

Finding Forever
The Fading Series
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Sneak Peek

Pulling up to the loft, I hate that I see Candace's car already here. She's supposed to be at the studio, so the fact that she's home makes my chest ache. I know what I'm about to walk into, and it kills me.

We've been trying to get pregnant for over a year now. Every month seems to be filled with stress and anxiety, wondering if this month will be the month Candace will get pregnant. The doctors say it's not out of the norm for athletes to struggle with this. I've known that she's always had irregular periods, sometimes going a couple months without one. She works her body so hard, has since the day I met her nearly eight years ago when she was still in college.

But it was a couple weeks ago when she finally tested positive. Fuck, her smile was incredible as she leapt into my arms, squealing with joy. I've never felt my heart beat like it did in that moment. And then last week, my heart beat in a completely different way when Candace woke up in the middle of the night bleeding. She curled up in my arms and cried, feeling like she failed, and that somehow she was to blame. We learned the following day that what had happened was a chemical pregnancy—an early miscarriage. Life's cruel joke of finally giving us a baby long enough to get excited and then snatching it away.

When I walk in, I can hear her cries from upstairs. I drop my things and rush up to find her muffling her sobs in her pillow. Without saying a word, I crawl in

behind her and tuck her in my arms. Her tiny body heaves against mine, breaking away pieces of my heart, of what could have been. A baby. Our baby.

I watch her with Jase and Mark's daughter. They adopted Caroline a few months ago from birth. She's only a tiny infant, but she's become everything to us. We were beyond thrilled when they asked us to be her godparents. I've seen how Candace is with my nieces and nephews, but when I saw her holding Caroline, this tiny baby, I knew I wanted to give her that. Give her a baby of our own. I'll never forget coming home that night.

"I still can't believe she is finally sleeping in that thing," I laugh, amazed that Ana is finally in her own bed and not ours.

Candace hops up into bed and teases, "See, aren't you glad we never got rid of her bed?"

"Oh, I still wanna get rid of it. Trust me on that."

Her furrowed brow makes me smile, and she smacks my arm when I can't hide my evil grin. She still gets so worked up whenever I make the slightest jab at our cat. She makes me laugh at her attempted abuse on me, and I snatch her around the waist and playfully toss her onto her back.

"You wanna get feisty?" I goad with a smile, and she puts on her most serious face she can muster up and says, "Are you mocking me, Ryan?"

"Never. I want you to get feisty with me," I tell her, and then go in quickly, before she can respond, and run my tongue up her neck and behind her ear, nipping her lobe between my teeth.

Her hands weave into my hair, before she fists it, moving me to her lips, which I take with mine. Her soft moans drive me to sink my tongue in her mouth, needing to taste what's mine. She's amazing, wrapping her legs around me, locking me close to her.

Candace used to be so timid with sex and understandably so. We married quickly, only dating for a year before she became my wife. The year we dated was such a dark time in our lives. I met her when she was nothing but a broken mess. The first time I ever saw my wife, she was being raped. I hate that I met her like that. Even though we tell people, when they ask, that we met on a rainy Halloween night at the coffee shop she used to work at, we both know it's a lie.

Candace has gone through the depths of hell to get to where she's at now. Every intimate part of our relationship has taken time and an insane amount of patience, but we're now able to give each other every single piece of ourselves. She knows she's okay and safe with me. My tiny fighter. God, I love this woman so much that I want to give her the final piece of me—a baby.

Pulling back from her lips, I look down at her soft face, cheeks flushed pink, whispering, "Do you have any clue how beautiful you are?" She runs her hand along my jaw, and I tell her, "I love watching you when you're with Caroline."

"She's so perfect."

Dropping my lips to hers, I say, "I want to give you that."

As soon as the words are out, I get nervous. Dancing is her life and maintaining her body is imperative. I knew from the get-go that it would be just the two of us for a

long time while she moved up the ranks in the company she dances with. But she's now thirty and I'm thirty-six, the only ones without kids in our group of friends.

As soon as I start doubting her response, she surprises me with a smile.

"Really?"

I give her a nod, saying, "Really. But, if you want to wait longer, I'm okay with that. I just needed you to know that I'm ready when you are."

Her eyebrows cinch up, and I see her eyes rim with tears. Candace has always been an emotional girl with me. She's so soft, and I love that about her.

"Talk to me, babe."

"I'm glad you said that, because I've been thinking about it lately."

"And?"

"I'm ready."

With a heavy sigh, I drop my forehead to hers, and she lifts her chin, sealing her lips with mine. I swear, I'm going to enjoy every single second it takes to get my girl pregnant.

"I'll stop taking my pills tomorrow," she breathes between our kisses before I start peeling her clothes off, tossing them aside to get her naked beneath me.

"I don't know what to do anymore," she cries, pulling me from my thoughts.

"We don't have to make any decisions right now, babe."

"Do we try?" she asks, referring to what the doctor had told us, that after a chemical pregnancy, Candace should be at her most fertile state. She told us, that if we were up to it, we should give it a go, but seeing how upset Candace is, I just don't know.

Tugging on her hip, I move to roll Candace over to face me. Her face is splotchy and her eyes are thick with tears and bloodshot. She looks so tired as I run my hand down her cheek.

“Baby, if you’re not ready, then we wait. I have all the time in world.”

“What if I can’t ever give you a baby?”

“Don’t put this on you. This is us, not you,” I tell her adamantly. “But I believe we will.”

“How? How can you believe that when we’ve been trying so long?”

“Because I saw her.”

“Who?”

Threading my hand through her thick hair, I rest my forehead against hers and close my eyes when I tell her, “Our daughter.”

Candace grabs ahold of my wrist as her cries pick up, but I continue anyway, explaining, “I had a dream. You were there. We were in the kitchen making breakfast, but there were three plates. I was watching you cut an apple and divide the slices between the plates, and then you hollered a girl’s name. When I looked up, I saw her. She looked just like you and I knew she was ours.”

“When did you have this dream?” she asks through her tears.

“A few weeks ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Running my thumbs under her eyes, I tell her, “Because I didn’t want to put any unneeded stress on you.”

She tucks her head under my chin and remains quiet for a moment before asking, "What did I holler?"

"Hmm?"

"You said I called out for her. What name did I say?"

"Annabelle. You called her Annabelle."

Candace's arms band tighter around me when I tell her this, and I strengthen my hold on her as well.

"It's a beautiful name," she murmurs.

"Can I show you something?"

"What?"

She pulls back and I look into her eyes. She's so beautiful, even in this moment, she's simply stunning to me.

"You're Valentine's gift," I tell her.

She nods, and I roll over to open the drawer on my nightstand. Pulling out the small white box, I turn back to her and lay it on the bed between us. She stares at it for a moment before sitting up and crossing her legs in front of her. Candace used to hate getting gifts, but through the years, she's learned to enjoy them, so when she picks up the box, I move to sit in front of her.

Candace removes the lid and the puzzled look on her face makes me laugh.

She darts her eyes to me, and with confusion written all over her face, she says, "I don't get it. I feel like I should since you're laughing."

“I’m laughing because you’re adorable,” I respond as I pick up the tiny bell charm from inside the box. “This is our hope,” I tell her as I hold it up. “Take off your necklace.”

Candace unclasps the necklace I gave her when we first started dating. She still wears it everyday after all this time. When she hands it over, I slip the bell charm onto the silver chain.

“Our Annabelle,” I say as I take the necklace and fasten it back around her neck. “But I’m going to call her Bell.”

-To Be Continued-