

## CHAPTER TWO

TAYLOR

“CHEER UP, BUD. I bet she’ll be at the house by shift’s end,” Jubal said, watching me fold laundry.

“You’ve said that every shift since she left,” I grumbled, shaking out a pair of standard-issue navy blue cargo pants. The color was fading.

When Falyn did the laundry, she somehow kept them looking brand new for months. I cooked dinner and took out the trash; she’d do the laundry and the dishes. We tag-teamed taking care of the kids. Having Hollis and Hadley four months apart was a lot like having twins. One of us held down flailing legs and pulled out baby wipes while the other cleaned and re-diapered. I’d take Hollis to soccer, and she would take Hadley to volleyball. For nine years, we’d worked like a well-oiled machine. We’d even perfected fighting. Anger, negotiation, make-up sex. Now that she was gone, I had no one to compromise with, no kids to juggle, no dinner for four. I’d been doing my own laundry for two months—since she’d moved back to Colorado Springs with the kids—and my pants were already looking like shit. One more reason to miss her.

I folded the cargos over a hanger and hooked it on the rod inside my armoire. I hadn’t been on the mountain digging firebreaks in four years. Only being home for six months out of the year had taken its toll on our marriage, so I hung up my pulaski and took a full-time job with the city fire department.

In the end, it didn’t matter what I did. Falyn wasn’t happy.

“How are the kids liking the new school?” Jubal asked.

“They’re not.”

Jubal sighed. “I wondered if it would be tough for Hollis. I’m surprised you let her take him.”

“Split ‘em up? No,” I said, shaking my head. “Besides, she’s his mother. She always has been. It wouldn’t be right to pull the biological card now.”

Jubal nodded. “True.” He patted my shoulder. “You’re a good man, Taylor.”

My brow furrowed. “Not good enough.”

My cell phone rang. I held the receiver to my ear, and Jubal nodded, already knowing I needed privacy. He walked back into the living area, and I swiped my thumb across the display, holding the phone to my ear.

“Hi, honey,” I said.

“Hi.” Falyn was uncomfortable with terms of endearment now—as if I shouldn’t care about her because she’d left me.

The truth was I’d tried yelling. I’d tried being angry. I begged and pleaded and even threw tantrums, but all that did was push her further away. Now, I listened more and lost my temper less. Something my brothers had all learned early on. They still had their wives.

“I was just thinking about you,” I said.

“Oh, yeah?” she asked. “I was calling because ... Hollis isn’t doing well. He got in a fight today.”

“A fistfight? Is he okay?”

“Of course, he’s okay. You taught him how to defend himself. But he’s different. He’s angry. Thank God it was the last day before summer break or he would have been suspended. He still might. Taylor, I think ...” She sighed. She sounded as lost as I did, and it was both painful and a relief not to be alone in that. “I think I made a mistake.”

I held my breath, hoping she would finally say she was coming home. It didn’t matter why. Once Falyn came back, I could make things right.

“I was hoping ... maybe ...”

“Yeah? I mean, yeah. Whatever it is.”

She paused again. Those in-between moments felt like dying a thousand times. Her voice said it all. She knew when she’d called she’d be getting my hopes up, but this conversation was about the kids, not me. Not us. “I was hoping you wouldn’t mind helping me find a rent house in Estes. You have more connections there for housing than I do. It’s going to be hard to find a three-bedroom apartment. The kids are too old to share.”

I sat down on my bed, feeling like the air had been knocked out of me. “Couldn’t you just ... move back in? The kids’ rooms are all set up. It’s familiar. I’d love for you to come back. I want you to. It doesn’t have to mean anything more than if you got your own place. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

The other end of the line was quiet for a long time. “I can’t, Taylor.” She sounded tired. Her voice was deeper than usual; ragged.

I’d begged before. It would only start another fight. This was about our children. I had to put us aside. “Falyn ... move back into the house with the kids. I’ll find an apartment.”

“No. I’m the one who left. I’ll find a place.”

“Baby,” I began. I could feel her discomfort through the phone. “Falyn. The house is yours. I’ll let the school know they’ll be back next year.”

“Really?” she asked, her voice breaking.

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “It doesn’t make sense for me to live in that big house alone and you and the kids crammed into an apartment.”

