

Excerpt

Chapter 1

Shelby

Shutting off my car, I stare at the two-story house I used to call home. It looks the same as it did when I left. The deep blue is still vibrant, even more so now against the backdrop of the gray sky behind it. The white porch is still welcoming, with flowers hanging from the banister.

My grandmother and I would spend hours planting flowers in those boxes during the summer. When she passed away during my sophomore year of high school, I made sure to keep up the tradition in her memory. It looks like, in my absence over these last fifteen years, someone else had taken over the job.

Looking at the bright blooms growing wild, hanging over the sides of the boxes, I wonder if Granddad hired someone to plant them for him when he left to live in Florida. He never mentioned that he cared about the flowers we planted. Honestly, I don't remember him mentioning them. Growing up, I didn't even think he noticed, but now, looking at the blooming buds that are artfully arranged, I know they meant something to him after all.

"Mom?" Turning my head, I look at my son Hunter and force a smile as aching pain and regret slice through my chest.

"Sorry, honey. I spaced out. Do you want to unpack tonight, or do you want to wait until tomorrow, kiddo?"

Looking over his shoulder, he eyes the boxes and suitcases piled in the back then looks at me. I hate the sadness I see in his eyes. I hate I'm the cause of his pain. I know he misses his father already, and I know that at ten years old, he doesn't understand why we're no longer together even if it's been over two years since we separated and divorced.

"Tomorrow," he grumbles, and I feel that ache in my chest expand. He hates me for moving him across the country. Away from his friends, away from everything he knew. And I hate myself a little bit, too, for failing miserably at keeping my family together. I just hope this move will be a new start for us.

"Tomorrow," I agree softly, unhooking my belt and opening the door.

Rounding the hood of the van, Hunter has already made it to the porch and is waiting at the top of the stairs, with his eyes pointed over my shoulder. Stopping, I look behind me as rain soaks through my clothes. I can't believe how much the town has changed and grown. When I'd left home, you could see the sound from the front porch of my grandparents' home. Now, the view is blocked by houses that have been built up side-by-side across the road. The street looks more like a New York City block, rather than a street in small-town Alaska.

"Is it always raining?" Hunter's voice breaks into my thoughts, and I turn back toward him and take the steps slowly, noticing they are rotting out in a few spots. Something I will have to fix soon.

"Not always, but this is a rainforest, so I guess the answer in some ways is yes," I tell him, when I

make it up to the covered porch.

His brows draw together over his blue eyes, making him look like his father, as he asks, "This is a rainforest?"

"It is." I want so badly to reach out and run my finger down his cheek, but I keep my hand locked at my side. I don't know exactly when it happened, but some time ago, he stopped wanting my affection. Stopped being my little boy.

"Really?" he asks curiously, with wide eyes. "It doesn't look like a rainforest," he states, and he's right; it doesn't look like what you might imagine a rainforest would look like.

"It doesn't look like one, but it is all the same." I smile, and his eyes move over my face then to the view, and his face loses the curiosity it held a moment ago.

He turns, muttering, "Whatever."

Biting my lip, I take the key the lawyer mailed me out of the front pocket of my jeans, put it in the lock, and turn. The door opens with a loud creak and dust rises up from the floors. A loud alarm sounds, making us both jump. Running into the house, I look frantically for some kind of alarm system, finally finding the small white box off the door in the kitchen. Flipping the panel open, I stare at the numbers.

"What's the code?" Hunter yells over the siren, covering his ears.

"I don't know," I yell back, pressing in every single number combination I can think of, but none of them work.

"Is it in the papers in the car?"

"Maybe," I yell, then run for the door and down the stairs to the van. Swinging open the back door, I shove three boxes out of the way before finding the one I'm looking for. Ripping off the tape, I shuffle through the contents and scan the papers the lawyer sent, searching for the code, but stop and look over the hood of the van when the alarm goes quiet. "What was the code?" I ask Hunter, when he steps out onto the porch.

"I don't know." He shrugs, looking over his shoulder into the house, like he's waiting for someone to come out, which makes me frown.

"Did it just stop?" I question, slamming the van door. His eyes come back to me and he shakes his head then starts to open his mouth to say something else, but is cut off by a deep voice.

