital provided. They looked content, so I followed the nurse out of the room.

"Has anyone ever talked to you about postpartum depression?"

I blinked. "What?"

"Your wife. We think she might have postpartum depression."

"My wife?"

The nurse stopped. "Is she not your wife?"

I shook my head. "Um, no. Sorry. She's a friend's sister. We were all out looking for her, and I just happened to find her."

"Oh."

Just then, my phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket and glanced down.

*Abigail*

"I'm going to need to take this," I said, and she nodded as I turned away.

"Hello?" I asked, bringing the phone to my cheek.

“Bash?” Abigail sounded panicked, and my heart ached for her. I took in a deep breath, knowing that this was probably the last time we were going to talk before I had to leave.

“Abigail?” I said, reveling in the feel of her name on my tongue.

“I need your help. I’m...I’m on highway 80. My car’s smoking, and I don’t know what’s wrong. I haven’t been able to find Sabrina, and I’m freaking out. I went to the pub to find Anders, and he was drunk, and now...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Now it’s raining on me.”

I hated that I wanted to save her. I hated that I wanted to be the knight she didn’t seem to want. If I could, I would take away all of her pain.

“I’m going to be right back. I have another patient to check on,” the nurse said.

I nodded, but before I could respond, Abigail’s voice drew my attention back to the phone. “Oh my gosh. You’re with someone. I’ll just —”

Then the line went quiet.

“Abigail?” I asked. I pulled the phone from my cheek; the call was over.

I stared down at it, trying to figure out what I was going to do. But my fingers had a mind of their own, and before I knew it, I’d pressed the call back button. I waited, but she didn’t answer, and it went to voicemail.

Frustration built up inside of me. Why did she care if I was with someone else? She was with Anders.

A few seconds after I hung up, my phone chimed again. I glanced down to see Abigail’s text.

**Abigail:** Hey, don’t worry, you sounded like you were busy. I’ll just contact a tow truck driver.

I cursed under my breath and shook my head. This woman was being ridiculous.

**Me:** Where on 80 are you?

**Abigail:** I think I remember exit 195, but really, it’s no big deal. You don’t have to come. I’ll find someone else.

Like hell she would. I wasn’t going to be able to think until I knew that she was safe. And since I wasn’t her boyfriend, it would be strange for me to call later to check up on her. I was going to pick her up and bring her back to safety. That was the only way I was going to be able to keep my head on straight.

That seemed like too much to put into a text, so I kept my response simple and texted a quick, “Okay,” before I slipped my phone into my pocket.

I checked in on Sabrina, who was fast asleep with a snoozing Samuel next to her. I nodded as I left the room and headed back out toward the lobby.

Luckily, the receptionist wasn't busy, so I left my contact information stating that I would take care of the bills. Then I gave her Abigail's contact information as Sabrina's next of kin. She jotted it all down before peering curiously up at me. I just gave her a quick smile and headed through the sliding doors and out to my car.

The rain was pouring now, but I didn't slow until I pulled up behind Abigail's car. My entire body went into autopilot as I pulled open the driver's door and ducked out into the rain, praying that she was safe. Relief flooded my body when her driver's door opened and she climbed out.

I parted my lips, preparing to explain why I was here instead of her boyfriend. Instead, she threw her arms around me, wrapping them so tight that my entire body froze. My mind swam with questions as fear clouded my thoughts.

And then, my body told my mind to shut up, and I pushed my fear aside as I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her against me. I took in a deep breath, the sweet smell of her shampoo filling my senses. I closed my eyes as I committed to memory the feel of her body against mine.

I was never going to be the same.

"She's safe," she whispered. Her voice was muffled by my shirt and the rain.

"Sabrina?" I asked. The nurse must have called Abigail.

I felt her head nod against my chest. "And Samuel is safe."

I couldn't see her expression, and I feared that she was upset. But there was no way I was going to loosen my grip on her. "That's good news, right?" I wanted so badly to make her happy.

I heard her sigh and sink further into our hug. The movement and sound sent ripples of pleasure down my back. "It's great news." Her voice was soft and melodic. When she pulled away, my arms ached for her to return.

When her gaze lifted to meet mine, my heart stopped. Tears were streaming down her face, mixing with the rain. I hated seeing them. I hated that she was hurt. "Then why are you crying?" I asked as I reached up and wiped away a tear that was rolling down her cheek.

She didn't flinch or pull away. Instead, she held my gaze. The look in her eyes confused me. All I wanted was to tell her that I cared. That I couldn't stop thinking about her. That I wished she were mine instead of

Anders’.

Her lip quivered. “I felt so alone and worried. But now...now she’s safe.”

I hated myself. I hated that I let her walk away from the apartment earlier. That I’d been a jerk to her. I should have helped her. I should have been there for her. If she only knew how much I wanted to be the man to protect her and take away all of her worries. “I’m sorry you felt alone.”