“Thank you.” She sniffed. “The kids will be so happy.”

“Good,” I said, forcing a smile. I wasn’t sure why. She couldn’t see me. “Good, I’m glad.”

She puffed out a breath of relief, and scuffing sounds against the phone had me imagining she was wiping away tears. “Okay, then. I’ll, um ... I’ll start packing.”

“Need help? Let me help you.” The apartment she’d found in Colorado Springs was furnished, so there wouldn’t be much heavy furniture, but I was desperate to return to our well-oiled machine.

“No, we can do it. We don’t have much. There’s nothing too heavy.”

“Falyn. At least let me help pack up the kids. I haven’t seen them in two weeks.”

She thought about it for a moment, sniffing again. I imagined her weighing the pros and cons. She had to think about her choices longer these days, her decisions made only after having more information—something I had to start doing, too. I half-expected her to say she would think about it and call back, but she answered. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I was considering telling the kids tonight. Do you want to be here when I do? I’m not sure if that would be confusing for them ...”

“I’ll be there,” I said without hesitation. Some things required less thinking than others.

We hung up, and I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. I didn’t dare say to her what I wanted. I’d held in the hope that once she was back we could really start to work on what went wrong. This time, I would promise not to push too hard or move too fast—I would show her I had changed.

I gripped the phone with both hands and held it to my forehead, silently chanting to keep it together and not ruin it this time. Nothing was more frightening than being your own worst enemy. Even when I wanted to do the right thing, it was a struggle. I had always lived by my emotions, and those close to me experienced the blowback. They saw the pressure build and the discharge, even if it only lasted for a few seconds in the form of rage. After years went by—and I hadn’t learned or grown or made an effort to overcome it—the forgiveness came less easily for Falyn, and I couldn’t blame her.

“You off the phone?” Jubal asked. I lifted my head and nodded, working hard to keep the suffering off my face. “The commander wants a word.”

I wiped my nose with my wrist and stood, taking a deep breath. My muscles were tense. I knew what was coming. The commander had been in meetings all morning with the other shift commanders, the chief, and the city council—all about me.

“Taylor?” Jubal said as I passed him.

“Yeah?” I turned around to face him, annoyed. He’d interrupted my emotional preparation for what would go down in the commander’s office.

“You need to take that temper and dial it down a few notches before walking in there. You’re in enough trouble as it is. You’re definitely not going to get her back without a job.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing has gone right for me since she left.”

Jubal made a face, unimpressed with my shameless self-pity. “If you’d stop spending so much time placing blame, you might free up your head and your heart to think of a solution.”

I thought about his words and nodded, taking a deep breath. Jubal was right, as usual.

The commander was on the phone when I knocked and came in. He lifted his index finger, and then directed me to sit in one of the two orange chairs positioned in front of his desk.

I did as he instructed, lacing my fingers together on top of my stomach and bobbing my knee. That office hadn’t changed much since he’d taken over; the same pictures hung from the walls and tacks on various corkboards held informational posters around the room. The paneling gave away the building’s age, as did the stained carpet and worn furniture. The only things different

were a framed picture on the desk, the man sitting on the other side of it, and the nameplate in front of him.

COMMANDER TYLER MADDOX

“You rang?” I asked when he hung up the phone on its cradle. I grabbed the picture of us with Dad, all standing side by side, our arms around each other and happy. Thomas almost looked out of place, without tattoos and longer, lighter hair, and hazel green eyes as opposed to shit brown like the rest of us.

“Anyone else looking at this picture must think Tommy belongs to the milkman. Only people who know us recognize that he looks like Mom.”

Tyler grimaced. “I know you’ve already told me once, but tell me again, Taylor. Tell me you didn’t know who he was when you swung.”

I tried not to get defensive, but holding back was hard when he was asking me to explain why I’d knocked out the mayor’s son for touching my wife’s ass at a bar. Tyler knew as well as I did that he would have done the same thing. Maddox boys didn’t stop to ask the importance of someone before putting them in their place.

“The mayor just moved here a couple of years ago,” I said. “How was I supposed to know who his douchebag son is?”

Tyler’s frown didn’t budge. “This isn’t just a fuck up, Taylor. I don’t know how I’m going to get you out of it this time.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “This time? You act like you’ve been bailing me out my entire life. I think it’s been a give and take.”