"I turned it off."

It takes one breath to realize who just stepped out of my grandparents' house. One breath for every moment I spent with the man standing before me to flash through my head. Two seconds for me to feel my world come to a stop.

The boy I once knew is gone. There's nothing boyish about Zach Watters anymore. His jaw is now sharp, the stubble on it giving him a rugged look while accentuating his full lips. His dark hair has

silvered around the edges, drawing attention to his expressive hazel eyes that look like they hold a thousand stories. His red and black plaid shirt is stretched tight across broad shoulders, giving a glimpse of the muscles it's covering. He's still every bit as beautiful as he once was, only more so now that time has aged him, taking him from a handsome boy to a gorgeous man.

Swallowing, I look at my son then back again. "Thanks," I whisper, and Zach's eyebrows pull together as he sweeps his gaze over me. I have no doubt that I too have changed, but unlike him, time hasn't been good to me. I've gained a few too many pounds from eating my feelings over the last year. My skin has lost its youthful glow, and my hair has grown out at the roots without my bi-monthly maintenance appointments.

"Shelby?" he asks, but all I can do is confirm with a nod, since my mouth has dried up and I can't find my voice. "Jesus." His eyes widen as he looks down at Hunter then back toward me. "What are you doing here?"

"My... my son Hunter and I are moving in," I stutter, caught off guard by his presence. I wasn't stupid enough to believe I wouldn't see him when I moved home, but I had convinced myself that seeing him would be on my terms, or sporadic at best.

"What?" he whispers, leaning back on his boots, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ignoring his question, I start to move back toward the stairs, asking, "Do you mind giving me the code for the alarm? I'm sure it's somewhere in the papers the lawyer sent, but..." I stop and look to the left when Zach's name is called. Standing on the porch of the house next door is a woman I know he got with a few months after I left. A woman he married soon after she gave birth to their twins. A woman I used to call my friend.

A woman I now hate.

I absently hear him say something to her, but the nausea turning my stomach and the sadness prickling my skin have me moving quickly up the steps, focusing on not falling over as I move past him. "Never mind about the code. I'm sure I'll find it. Thanks for shutting off the alarm," I mumble, as I walk through the door.

"Mom."

"Come on, honey. Let's have a look around, and then we need to get to the store."

"Mom," Hunter repeats, sounding confused. I plaster a fake smile on my face.

"The pizza place we drove past has the best pizza I've ever tasted. We could do that for dinner."

"Mom."

"Right here, honey." I laugh, even though that laugh feels like glass edging down my windpipe.

Studying me for a long moment, he finally mutters, "Pizza sounds good. I'm gonna call Dad before we go, and tell him we're here."

"Sure," I agree, watching him pull out his cell phone and walk toward the kitchen. I didn't agree that

he needed a cell phone at his age, but like all things with his dad, there was never any kind of conversation. He didn't ask what I thought about it; he just did what he wanted to do.

I hear a familiar throat clear. "You're back?" Zach asks from behind me, making my shoulders slump forward and my eyes slide closed briefly.

"Yeah." I turn to face him and wrap my arms around my waist, feeling my stomach twist into knots. When I left town, we didn't fight, didn't yell at each other, didn't say things we would end up regretting one day. I just knew there was too much pain between us to make what we had left work, and Zach, knowing the same, didn't put up a fight when I told him my plans.

"You're staying here?" he asks, and I nod. Running a hand over his head as his eyes move to the right, where Tina had been moments ago, before bringing his gaze back to mine. "The code for the alarm is one, two, three, four. I told Pat to change it, but you know Pat," he mutters, and I nod, knowing exactly how stubborn Gramps was. Shoving his hands into the front pocket of his jeans, his voice drops. "I'm really sorry about Pat."

"Thanks." I hold myself a little tighter. His eyes drop to my arms around my waist and soften before moving up to meet mine once more.

"If you need anything, I'm next door." He lifts his chin in that direction, and my world stops again.

"Pardon?" I breathe.

"I live next door."

Okay, maybe I should have guessed that, since Tina was over there, but I didn't, and this is not good... as in really not good. There is not one damn thing I can do about it, though, unless I want to load Hunter back into the van and live out of it for the next year or so, which I don't think will win me any brownie points with my son.

