
THE RISK TAKER

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I take a huge breath and slowly ease my foot off the gas pedal to coast my SUV into the long winding driveway. A quick glance in my rearview mirror reveals my son, still sound asleep in his car seat, and my heart wobbles as he mumbles something incoherent in his slumber.

My gaze rakes over him, takes in his mess of dark hair, sun-kissed skin and plump rosy lips. Honest to God, with each passing day he looks more and more like his father. But thinking of my late husband Ethan has my heart punching into my throat, forcing me to once again fight back the tears at his senseless, tragic death.

I turn my attention back to the house rising up before me. I haven't been back to Seattle since the car accident that killed Ethan, as well as Sara's unborn baby—Sara was engaged to Ethan's brother Jamie, and was to become my sister in law. The four of us were close, but after the funeral, Sara left Jamie, and I needed time away.

With hardly any belongings, I hopped into my vehicle and took three-year-old Chase to my Mom's house in Spokane to grieve in my childhood home. But it's been a little more than

a year and it's time I got back into the work force, and start walking amongst the living again. Chase is four years old now and he needs stability, pre-school, and most importantly, a strong male influence in his life. That's where my late husband's brother Jamie comes in. At least that's what I'm hoping for. He sort of fell off the grid after hockey season ended a few months ago and has stopped answering my calls or returning my texts. Jamie and I were always close, the best of friends. He was there for me when Ethan traveled, so his silence, his disappearance from my life, has left a gaping hole—in so many ways.

I kill the ignition, and Chase stirs in his seat. "Mommy," he whines, and I unbuckle myself.

"We're here," I say quietly, but have no idea if he remembers the house we once lived in, the place where he was conceived, and where we made memories for three special years.

He rubs his tired eyes with his knuckles. "I'm thirsty."

"I'll get you a drink as soon as we get inside."

I exit the car, and the warm night air falls over me as I open his door. When we left here a year ago, we fled with only our luggage. I'd left everything behind, the house and contents, unable to deal with the reality of the situation. I unbuckle Chase and, dinky car in hand, he jumps from his car seat onto the concrete driveway. The lights in his sneakers flash as he lands with a thud on two feet.

Since it's way past his bedtime, I say, "After your drink, I'll tuck you into your race car bed and you can go back to sleep." I pause for a moment, gauge his face for recognition, and my heart stalls when I see it.

His big brown eyes go wide when he lifts his chin to see the house. He blinks once, then twice, like he's trying to gather his bearings. "Is Daddy here?" he asks, and I unsuccessfully try to choke down the garbled sounds rising up in

my throat. A street light flickers overhead as I drop to my knees, and put my hands on his shoulders.

“Daddy is in heaven, remember, Chase?”

He glances up into the dark night sky, a black canvas shimmering with a mosaic of stars. He points. “Up there.”

“That’s right. He’s watching us from up there.”

Keep it together, Fallon.

“I want Daddy here,” he pouts, and I fight the tears.

Things might not have been perfect between Ethan and me, but he was a good father when he was home, and Chase treasured their time together. Until...

Until the fearless, no holds barred NASCAR racer who could handle any vehicle ended up driving his own over a guardrail. Unbelievable really. There are still so many unanswered questions, and while I have my own theory on what happened that day, well...I can’t bring myself to seek the truth, or even vocalize my thoughts. Can’t bring myself to charge Ethan’s phone, and read his last texts, ones that could either confirm or disprove my suspicions. Either way, it won’t bring Ethan back. Won’t bring back the guy who was wild and reckless, and at times thought he was invincible.

He wasn’t.

“Let’s go inside and get you a drink,” I say, in my best cheerful voice.

I scoop him up, and since I have no groceries, grab the cooler bag from the back seat and head to the front door. Memories bombard me and my chest constricts as I insert my key and open the door to our house, now quiet, dark...lifeless. A stale scent drifts by my nose, and I almost can’t breathe as I glance at the sofa, lit by the streetlight slanting in through the big bay window, and find Ethan’s favorite spot empty. But for Chase’s sake, I need to keep myself together. Tonight, when he’s sound asleep, I’ll snuggle up with a bottle of wine, and weep quietly for a young man taken from this earth far

too early, and for a little boy who will grow up without a father. I really hope Jamie comes through for him, because I have no plans or desire to date—now or ever. Marriage isn't in my future and right now, my son needs all my focus. Besides that, I'm in no state, mental or physical, to put myself out there again. I haven't even lost the baby weight. If I had, maybe Ethan wouldn't have...