Tyler’s shoulders fell. “Okay then, it’s my turn, and you’ve fucked me out of it. My hands are tied.”

“Maybe that cocksucker shouldn’t have grabbed my wife’s ass.”

Tyler leaned back, huffing his impatience. “He tripped.”

I clenched my teeth and white-knuckled the arms of my chair, trying to keep from leaping across the desk at my brother. “Don’t repeat his fucking lies to me, Tyler. I saw it with my own eyes and so did half the crew. Jubal, Zeke, Sugar, Jew, Cat, and Porter all put their jobs on the line to vouch for me. They knew the mayor wanted them to say different in their statements.”

Tyler glared at me for a minute, but his expression melted away. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“So ... what? I’m done?” I asked.

“We both are.”

My brows pulled together. “What do you mean? They can’t fucking do that. How can they do that?”

“They didn’t. I handed in my resignation this morning. Looks like it’s the last day for both of us.”

My chest felt heavy, and I puffed out a breath in disbelief. “Are you fucking with me?”

Tyler shook his head. “We started out together. We go out together, right?”

I shook my head, feeling tears burn my eyes. I remembered how proud Tyler was when he received word of his promotion, how proud Ellie was, and how happy we all were when we celebrated that night. He was the best man for the job. He took care of the guys like he took care of me. “You don’t deserve this. You worked hard for that desk.”

Tyler stood up and walked around the table. He held out his hand, and when I grabbed it, he yanked me to my feet. “It’s just a desk. You’re my brother.”

He hugged me, and my forehead fell against his shoulder. I tensed, keeping all the hurt and pain I’d felt since Falyn left and for losing my job—in addition to my guilt for Tyler losing his job, too—from flooding out of me in an uncontrollable release of emotion.

“I guess we can quit lying to Dad and really be insurance salesmen now.” He hooked his arm around my neck and rubbed his knuckles on the top of my head with his free hand. “C’m on. We’re going to be okay. Let’s go break it to the guys.”

“Hey, uh ...” I began. “I’m going to have to find something else quick.”

“Why?”

“Falyn’s moving back with the kids.”

Tyler’s mouth fell open, and he stepped back, socking my arm with the side of his fist. “Are you serious, brother? That’s awesome!”

I shifted my weight, crossing my arms across my middle. “The kids aren’t happy in the springs. I told her to take the house.”

“Oh.”

“So I’m on the hunt for an apartment.”

He made a face. “That’s not as good of news as I thought.”

“Me neither.”

Tyler put his hand on my shoulder. “You want to stay with Ellie and me?”

“Nah,” I said. “Thanks, though.”

“You guys love each other. You’ll work it out.”

I looked down, chills running over my entire body. “If she loves me, then why did she leave me?”

That gave Tyler pause, and he squeezed his fingers into my skin. “We’re crazy as fuck. It takes balls for those women to love us. And ... sometimes it takes losing someone to finally have the courage to grow into the person they deserve.”

My chest concaved, and I puffed out a breath as if Tyler had just punched me. Taking that kind of truth felt like falling on my own sword.

“Just ... don’t tell anyone she’s coming back,” I said. “I want to try to have a few good conversations with her before the mayor’s son finds out. Arrogant prick.”

“He can’t steal your wife, Taylor. She doesn’t want him.”

I made a face. “She doesn’t want me, either.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. We’ve all reevaluated at some point and realized our wives are getting tired of our crap. We straightened up, and it’s all good. You were just a day too late.”

“Something like that,” I grumbled as we walked into the living quarters.

We stopped just short of the closest row of recliners. Every seat was taken by the guys from our shift. All of them were former hotshots like us, waiting for the alarm to sound so we could get a taste of the adrenaline and power that came with fighting something unstoppable and inhuman—and winning.

Tyler glanced at me and nodded toward the crew. I clenched my teeth and looked to the floor; shame and the feeling of letting my firehouse family down were unbearable.

Jubal sat up, recognition in his eyes. “Baloney. I don’t believe it.”

“I—” Before I could finish, the alarm bleated through every speaker in the building. We waited for the dispatcher, Sonja, to tell us the location and nature of the fire we were about to be called to.