Her gaze met mine once more as a soft smile stretched across her lips, making my heart sing. “I’m not anymore. You’re here.”

I stared at her, letting her words sink in. And then reality hit me. What was I doing? Why was I holding her like this? Why was I letting myself feel things for her? She was Anders’, not mine. And even if she wanted to be, I was in no place to let her into my life.

It was a shit show, and I cared too much to hurt her.

I needed to pull back. I needed to put a chasm of space between me and her. I would take her to see her sister, and then I was going to leave. I would walk away forever even though the very thought crushed my heart.

Abigail was not mine.

And she never would be.



---

# BASH



My father's house was dark. The moon shone behind it, and only a lone window in the top left of the mansion was glowing.

I punched the code into the box next to the large iron gate and waited for it to swing open. It took a moment for the code to register, and then slowly the gates parted, letting out a groan that echoed into the dark night sky.

I stared at the driveway reaching out in front of me and took in a deep breath. My fingers tightened against the steering wheel, causing my knuckles to turn white.

“What are you doing?” I asked myself. I closed my eyes and slowly let out the breath that felt as if it were choking me.

Memories of pain. Memories of death flooded me like a river bursting through a broken dam. The dam that I'd used to keep my memories at bay these last five years had been demolished in one phone call.

*Emery.*

When I saw her number flash on my screen after I dropped Abigail off at the hospital, my entire body went numb. Why was she calling me? We hadn't spoken since the funeral—since she slapped me across the face and swore she would never forgive me. I almost didn't answer, but I wasn't strong enough. If she was calling me, it couldn't be good.

Her words were quick and curt. “Your father is about to pass. He's asking you to come. It's the least you can do.”

I don't remember what I said or if I even said anything at all. All I remember doing was nodding. And after a few seconds of silence, she hung up, leaving me sitting on my bed with my phone pressed to my cheek.

I was on the soonest flight to New York, and now I was sitting in the



driveway like some idiot who didn't belong but couldn't stay away.

The gate began to close, so I pressed the gas and narrowly missed scratching the back end of the car as it closed behind me. My headlights illuminated the pavement ahead of me, and I started the long climb up the driveway to the front door. I pulled into one of the side spots—the one I used to park in when I would visit—and turned off the engine.

Every part of my body felt numb as I pulled open the door and climbed out. The sound of the door slamming rattled in my brain as I slipped my keys into my pocket and pulled my suitcase from the back seat. My hand strangled the strap as I crossed the driveway to the stairs that led up to my father's multimillion-dollar mansion.

I didn't even have time to knock. The door opened before my fist landed.

"Sebastian." Nicholas' frame filled the doorway, and the light behind him cast shadows across his face. He was older now. His forehead wrinkles deepened as he frowned at me. His white hair was slicked back and thinner.

"Nicholas," I said, my voice deeper with emotion than I liked. I shifted my luggage into the other hand and nodded to him.

His gaze dropped to my hands for a moment. "I'm glad you came."

His words hit my gut like a sucker punch. I didn't deserve to be missed. I didn't deserve to be welcomed back. I deserved to disappear from their lives, so they could find a way to be happy.

Silence coated the distance between us making me acutely aware of how much time had passed and how much had changed. There were unspoken words between us. I could scarcely bring myself to even think them. I dropped my gaze to the porch floor.

Seconds ticked by so slowly that I feared we were moving backwards. He sighed, strangling the silence before he stepped to the side and waved me in. "Your father will be glad to see you."

I scoffed but then covered it up with a cough. Nicholas' gaze nearly bore a hole in my face, but I didn't look at him. I wanted to get this reunion over with and then go to bed and try to get some sleep. I knew life would be a frenzy tomorrow—the life of a Torres always was—and being well rested was the best way to prep for battle.

We walked in silence as we climbed the massive stairs in the center of the foyer, which led to the second floor. I kept a few feet behind Nicholas as he made his way down the long hallway to my father's door. I remembered standing outside of it many times as a child, waiting for him to come out to play with me. But the door never opened.

Now it sat open, and the soft beeping of medical equipment could be heard from inside. Nicholas walked into my father's room like it was a common occurrence. I was paralyzed as I stood just outside of the doors, not ready to even peer inside of the room.

I closed my eyes as my emotions rose to my throat, choking me.

I wanted to run away. I didn't want to be here, and I knew my father didn't want me here. Emery had called me, yes, but that didn't mean *he* wanted me here. After all, he was the one who had told me I wasn't fit to carry the Torres name and that, from that moment on, he was no longer my father and I wasn't his son.

He hadn't stopped me as I hurriedly packed my bags. And when my car drove away, he hadn't followed after me.

I was officially cut from the family. And I'd accepted that. After all, if it weren't for me, my younger brother, Carson, would still be alive. His wife would still be happy, and their son would still have his father.