I cut off those thoughts, unable to go down that road as I hold Chase against me, and shut and lock the front door. Sliding my hand along the wall, I find the switch and we both blink when the bright white light floods the entryway. I take in my once cozy place, but I'll never think of this house as home sweet home again.

Chase wiggles in my arms and I set him down. Dinky car still held tight in one hand, he reaches into the cooler bag and pulls out his juice box and some crackers. I step further into the house and a bang at the back patio door startles me. My hand flies to my chest and I gasp. Another bang sounds, almost like the lid of a barbecue being slammed shut, or a garbage can being tipped over.

Could it be an animal? The place has been abandoned for a long time. Maybe Jamie hasn't been looking after it like he once assured me he would.

"Chase, I want you to stay right here, okay?" I point to the floor. "Don't move from this spot."

"Okay," he says and stuffs his face full of crackers.

I slowly open the front hall closet and feel a measure of relief when I come across Ethan's old baseball bat. I scoop it up, weight it in my hand and walk toward the patio door. I check the lock, find it secure. With a flick of the switch, the backyard lights up, and showcases very neglected foliage and a pool full of dirt and algae. The click of the lock sounds like a gun being cocked as I open the door and step out, bat poised on my shoulder. As a nurse, we've taken self-defense

courses to help us deal with unruly people, but I'm not sure I could actually hit someone with a bat.

Please be an animal.

I glance toward the barbecue and before I know what's happening, someone has me by the front of my T-shirt and is shoving me against the side of the house. My head hits with a thud and I wince and shut my eyes as stars dance before them.

"Take what you want," I say, my thoughts focused solely on protecting my son. He's all that matters. TVs and computers, phones and jewelry, they mean nothing in the big scheme of things.

"Fallon?"

My eyes blink open at the familiar voice and I cry out in relief when I find Jamie looming over me. "Oh, God, Jamie. You scared me."

"What the hell, Fallon?" His dark eyes narrow in on me, his gaze roaming my face. "What are you doing?"

He takes the baseball bat from me, runs his fingers through his too long hair and backs up. As I work to gather myself, my gaze races over the long length of him. My Lord, what happened to him since I've been gone? He used to keep his hair neat and short, now it's longer than usual and hanging in his eyes. The clothes on his back look like they've been doubling as his pajamas for a week straight, and the beer on his breath is enough to spike my blood alcohol levels.

"I thought you were an intruder...or an animal," I say, still breathless.

"I was just checking on the place," he informs me in a gruff voice, like he's angry with me. "I told you I would," he snaps.

I jerk my thumb over my shoulder. "I didn't see your car. It wasn't in the driveway." Which is a good thing, considering he's been drinking. The last thing I want is for him to be

taken to the hospital because of a car accident—one fatality from driving is enough for any family. Or should I say two, considering the unborn baby.

He rakes an unsteady hand through his hair and shakes his head. “I live two houses down or did you forget?”

“No, I didn’t forget.”

“I could...” He stops to swallow. “There’s been a string of break-ins in the neighborhood lately. I could have hurt you.” There is real fear in his eyes when they meet mine and that’s when I understand where his anger is coming from. He was worried about me, and in his current state could have reacted first, asked questions later.

“I texted to let you know I was coming back,” I explain. “Didn’t you get it?”

“I got it,” he grumbles.

Knowing he was purposely ignoring me widens the gaping hole inside me.

“I just came a bit earlier, is all.”

He waves his hands. “Which is why I thought I had more time.”

I try to figure out what he’s waving at. “For what?”

“To get this place cleaned up for you.” His throat makes a sound as he swallows again. “I kind of just let it go. I didn’t want...you don’t deserve...Ethan would have...”