“Box alarm at the Hickory Warehouse, 200 North Lincoln Avenue. Possible occupants.”

“Inside?” I asked. “It’s been vacant for years.”

“Fuckity,” Jubal said. “No, it’s not. The Hickory family sublet it to Marquis Furniture five or so years ago. It’s full of their inventory.”

“We’ll need the ladder and the two larger engines. Tender on standby!” Tyler said. He backhanded my shoulder. “Ride with me. Last one.”

My eyebrows pulled in. “I told Falyn I would meet her in the springs tonight to help her pack up the kids.”

Tyler grinned in understanding. “No problem. Patch that shit up so you’ll stop whining, would ya?”

I half-heartedly smiled, watching my twin brother grab his commander’s hat, jacket, and keys before jogging to the ambulance bay where his truck was parked.

The rest of the guys followed behind him to the fire trucks and ambulance, and I stood alone, feeling my jaw tense. Something didn’t feel right.

“Goddammit, Tyler,” I said under my breath, running out to put on my gear. I stepped into my bunker gear, grabbed my hat, and yanked open the door just as Tyler was backing out.

Tyler frowned at me as I pulled on my seat belt. “What are you doing, fuckstick? Go get your wife.”

“Last time,” I said, sitting back and putting on my game face.

He stepped on the gas, leading the crew to the outskirts of town so fast the haunting sound of our sirens trailed behind. He was already on the radio, speaking to the other brass who would arrive and communicating with dispatch about shutting down any way in or out to the public. We all knew the warehouse would be one hellacious fire, but I could see a flicker of nervousness in my brother’s eyes. He had the same bad feeling I did.

The brakes of Tyler’s truck screeched, and the tires dug into the gravel as he slowed in front of the warehouse. The south side of the looming three-story structure was nearly engulfed in

flames. I rolled down the passenger side window, and even from a hundred feet away, I could feel the heat on my face. The flames whipped up into the sky, reaching with their glowing, misshapen fingers as they devoured and digested the steel and lumber that had withstood five generations of grueling Colorado weather.

Tyler leaned forward, pressing his chest against the steering wheel to get a better look. He had to yell over the roaring orange monster. “That’s one big bitch!” He radioed into dispatch, requesting a shutdown of the roads leading to the warehouse. Consistent water pressure would already be a problem. We didn’t need traffic running over the hoses, too.

For the first time before a fire, an ominous feeling came over me. “I gotta bad feeling, Tyler.”

He puffed out a breath. “Gimme a break, big brother. You’re too fucking mean to die.”

I looked up at the fire. “I hope so. I haven’t held my wife in three months.”

### **CHAPTER THREE**

TYLER

“IT’LL BURN FOR DAYS,” I said, tugging once on my door handle.

“I’d better call Falyn,” Taylor said. “Let her know I’m not coming tonight after all.”

We had both climbed out of the truck, standing on opposite sides of the hood. I point at him. “Don’t you fucking dare. We’re going to restrain this hungry whore, and then you’re going to pack up my niece and nephews and bring your family home.”

Taylor glanced at his watch while jogging to Engine Nine. “I’ve got two hours!”

I glanced at the warehouse and yelled back to my brother, “She won’t be out, but we can beat her back!”

Jubal and Sugar were already on fire attack, dragging a hose on the main floor, while Zeke and Cat were outside as their backup. Jubal had carried in a TIC—a thermal imaging camera—to locate the fire and any possible people inside.

“Hold off, Ladder Two,” Tyler said into his radio. “Let’s clear the building before we start throwin’ steam.”

Jew’s voice came through the speaker, “Copy that.”

“We’re going to need ventilation,” Jubal called over the frequency.

I gestured for Taylor to oblige Jubal’s request. “Copy, Jubal.” I lowered my radio. “Give me vertical ventilation, Taylor. With all that furniture in there as fuel ...” I trailed off, troubled.

“We’re at a high risk for a flashover,” Taylor said, finishing my sentence.

“Then let’s make sure we ventilate her right,” I said. Fire fuel, whether it was hydrocarbons or natural vegetation like wood, released gasses at a certain temperature. Once those gasses ignited from super-heated air from the fire, an area could spontaneously combust, a phenomenon that would mean death for any firefighters in the vicinity. Other than a warehouse full of explosives or tires, thousands of pieces of furniture were a formidable rival for any fire department, and I knew my last fire was going to be my biggest challenge as commander.