I was the reason my family was torn apart.

I didn't blame them for banishing me. They treated me like I deserved to be treated. I shouldn't have been drinking that night. I should have called a cab. I shouldn't have insisted that Carson come with me. I'd seen the worry in his gaze as he assessed me. And when he said maybe I should sleep the alcohol off, I brushed him off as a sissy and pushed him into my car.

To this day, when I close my eyes, I can still hear the crunch of metal and, in the distance, Carson's faint moan of pain.

My life changed in a matter of seconds, and I swore that I would never come back here. Yet, here I was, facing the past that I'd tried so hard to stay away from.

"Come on." Nicholas appeared in the doorway, snapping me from my thoughts. My gaze met his as he nodded toward my father's bed. "He's asleep."

I swallowed, hating how weak I felt. I took a step forward, acutely aware of the way the marble floor felt under my feet. The vibrations of my movement rattled through my body with each step until I was standing next to my father's bed, staring down at it.

He'd aged in the last five years. His hair was thinning and completely white. His skin was ashen and so pale I could see the blue veins running through it. His eyes were closed, and his hands were placed at his sides. The only thing that hinted of life was the slow, methodical way his chest rose and fell and the soft thrumming of his heartbeat that came from the monitor next to him.

“Does he know I’m here?” I whispered, tilting my head toward Nicholas, who was standing next to me.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Nicholas shake his head. “He’s not really aware of much right now. The doctors keep him on heavy pain killers.”

Tears clouded my sight. I didn’t want Nicholas to see, so I focused my attention back on my father. My hands were clasped in front of me. I felt like a child awaiting reprimand from their parent. Like, any moment, he was going to wake up, and the disappointment that I knew he felt would slap me across the face once more.

Unable to continue staring at my father, I blinked the tears away and turned to Nicholas. “Why did Emery want me here?” I lifted my gaze to meet his.

He reached up and rubbed his shoulder as he sighed. “Timothy is asking about his family. I guess she just wants him to know you guys before things change forever.”

“Timothy?”

Nicholas nodded. “Your nephew.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. I wasn’t sure I could face my nephew. The boy my brother never knew about. Emery hadn’t yet known she was pregnant when Carson died. And I left before he was born. I’d seen some tabloid pictures of her holding the baby, but after that, I made a point of never looking at magazines again.

“I’m exhausted,” I said as I stepped past Nicholas toward the door. I needed to get out of here before the walls closed in on me and I suffocated under the pressure. I needed a hot shower and liquor. But after the accident, I swore never to touch a drop of the stuff. So I was just going to have to settle for a hot shower and a restless night’s sleep.

The sound of Nicholas’ shoes on the marble as I made my exit told me that I wasn’t alone. He had more to say to me, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear it.

“Bash,” Nicholas said as I quickened my pace.

I didn’t want to stop, but it wasn’t fair to him. He was like an uncle to me. And even though my father disowned me, I knew Nicholas still cared. He was as loyal to my family as any outsider could be. If anything, I should be grateful that he’d taken care of the mess I’d left in my wake.

“What?” I asked, turning to face him once more.

He studied me for a moment before he glanced at the floor and sighed. “I’m glad you came. I know it wasn’t easy for you, but...” His gaze made its way back to me. “Your father misses you. It’s good for you two to see

each other once more.”

I raised an eyebrow as his words settled around me. Then I nodded, my grip on my luggage tightening. “I hope so.” Then I turned and made my way down the opposite hallway to my old bedroom.

Once I got inside, I shut the door and took a deep breath. I glanced around the room, startled that it looked nothing like it had when I left. My father erased every part of me. The posters that dotted the walls and the trophies that lined the shelves had disappeared. The walls were painted a pale grey, and the room felt more like a hotel than my childhood bedroom.

I tossed my luggage onto the nearby armchair and then headed into the bathroom. I flipped on the shower and pulled off my shirt. Just as I turned to face the shower, my scars caught my attention. I turned so I was facing them head-on. The jagged pink lines were a reminder everyday of what I took. Of the life that was no longer here because I’d been an idiot, thinking that I was untouchable.

I should have died that night, not Carson. He would have done more with his life than I could do. He would be a father to his son and build a family with his wife.

And here I was, hiding in town after town, running away from my life.

Steam slowly crept down the mirror, hiding my shame from view. I cursed as I stripped down the rest of the way and climbed into the shower. I leaned my arms against the shower wall and dropped my head, hot water pounding my back.

I knew I shouldn’t have come. I knew I should have packed my bags and run so far away that no one knew who I was or what I did.

But the fact that Emery wanted me here gave me hope. It was stupid, but that flicker of hope was keeping me alive. There might be a chance that she would forgive me. And perhaps then I would start to forgive myself.

But if that hope was snuffed out, I didn’t know what I was going to do. Or if I would have a reason to keep living.