"Cool," I whisper pathetically, with nothing else to say. Something familiar-looking and soft slides through his features, making my stomachache twist again, but this time in a way I haven't felt in a long time.

"Well..." I pause, needing this encounter to be over. "Thanks again for turning off the alarm. I wish we had time to catch up," I lie. "But I need to get to the store before it closes, and then I need to get Hunter some food. Growing boys don't do well without food," I ramble, as I put my hand to the door, wanting so badly to shove it closed.

"Sure." He nods then looks over my shoulder, into the house. "Nice meeting you, Hunter."

"You too—" Hunter looks between Zach and me.

"Mr. Watters, honey," I mutter, answering his unspoken question, as he comes to stand at my side with his cell phone in his hand.

"You too, Mr. Watters."

Zach's eyes come to me and his face softens once more. "See you around, Shelby."

“Yeah, see you around,” I lie again, since I plan to pretend he doesn’t exist from this moment forward. I wait, even though I don’t want to, until he is walking away to close the door then stand there for a moment, trying to process what just happened.

“How do you know him, Mom?” Hunter asks.

“When I was younger,” I say, turning to face him, “we were friends.” I shrug, looking toward the stairs. “My room used to be in the attic—it’s the best room in the house—and if you make it there before me, I’ll let you have it.” I raise my brows before taking off in a sprint up the stairs, listening to my son, who I haven’t heard laugh in weeks, giggle as he runs up the stairs behind me.

“Wow, this is awesome.”

Looking over my shoulder at Hunter I smile as he walks into the room with wide eyes. “I told you it’s the coolest room in the house.” I used to love hanging out up here when I was a teenager. The vastness of the space, with its angled ceilings and four large skylights, was a cool place to spend time. Looking at my son now, I can see the excitement in his eyes as he wanders around the room.

“Do you think I could get a telescope?” he asks, looking up at the cloud-covered sky through one of the skylights.

“Definitely.” I bump my shoulder with his as I walk past him toward the couch in the corner that’s covered with a sheet and pull it off. “We may also want to find a cover for this thing while we’re at it,” I say, looking from the floral-covered couch to his scrunched up face.

“Yeah.” He nods, moving to the bed, where he rips off the sheet that is covering the mattress. “I can’t wait to tell Dad about this. He’s going to think it’s so cool,” he mutters, and I bite my tongue to keep from saying, No, your dad will definitely not think it’s cool.

Max, Hunter’s father, grew up wealthy. He never owned anything that had been used. Even when we got married, he insisted I sell the Victorian house I bought when I graduated college, wanting instead for us to buy a newly built house in a cliché subdivision, where all of his friends lived. Shortly thereafter, he insisted I sell all of my old furniture, things I had bought secondhand and refurbished over the years. At the time, I was blinded by hope and love, so I didn’t think anything about it. But over time, I slowly realized I was no longer the person I used to be. I had turned into a trophy wife who lived in a show home and neither of us had any real character.

“Mom,” Hunter calls, bringing me out of my thoughts, and I turn to look at him and notice he has a stack of photos in his hand. “Who’s this?”

“That’s my mom,” I say softly, while walking over to where he’s sitting on the bed, holding out a picture of my mom and me. In the photo, we’re sitting outside on the porch, with our arms wrapped around each other, smiling at the camera.

“You look like her,” he says thoughtfully. “You have her eyes and hair.”

“You think so?” I ask, looking at my mom, who had to have been about my age when the photo was taken. She was beautiful, with long dark blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a smile that lit up the world.

“Yeah.” He nods then looks at me, and asks quietly, “Do you miss her?”

“Every day.” I nod, taking the photo from his hands. “She gave the best hugs,” I say, fighting back the tears I feel creeping up my throat. My mom and dad both died in a plane crash when I was fifteen. My father was the owner and pilot of a local adventure company, and he had taken my mom with him to drop off supplies to some men who were bear hunting out at one of the islands. On their way back into town, the weather shifted, and their plane went down on one of the mountains. Neither of them survived. That’s when I moved to Cordova to live with my dad’s parents.

“Do you have any pictures of your dad?”