I watched my brother walk away and felt my stomach sink. “Taylor!” He stopped. “Hold up. Keep an eye out down here. I’ll do it.”

“But,” Taylor began.

“I said I’ll do it!” I growled. I grabbed an ax off Engine Nine before heading for the aerial ladder to cut a hole in the roof. I signaled to Porter to follow me to the ladder truck. “Grab a saw!” I yelled to him.

He frowned, confused that a shift commander was running toward a ladder instead of remaining on the ground to keep watch.

We climbed onto the platform, and I waved at the operator, letting him know we were ready. Gears whined as the aerial ladder surged upward nearly fifty feet. As the wind whipped, heat pelted my face and glowing embers floated all around us. A nostalgic pang in my chest urged me to remember this moment because I was going to miss it. I had loved fire trucks since I was a boy, and I wasn’t sure how life would be without feeling the rush of running into a burning building when everyone else was running out.

Porter closed his eyes and swallowed. Even under his bulky bunker gear, I could see that he was breathing hard.



“You ain’t afraid of heights, are ya, Porter?”

He shook his head, his cheeks still fattened by youth. Straight out of school, he’d just joined Estes Park’s Station four months ago. We hadn’t even thought of a nickname for him yet.

“No, sir,” he said. “I mean, yes, sir, but I’m going to do the job.”

I slammed my hand down on the top of his helmet. “I just thought of a nickname for you, Porter.”

His face brightened. “Yeah?”

“Honey badger.”

Porter looked confused.

“You know what a honey badger is, Porter? They eat cobras. They don’t give a fuck.”

A wide grin spread across his face, but he quickly sobered when the ladder came to an abrupt stop.

“This is us,” I said, hopping onto the edge of the rooftop. I tapped the butt of my ax down before putting all of my weight in one spot, making sure the roof wasn’t spongy.

“How does it feel?” Porter asked.

“Stable,” I said, carefully stepping down. After a few more tests with my ax, I waved Porter over, drawing an imaginary circle in the air above the spot I wanted him to cut. “Here!”

Porter nodded and then yanked on the chain of his saw. The flames were already licking the edges of the roof, and the heat was nearly unbearable.

“We don’t have much time,” I barked. “Get it done.”



Porter carved through the thin top layer of the composite and the next layer of insulation. Just minutes after Porter began, smoke billowed from the hole he'd cut, and he took a step away from the intense heat.

I called Taylor over the radio. "She's opened up. We're headed down."

"Good work," Taylor said.

Porter and I returned to the platform, and I radioed for the operator to lower us down. Just as we reached the halfway point, the roof popped with a crack so loud it was like the building was snapping in two. A puff of thick, black smoke and some embers exploded from the opening we'd just created.

Taylor came over the radio again. "Back off, everyone. We've got ... yep, it's spalling! Get the hell out of there!"

With more than six feet left to go, I jumped from the platform, running away from the crumbling warehouse toward my brother. I yelled into the radio. "Move! It's coming down!"

Jubal and Sugar burst from the main entry just before the brick's mortar joints began to give way. A large part of the front wall collapsed, pushing out a plume of dust, smoke, and debris.

I grabbed Taylor by the jacket. "You don't have time for this. Take my truck."

"You sure?" he asked.

I patted the side of his helmet. "Get outta here. We got this."

I scanned his face, watching Taylor war between staying to protect his little brother or save his family.

After several seconds, he ran to my truck, peeling off his gear and throwing it in the back before sliding behind the steering wheel. I'd left the keys in the ignition, knowing he'd be bailing early.

My focus alternated between Taylor leaving and the burning rubble. I pointed at different areas, barking orders to my men and talking into the radio. The fire was burning hotter, the smoke getting darker. We weren't anywhere close to having it under control. I could see Taylor sitting conflicted in the driver's seat. I knew he felt it was wrong to leave me alone, but just before he grabbed the door handle to rejoin us, I pointed at him, and he paused. "Get the fuck outta here! Now!"