“Mommy...”

I spin around fast, and Chase is staring up at us. His big brown eyes, so similar to his father’s, and to his uncle’s, are confused, a bit frightened as he grips his dinky car.

“Chase,” I say quickly, and hurry to him. “Do you remember Uncle Jamie?”

“I don’t know,” he says. Chase was young, and the car accident happened just after hockey season ended, and Jamie had been away a lot that year. But on some level, deep inside the

little boy, I suspect he has some buried memories of the man looming close.

I smile at my perplexed son. "Well, why don't you say hello. You're going to really like Uncle Jamie."

"Hello," he says, tilting his head back and moving closer to my leg.

"Hi Chase," Jamie says, and takes a distancing step backward. What the hell? Is he afraid of his nephew? He might have been absent a lot that last year, but when Jamie was around in the summer, he was definitely the fun uncle. But when my gaze meets his, sees the pain in the shadowy depths, I understand completely. Looking at Chase must be like a punch to the gut, considering he's the spitting image of Ethan when he was the same age.

As the oldest brother by three years, Jamie would have remembered Ethan at the age of four, remembered every trait and nuance. Ethan had told me Jamie was always a good big brother, and I guess that's why Ethan's jealousy always confused me. Oh, he'd never come right out and say mean things, but I felt there was a hint of anger in the joking jibes spoken behind his brother's back. It always seemed like Ethan wanted what Jamie had, and always wanted to outshine him.

But despite it all they were brothers and Jamie always looked out for his wild, reckless younger sibling, even though Jamie was known to be a risk taker too. Hence his hockey name. As I look at him now, however, I don't get the sense he's a guy whose about to risk anything. Not anymore. A loss will make you more cautious. That I know first-hand.

A dog barks in the distance and snaps me back to attention. "Let's get inside." I usher Chase in and Jamie follows. I walk around and flick all the lights on, like that will somehow chase away the ghosts that haunt me.

Chase climbs into the chair at the table, and makes noises

as he runs his dinky car over the tabletop. I open and close the cupboards and fridge. I find a few canned goods, that have long ago expired, and set them on the counter to dispose of.

“I cleaned out the fridge, donated a bunch of canned goods last Christmas,” Jamie says, his voice quiet.

“Thanks, Jamie. I hate to see good food go to waste.”

“Are you hungry? I could order a pizza, or we could go to my place and I could make you something. I’m not a great cook, but I can get by.”

My stomach takes that moment to grumble. “Actually, a pizza sounds good.”

“Mario’s,” we both say at the same time and Jamie gives me the first smile of the night. It brightens his face, and reminds me of the once handsome, carefree guy from years ago. But I’m not so sure he exists anymore. We’ve both have gone through a lot since the accident. It was his pregnant fiancée in the car with my husband, and she walked away from Jamie after she lost the baby. I want to ask if he’s heard from her, but don’t want to open old wounds. Rumor has it he’s been with a lot of puck bunnies since Sara, but who am I to judge. We all grieve differently.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and punches in a number.

“Mommy, I want pizza.”

“Okay,” I say, knowing I’m going to regret feeding him pizza this late at night. He’d eaten on the drive here, but I’m not going to deny him a slice. “Can you get a cheese and pepperoni for Chase?”

Dark brown eyes so similar to Chase’s move over my face. “Pizza with the works okay for you?”

“Same as always,” I say, then go perfectly still. Nothing is the same as always. Why would I even say that? Oh, maybe because being in this house again, surrounded by all things

Ethan is messing with me hard. I lean against the archway, and glance into the dining room. My gaze flickers over the framed wedding photo, as well as the photo of us holding Chase for the first time, and that's when it really hits me.

I can't stay here.

A big, heavy hand lands on my shoulder and I jump a good foot in the air. I turn, and Jamie pulls me into his arms. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." He holds me tight, and my throat aches. It feels so good to be held, hugged—by him. He slowly inches back, and his eyes meet mine again. "Are you okay?"

"No, Jamie. I'm not okay. I'll probably never be okay again."