I pause, trying to recall if I’ve ever really spoken to Hunter about my parents, if Max ever asked about them, but I can’t think of a single time. “There are a few downstairs on the wall. I’ll point them out to you.” I lean into him a little then stop when his arm wraps around my shoulders, surprising me. “I love you, kid,” I whisper, not surprised when he doesn’t say it back, but happy that his arm tightens ever so slightly.

“I’m starving.” He chuckles releasing me when his stomach growls loudly, breaking the moment.

“We can’t have that.” I laugh, standing from the bed. “Let’s go to Joe’s. Hopefully, the pizza is still awesome. If not, you’re gonna have to suffer and eat it anyway, ‘cause the store is probably closed by now.

“Is there such a thing as bad pizza?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” I murmur, and then head out of the room and down the stairs, grabbing my purse as we leave.

When we make it to Joe’s, I find nothing has changed in the years I’ve been gone. The owner Joe, an older Korean gentleman, is still in the back making the pizzas, and his wife Kim is still working the counter, gossiping about everything and everyone. While we wait for our pizza, Kim talks my ear off, telling me about the people in town, including Zach, who she informs me is not only a cop, but also the sheriff. She also tells me that Zach is single. He and Tina supposedly got divorced nine years ago, and Zach has had full custody of both his kids since then. I tell myself I don’t care that Zach is no longer with Tina, but I still feel some relief knowing I won’t have to witness seeing them together.

“Can I sleep in my room tonight?” Hunter asks, as I finish off my third slice of pizza and wipe my mouth with a paper towel.

“I don’t mind, but everything in the house needs to be washed. So if you want to sleep up there, we have to get your stuff from the van.”

“I’ll get it, and then we can bring in everything else too.”

“You want to clean out the van?” I ask, not at all excited about lugging stuff up three flights of stairs.

“Yeah.” He nods again, taking his half of the pizza box lid that he used as a plate to the trash bin.

“If that’s what you want,” I agree, regretting those words an hour later as I head out for the last box. My arms and legs are tired from carting everything inside and up the stairs. I haven’t worked out in the last year, and I can feel it now as every muscle in my body protest.

Stopping when I hear a door close, I hold the box in my hands closer to my chest and look toward the house next door. I spot a handsome blond boy, who looks a lot like Zach, hopping down the steps, with Tina following close behind. Ducking down, I hide and watch them as they get into an old pickup truck, only coming out of hiding when they drive off.

Having over fifteen years to deal with the adoption of Samuel should make it easier to see Zach's other children, but it doesn't. I still feel bitter about the situation. I know it's the fact that Zach's children were born a little over a year after Samuel, meaning Tina got pregnant not long after I left town. So not only did Zach have a relationship with Tina, but he built a family with her and kept the kids they had together.

Heading back into the house with the final box, I wonder how I'm going to do what I've been doing for the last fifteen years. It was easy to block out thoughts of Zach when I was gone, but now that I'm back and living next door to him, I wonder if it will be as easy to ignore the feeling in my chest that coincides with thoughts of him.

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Grabbing my quilt from the end of my bed, I carefully balance my Kindle and glass of wine in one hand as I open the sliding glass door in my room and step out onto the balcony. Tonight is one of the first nights it hasn't rained since we moved in, and I have been looking forward to sitting outside under the stars with a good book all day long. Grabbing my glass, I take a sip then look to the left when the sound of rock music starts up and light flutters across the back deck next door, making me wonder if Zach's room is off the balcony like mine.

Pushing that thought away, I turn on my Kindle then proceed to get lost in someone else's happily ever after.

"Shelby." Jumping, some of the contents from the glass in my hand sloshes out over the side and runs down my fingers as I swing my head to the left, where Zach is leaning on the banister, his eyes on me. A short glass full of dark liquid is in his hands, and the light casts a glow behind him.

"You scared the crap out of me," I gripe, holding my free hand over my rapidly beating heart.

"I've been standing here awhile," he mutters, then takes a swig of his drink. "I thought you would have noticed." He rolls the glass between his hands while looking at me intently, making me fight the urge to squirm in my chair.