TAYLOR

SWEAT DRIPPED FROM MY FOREHEAD, and I wiped it away with my wrist. I could still feel the heat from the fire on my face and the heaviness in my lungs from the smoke. I made a fist and coughed into my hand once before reaching down to twist the keys in the ignition. It took everything I had to pull the gear into reverse and back away from my brother, but he was right. Falyn and the kids came first.

Driving the commander's truck proved advantageous as I passed two police cruisers exceeding the speed limit by at least fifteen miles per hour. When I finally reached the station, I ran in long enough to drop Tyler's keys on his desk and to grab my truck keys, wallet, and phone before getting back on the road for Colorado Springs. The plume of smoke from the warehouse loomed in my rearview mirror as I left Estes Park. I dialed Tyler's number, but it rang four times before the voice mail picked up. I couldn't shake the same ominous feeling I'd had while watching my

brother leave for the warehouse fire without me. We'd fought fires separately before, but this felt different. That feeling had made me jump in the truck with Tyler before, and the farther away I drove, the more wrong it felt.

I concentrated on Falyn and the kids. The thought of Hollis and Hadley's excited reaction was an easy distraction. The combination of thinking about having my family back together and my gut feeling about the fire put the night Falyn left in the forefront of my mind.

We almost didn't go. Fuck, I wish we hadn't gone. The babysitter had backed out, and if Ellie hadn't called Falyn last minute, we would have just stayed home. What we thought was a stroke of good luck ended up demanding, or guilt her into coming home resurfaced. Love was fucking terrifying, laying your heart out in the open for someone else to protect or trample. My happiness depended on Falyn's forgiveness, and I still didn't know if she was willing.

My phone rang, and I pressed the button on my steering wheel. The display already told me who it was, but I was caught off guard, worried she would tell me she'd changed her mind. "Falyn?"

"Dad?" Hadley said.

"Hi, pumpkin! How was the last day of school?"

"It sucked."

"Again?"

"I got in trouble." She sounded disappointed in herself, and I imagined hot tears running over her chubby cheeks. She would start middle school next year, and I knew she was going to sprout up three or four inches at any moment. She was already taller than Hollis was, but he would overtake her in high school. I wasn't happy that she was growing up so fast, but at least she would be back in Estes with her friends.

She sniffed. "Hollis got into a fight today."

"Don't worry, Hadley. It's going to get better. I promise, okay? Very, very soon. Daddy's going to make sure of that."

"How?"

"You'll see. Put Mom on the phone."

"Hello?" Falyn said. I was sure the conversation with the school about both kids hadn't been easy.

"I'll be there in less than an hour," I said.

"Really?" she said, already sounding perkier.

I smiled. "Yes, really. I told you I'd be there, didn't I?"

"Yes, but ... I saw on the news about the fire. I assumed you'd be there."

I thought about telling her there would be no more fires but decided it wasn't the right time. "I was. I left."

"Before it was controlled?"

“Close enough.” I could practically hear Falyn smiling, and warmth ran through my body. I’d won big points for putting her first, even though I thought I always had by working hard and making a good living. She’d clearly needed me to prove it.

“I ... thank you, Taylor. That really ... means a lot.”

I frowned, wondering why she was trying so hard not to love me. The things she’d said while I was being arrested cut me so deep I wasn’t sure I could recover, when just her leaving was agony enough. She could have tied me to the bed and lit the house on fire, and I would have loved her still. I didn’t understand the point of pretending, but maybe she wasn’t. Maybe she didn’t love me anymore. I cleared the emotion from my voice before I spoke. “Are you packing yet?”

“What I can without the kids noticing. I didn’t want to give away the surprise before you got here.”

“Good. I’ll be there soon, ba—Falyn,” I said, correcting myself.

“See you then,” she said. No emotion in her voice, no disdain or sentiment. Nothing.

I wasn’t sure what I would do if we couldn’t work things out. She was it for me. Falyn had been my life since we were practically kids. She was the only life I wanted. When she left, I was miserable, but there was still hope. That hope motivated me. The dashboard lights switched on just after the last bit of daylight slipped behind the mountains. A sign on my right read Welcome to Colorado Springs, and I shifted nervously in my seat. I still held on to the hope that this weekend was going to be our point of turnaround instead of the point of no return.