"Me neither," he says, and slides his hand around my head to lay it against his pounding heart, which is just as shattered as mine.

Will we ever be able to put the pieces back together again? Find some semblance of a life?

Will either of us ever be able to find normal?

Here I thought I'd been doing okay until I set eyes on Fallon. Then again, who am I kidding? I've not been doing okay for a very long time. But the second I looked into Fallon's eyes, every painful memory of Sara losing the baby and leaving me, and my kid brother being rushed to the hospital only to die on the way, came crashing back in a whoosh.

Jesus Christ, I'll never forgive myself for any of it.

How could I?

I was supposed to be the one taking Sara to her appointment. She trusted in me to get her there, and I let her down. Trust is so important to me and I totally fucked up. The damn practice went into overtime, and then we had a field of puck bunnies to push our way through. Sara had obviously turned to Ethan, could trust in my younger brother when she couldn't trust in me, and now he's dead, our baby is gone, and Sara fled the state, never to be heard from again. Yeah, all that is my fault and I don't deserve to ever be okay again.

Fuck man, I still have no idea what happened that day. The roads were dry and clear, and Ethan was the best driver I

knew. Reports came back that there was nothing wrong with the car, and the single vehicle accident was driver error. Here it is a year later, and I'm still having a hard time wrapping my brain around one of the world's best NASCAR drivers crashing through a guardrail.

"Jamie?"

I blink and realize Fallon had been talking to me. Dammit. I need to stop spacing out. Once again, I had one too many beers tonight, a habit I've fallen into when I'm home alone, haunted by memories. I can still picture Sara glaring at me with angry eyes, telling me it was all my fault. A guy doesn't move past that easily, or ever.

"Sorry, what?"

Her brow furrows and her look is one of pity that I fucking hate. I'm a horrible person, a complete fuck up, and I don't deserve compassion or sympathy from anyone, least of all Fallon. By rights she should hate me. She should kick me in the nuts and call me every vile name known to mankind. But no, sweet Fallon isn't at all like that. My sister-in-law is the kindest woman I know and always put others above herself. I knew that from the second my brother and I laid eyes on her at her girlfriend's party all those years ago. Hell, back in the day, if Ethan hadn't put a ring on her finger, maybe things would have been different between us.

Or maybe not, since I was on the road so much, making a name for myself in the NHL. While I was away working my ass off in the rink, he swooped in and made her his girl. Eventually I met Sara. A nice girl and one of the team's physical therapists. She got pregnant, despite the fact that I always used protection, but sometimes things happen. Condoms aren't one-hundred percent effective. Obviously. At the time, all my friends were getting married, and having kids, and when she showed me the pregnancy stick, I knew it was time for me to grow up too, and do the right thing.

"I was just wondering if you'd like a drink," she says pulling my thoughts back once again.

"Yeah, sure," I say and as I gaze at her, take in her strength and her vulnerability, my heart hitches. Truthfully, I would do anything for her, and goddammit, I should have had the place cleaned and stocked for her and Chase. Once again, I let down those who counted on me. It's no wonder Fallon ran away from here so fast after the funerals. I guess she knew better than to turn to me.

"I don't have any beer, but I have some soda. Would you like one?"

"I think I'm done with drinking tonight anyway," I say. Maybe forever. I glance at the young boy at the table. While my risk-taking days are behind me, and I'm never going to be what these two need—I can't let anyone get too close, can't let anyone rely on me—I should at least be sober around him. Ethan would want that.

"Would you keep an eye on Chase for a second? I'll grab them from the SUV."

I hold my hand out. "Give me your keys. I'll bring all your stuff in."

"There isn't much." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out her keys. "We only have our clothes."

"Yeah, you didn't take much of anything when you left," I say and close my hand around the palm tree keychain that says Margaritaville—a souvenir she'd picked up on her honeymoon in Jamaica. I make my way to the front door and the warm night air washes over me. The sight of the SUV in the driveway is like a kick in the nuts. I was with them when they bought it. Checked out the back seat with my nephew.