"When I'm lost in a good book, the world could crash down around me and I wouldn't notice." I shrug, taking a sip of wine, using the moment of reprieve as an excuse to look away from him, but realizing for the first time that I don't know the man standing across from me. Yes, he looks a little like the guy I dated years ago, but he also seems more intense, like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's definitely not the easygoing kid I dated in high school.

"How are you guys settling in?"

Pulling my legs out from under me, I rest my Kindle on the edge of my lap and turn to face him fully

while adjusting the blanket.

“It’s going to take a little bit to get everything cleaned up. I didn’t know Gramps was such a hoarder until now. I think I’ve thrown out about ten thousand issues of National Geographic, along with a hundred empty boxes and every single item you can possibly buy from an infomercial,” I reply, then smile when he laughs a deep rumbling laugh and leans a little farther over the railing between us, causing another plaid shirt—this one blues and yellows—to tighten across his wide chest.

“You didn’t keep them? You never know when you might need an automatic potato peeler.”

“I thought about it, but if I did, I wouldn’t have anywhere to put my shoes, since all of it was stacked up on the floor in his closet, everything unopened.” I smile, watching him grin for a moment before the smile slides away and his eyes move beyond me to the forest that sits behind the house.

“I’m gonna miss him. I know he’s been gone from town for years, but I’ll miss our talks,” he mutters, then looks up at the sky for a moment before meeting my gaze once more. “Why’d you come back? Last time I talked to Pat, he told me you were planning on following him down to Florida.”

His words catch me off guard, since Gramps never told me he kept in contact with Zach. But then again, I never asked. I shouldn’t be surprised they kept in touch, since they were close when I was home, and were obviously neighbors before Gramps moved to Florida. Plus, Zach is the sheriff in town. Yet, it still feels strange that he knows about me, while I know nothing about him.

“I was.” I let out a breath, adjusting the blanket around my shoulders. “But I had to wait until…” I trail off, not wanting to talk about my divorce to anyone, especially not him. “Then when Gramps passed away, there was nothing for me in Florida, so I decided to come back here instead.”

“You didn’t want to stay in Seattle?”

“No, I needed something different, so when I found out Gramps left me his house, I just knew I needed to come back here,” I whisper the truth. Ever since I read the will and found out this house was mine to do with as I please, I had a feeling in my gut that I couldn’t get rid of. Something telling me that I needed to come back here.

“This is a good town,” he murmurs, but the look in his eyes is saying something I can’t quite figure out.

“This is the last place I remember being really happy. I hope that I can make it that way for Hunter,” I say quietly, and his face softens.

“He looks like you.” His words and tone catch me by surprise and I sit up a little taller. Never in a million years would I have thought I’d be sitting on my granddad’s deck in the middle of the night talking to Zach about anything. Definitely not about my son.

“You wouldn’t say that if you saw his dad,” I return honestly. “When he was a baby, he looked like me, but not any more.”

“He has your eyes and your smile.” He pauses, taking a drink from his glass. “He seems like a good kid.”

“He’s the best kid.” I take a sip of wine, trying to keep whatever it is I’m feeling right now in check.

“I... I think I saw your son. Um, the other day. He looks like you,” I tell him, wanting to take the words back after I say them, because I don’t want him to think I was spying on him.

“He looks like his mom, but has my personality, which I can’t decide if it’s a good thing or not. My daughter, Aubrey, on the other hand, looks like me, but is sweet down to her core. Where she gets that sweetness, I have no fucking clue.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip, trying to figure out what to say to that. The Zach I knew was a good guy, sweet even. Tina, however, was mostly bitch, and I honestly don’t even know why we were friends. Then again, growing up here, there weren’t a hundred girls to choose from. My graduating class had five girls in it, and none of them liked Tina, which meant none of them really liked me either.

“I better go in,” he says abruptly, cutting into my thoughts, standing to his full height. “I need to be to the station early tomorrow.”

“Sure... uh... have a good night.” The urge to say something that will make him stay hits me hard, and it takes everything I have in me to keep my mouth shut.

“You too, Shelby. And be careful when you’re out here reading. Louie’s out and about around this time of night, searching for food.”

“Louie?” I question, scrunching up my nose. Cordova never had homeless people before, and I can’t imagine it would now.