I open the back hatch and pull out their things as well as a paper grocery bag with soda and chips. Was this supposed to be her dinner? Guess she's been eating about as well as I have. I gather up what little belongings she has and carry every-

thing inside. I step into the kitchen and find Fallon staring off in to space.

"I'll take these upstairs," I say. I pause. "Um..." I begin not sure how to ask, but she comes to my rescue because she's a smart girl who is good at reading people and situations.

"I think I'm going to sleep in the spare room."

I nod, figuring as much.

"Chase okay in his room?"

"Yes, I think he'll like crawling back into his race car bed."

I glance at the boy who is the spitting image of his father. I focus back in on Fallon and lower my voice. "Does he...remember?"

"A little bit," she says and pulls the soda from the bag. I turn and go upstairs. I've been keeping an eye on the place for some time now, so this isn't my first trip to the bedrooms after Fallon left. Still, seeing the open closet, with Ethan's clothes hanging, a shelf with all his favorite ball caps, hits like a punch every single time.

Since Fallon didn't say which spare room, I drop her bag into the one across the hall from Chase's, and set his stuff on the floor of his room, near the foot of his hot rod race car bed, similar to the one his daddy drove.

I take a fueling breath and head back downstairs. My cell pings and I pull it from my back pocket to read a text from Rider. He and Kane are shooting a game of pool at the Freeman's bar. They've both been keeping a close eye on me over the last year—Heck, all the guys and their wives have been—and while I'd normally join them, go home with a puck bunny, tonight I'm not in the mood. I swipe my finger over the phone and send a text.

Jamie: Fallon is back. I'm with her and Chase at her house.

Rider: Fallon Adams? Your sister-in-law?

Jamie: Do you know any other Fallon who has a son named Chase?

Rider: You okay, buddy?

Jamie: As well as could be expected.

Rider: Wants some company. Kane and I can come over.

Jamie: Nah, I'm good. Having pizza and then crashing.

Rider: Say hi to Fallon for us.

Jamie: Will do.

I shove the phone back into my pocket and step into the kitchen. "That was Rider."

She hands me a soda and I take a big drink. "If I'm keeping you from something."

"No, you're not and the guys say hi."

She nods. "How are they doing?"

"Same," I say with a shrug.

"Rider still the Wing Man?" she asks with a small grin.

I snort. "You remember that?"

"I spent hours listening to him build his teammates up to the girls, but it's time he realizes his value and shows a woman who he is, not who his friends are."

"You always liked him, didn't you?"

Her smile is soft, like she's remembering happier times. "He was always nice to me, and he adored Chase."

I nod. "Too bad he's a sworn bachelor."

She gives me a teasing wink. "I'm pretty sure I once heard you say that, and look what..." She lets her words fall off, and her eyes go wide, like she's said too much. But just then the doorbell rings, and cuts the quiet.

"Pizza," I say happy for the distraction. I pull a few bills from my pocket and head to the door. I hand the money over and take the pizza. Fallon is setting out plates when I get back. She has a worried look on her face as I open the boxes and put a slice on each plate.

"Pizza," Chase yells and rubs his sleepy eyes. I grin at him

and rustle his hair. He kind of reminds me of myself as a kid. I'd fight sleep any day for food. Still would.

I take a seat, bite into my slice, and study Fallon's body language. She's wound so tight, her damn shoulders are practically hugging her ears. "What's on your mind?" I ask.

She smiles at me. "You always could read me."

"You're the one who's good at reading others and situations."

"Comes with being a nurse."

I nod. "I can only read you because we used to spend a lot of time together."

"True, we did. You were always there in the summers when Ethan was away," she says. "We did a lot of things together before Chase was born," she adds, but then she swallows, and her eyes slowly lift to mine. "I don't think I can stay here, Jamie."

"You can stay with me for as long as it takes," I say quickly, and without thinking. I'm not about to abandon her, and while I can let her into my house, I can't let her or anyone into my heart, can't let her think she can count on me.

"No, what I mean is, I have to sell this place." She waves her hand around. "It's too big for just Chase and me."

What she's not saying is that she and Ethan had planned to fill all those spare bedrooms, and this place has too many memories.

"Yeah, I get that. My place is too big too, but I bought it to be close to you guys." I bite into my slice, chew, and swallow it down with a drink of soda. I used to love hanging out here, and my ex Sara and Fallon had become good friends. Fallon was going to be Sara's matron of honor, and naturally Ethan would have been my best man. But that's all in the past now.

“Do you know any good realtors?” she asks and lets loose a big sigh.

“I can ask around. My mom probably does. They downsized after...” I don’t need to finish the sentence for Fallon to realize they were unable to stay in the house they’d raised Ethan in after he’d died.

“I need to go see them. I feel bad for being away so long. It wasn’t fair for me to run away without considering their feelings.”

“They will love that, but they knew you needed space. I can take you tomorrow if you want. You can talk to Mom about a realtor.”

“Thanks, Jamie.”

Christ, what is it about her saying ‘thanks, Jamie’ that hits like a fist and has me wanting to do more—everything—for her? Why does it make me want to pull her to me, and chase away all her bad memories in the bedroom?

Whoa shit, don’t go there, buddy.

She lets loose another heavy sigh. “I’m going to have to stage the place.”

I point to the pizza. “Another slice?”

Her look is almost embarrassed as she puts her hand over her stomach and says, “I probably shouldn’t.”

What the hell?

“Why not?” I question.

“Well, my metabolism isn’t the same as before I had Chase.”

I take that moment to let my gaze take her in, admiring every single inch, from the tip of her head to toes that are curling beneath her. Her long, honey blonde hair is piled haphazardly in a flimsy clip. Many loose strands fall teasingly over her cheeks, and shoulders. My attention drops from her face to her body, to admire her smooth, creamy skin, and plump breasts that are straining behind her Seattle Seahawks

T-shirt. She always was a football fan over hockey, but that never stopped her from watching all my games. I turn my attention to yoga pants that showcase plump hips any man would long to sink his teeth into and strong, well-shaped legs that have carried her along in the hardest of situations. Everything about her is beautiful, and admirable. She squirms, uncomfortable under my scrutiny.

“You’re perfect,” I mumble.

I swallow a moan, and berate myself. Shit, she’s always been breathtaking, and the extra weight, which emphasizes all her sexy curves, looks good on her. Damn, good on her. But what the fuck am I doing? The last person I should be admiring or having inappropriate thoughts about is my sister-in-law, no matter what I’ve always felt about her. No, it’s best I stick to puck bunnies. No history. No commitment. No tomorrows.

No pain.

“You can hire out for staging,” I point out, changing the subject before I say or do something stupid.

“Yeah, but I have to deal...”

I lift my head, and drop the rest of my pizza onto my plate, as Chase grows restless in his chair. “I can clear his things out. Donate what I can. Just let me know what you want to keep. I can do that for you, Fallon. I would have done it already, but I just didn’t want to overstep here.”

“I can’t ask you to. It’s not easy for you, either.”

No, but I don’t want easy. I don’t deserve it. “Consider it done.”

“I’ll take a few keepsakes.” She nods and picks a piece of bacon off her pizza and looks a million miles away as she pops it into her mouth. “I’d like to enrol Chase in pre-school a few days a week this summer. I think the interaction would be good for him, and he’s going to need to make friends. Plus, I plan on going back to work.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised. She doesn’t need the money, but maybe she needs work to find herself again. I needed my hockey. Would have been lost without it.

“Yeah, it’s time.”

Chase jumps up and starts running around the kitchen, racing his dinky car over the bottom cupboards.

“Oh, no, it looks like he got his second wind. I need to try to get him to bed now while I still can.”

I stand with her as she chases after her son. “He’s aptly named,” I say, and it brings a smile to her pretty face, a smile that hits like a puck to the jaw. Goddammit, I’m the reason she no longer smiles like that.

“I’ll take care of this pizza and lock up,” I tell her. “You guys both need sleep.”

“So do you.”

I run my fingers through my hair. “Yeah, I do,” I say. I need a lot of things, but no only do I not deserve them, I’m not about to share those thoughts with Fallon. My days of opening up and taking risks are over.