“Louie’s a black bear. Normally, he sticks to the woods, but he’s been known to nap on the decks now and then.

“Oh, man.” I jump up, looking around for any sign of Louie, not sure how I could forget there are bears out here, since we are in Alaska. “What’s funny?” I frown, turning to face him when I hear his deep laughter.

“You’re in Alaska, babe. You lived here for years. You know there are bears out in those woods.” He nods to the trees.

Babe. Why, oh, why did that word make butterflies erupt in my stomach?

“I know that, but I forgot.” I shake my head and watch his face soften once again.

“Still sweet as pie,” I think I hear him say, but can’t be sure, because his voice dropped to a low rumble that I felt skid across my skin.

“Well, I’m gonna go in too,” I blurt, picking up my Kindle and wine glass. “Have a good night.” And with that, I duck my head and go back into my room. Closing the door I lock it behind me then hurry and get into bed where I try to forget once more about Zach Watters.

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“Hello?” I answer the phone, still half asleep, then look at the clock and notice that even though it’s light out, it’s barely 6:00 a.m.

"Shelby, I've called three times," Max, my ex-husband, says into my ear, and I pull my pillow over my head with thoughts of suffocating myself with it.

"It's only six, Max. I haven't gotten out of bed," I grumble, tossing the covers back and sitting up. "What's going on?"

"I want to fly out there this weekend," he states, and I fight the urge to toss my phone across the room or scream at the top of my lungs.

"This weekend?" I verify, rubbing my face. "We haven't even been here a week."

"I have a few days off and would like to see Hunter."

I sigh, considering him and his request. "Our stuff is going to be delivered in two days. Then I start my new job next week, and Hunter has swi—"

"You're not keeping my boy from me," he cuts me off, and I can tell by his tone that he's mad and likely pulling at his ever-present tie in annoyance. Something I make him do often.

"I'm not saying you can't see him, Max," I clarify, wishing I had at least one cup of coffee before this conversation. "I'm just explaining to you that we're trying to get settled in here. Can you wait a few weeks before you come out?"

"Such fucking bullshit. I can't believe you moved to Alaska, of all goddamn places. A boy should have his dad in his life." My heart stutters and I feel my pulse skyrocket. We didn't have a custody battle, but I wouldn't put it past Max to take me to court to gain custody of Hunter if I step out of line in his eyes.

"Max," I soften my voice as I walk to the kitchen, "you know we talked about this. You can come see him anytime, and in a couple years, he can fly out to see you whenever he has a break," I say, then drop my voice even lower. "We agreed on him living with me at least until he's sixteen. After that, he can choose who he wants to live with."

"I miss you both." He sighs, making me roll my eyes. I know he doesn't miss me. I know this, because he's been dating woman after woman since I asked for a separation. For all I know, he was dating before that. Hell, the last year I spent under the same roof as him, he hardly spared me a glance. Hunter later suffered from his lack of attention, when we lived in the same town after our separation. With Max, it's always about him getting his way.

"Max, please just wait a few more weeks, and then you can come and stay as long as you like," I offer, the words leaving a horrid taste in my mouth. I will do whatever I have to in order to keep my son, though, including putting up with his dad in my childhood home for more than a few days.

"Fine, when?"

Closing my eyes, I whisper, "Next month. Whenever you like. Just let me know, so I can make sure I don't make plans for Hunter. I know there are a few camps here he's interested in."

"Fine. Where is he now? I called his cell phone, but he didn't pick up."

“Sleeping. Like I said, it’s only six here, and he was up late talking to his friends back in Seattle on Skype.”

“You really shouldn’t let him stay up so late, Shelby,” he scolds, sounding disapproving, and again, that’s not a surprise.

“It’s summer, Max, and his ‘late’ is ten, not three in the morning,” I mutter, wondering how the hell I put up with him for so many years. “I’ll have him call you when he gets up.”

“Don’t tell him I’m coming out. I want to tell him that myself.”

“Will do,” I grumble, looking at the coffee pot and begging it to hurry up.

“Talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later,” I agree, setting the phone down on the counter. I make myself a cup of coffee and take it out to the back deck, drinking it while the morning sun beats down on me.