

THE LONG ROAD HOME

Home
COMING

CAT JOHNSON
NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

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Navy SEAL Quinn Baldwin takes the long road home to visit his family, but instead finds TikTok sensation Bailey Knowles taking refuge in his childhood home. She needs protection. He's got time on his hands. It's a win-win until the internet and Bailey's fans declare him her new boyfriend.

Now Quinn has to deal with an über famous client to protect, the relentless paparazzi, her adoring fans and equally passionate haters who've 'shipped' them into being a couple, his sister who embraces the idea, plus whoever broke into Bailey's apartment.

His leave from the Navy is going to be anything but boring.

Home Coming is a steamy, bodyguard protector romance featuring a military hero trying to keep his hands off his little sister's best friend and an internet star with imposter syndrome trying to navigate newfound fame and what she thinks is unrequited love.

CHAPTER ONE

The cell phone rang at exactly zero-six-hundred, on the dot.

Quinn knew who it was even before looking at the caller ID on the screen.

Once he did look the name displayed only confirmed his suspicions. His mother in New York always waited until exactly nine a.m. her time to call him.

Luckily, for both of them, he'd already gotten in his morning run and had showered and dressed for the day. He had a few minutes to spare and talk.

"Good morning," he said as he moved to the window of his barrack's room.

He stared out across the small green rectangle of neatly cropped grass that bordered the vehicle-filled parking lot.

In contrast, the sweeping expanse of cloudless cornflower blue sky stretched out above the horizon—but this was southern California so sunshine and blue skies were nothing new.

"Quinn?" There was an inflection of surprise in his mother's tone.

Wondering why, he said, "Yes, Mom."

"I wasn't expecting to hear your voice."

He let out a short laugh. "Mom, you called my phone. Who else's voice would you hear?"

“I meant you never answer my calls. At least not live and in person. When AI takes over the world, I’m ready. I already have a very close personal relationship with your voicemail, whom I’ve spoken to more than I have you since you moved out there.”

He hung his head.

Over a decade later and his mother was still throwing it in his face that he’d moved to the other side of the country and away from her.

He drew in a breath before changing the subject. “So how are you? How’s Dad?”

“We’re fine. Your sister, however, is another matter.”

He closed his eyes and took another bracing breath. His mother might be mad at him for joining the Navy right out of high school and moving across the country, but his little sister Josie was the true Baldwin family problem child.

“What is it now?” he asked.

“It’s too much to get into on the phone since I know you can’t talk and we have limited time, so—”

“I never said that,” he interrupted while stifling a sigh.

She continued as if he hadn’t spoken, “—let me get right to the point. They mailed the invitation for your high school reunion here to the house.”

He did the math and frowned. “My *thirteen*-year high school reunion?”

“Apparently it’s for everyone. All the graduating classes together. Your sister’s year. Yours. Every alum since the school opened back in the sixties. Your sister’s very excited about it.”

Why? He had an image of the youngest, most recent graduates all taking selfies while the geriatric crowd sat and plugged their ears, scowling because the music was too loud.

“Sounds great,” he said with enough sarcasm that even his mother should pick up on it.

She didn't. "Do you want me to mail the invitation to you there?"

No, he did not since he wouldn't be there to receive it. He didn't mention that but did ask, "When is the date of this thing?"

With any luck it was while he'd still be out of the country.

"November something," she answered.

Over six months away. *Crap.*

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, the team would be back in Coronado in time for him to attend. And, given the fact they'd just have returned from a six-month deployment and at that point he wouldn't have taken leave for a year he'd be due.

Command would grant his request. He'd be able to fly home for a visit, which meant he'd also have to attend this thing he didn't want to go to while there.

He'd have no good excuse not to.

But if he knew one thing from being in the military for all of his adult life it was that no date was ever set in stone. There was a good chance his plans would change and he wouldn't get home in time to attend.

He could only hope...

"Speaking of dates..." his mother continued. "Would you be bringing one home with you for the reunion?"

"Real subtle, Mom. And no, I'm not dating anyone."

"Just asking. You're not getting any younger."

He shook his head but decided now was not the time to explain one more time that dating for a Navy SEAL, for him at least, could be more trouble than it was worth.

For now, he'd make his mother happy and pretend he might attend this thing.

"So back to this reunion... Don't mail the invitation. Can you just take a picture of it and text that to me?" He hesitated.

“Do you know how to do that?”

“Quinn Allen Baldwin. I’m turning fifty, not one-hundred. Yes, I know how to text photos. Jeez.”

Even at thirty-one he still felt like a child when his mother pulled out his middle name and that tone of voice. “Sorry. I wasn’t sure.”

He didn’t mention he’d spent a good hour doing long distance tech support over video chat from Djibouti after she’d somehow enabled the audio-description feature on the television and couldn’t turn it off.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“I suppose you have to run off so no. Nothing important.”

His mother had passive-aggressive down to a science. He almost denied having to *run off* as she’d put it but actually he did have somewhere he needed to be like now.

He couldn’t tell her the rest of his team would already be in the cages doing one final check that their kits were packed correctly for their upcoming deployment.

That was something he needed to do too prior to the zero-seven-thirty team meeting, the last one on base before they rallied for the transport later today.

She knew he was deploying soon but not that they were going wheels-up tonight. Exact timing and locations of troop movements were something he couldn’t discuss with his mother across the country over a non-secure line.

With his hands tied by Op Sec—or perhaps more accurately it was his tongue that was tied—he stifled a sigh. “All right. I’ll call you soon.”

“Oh? Okay. We’ll see.” The sarcasm shaded with doubt had him sighing.

“Love you, Mom,” he said loud and with finality before she returned the sentiment and he disconnected the call.

He did love her and his dad and his annoying little sister Josie. That didn’t mean he relished the idea of rushing home to

New York immediately after his boots hit the tarmac in Coronado after being away for six months just to go to his bullshit thirteen-year high school reunion.

Spending long overdue time with family was one thing. It was quite another thing to have to endure a night of awkward conversation and fake smiles with classmates he hadn't seen in years.

Worse, all of these forced social niceties would have to be executed amid a mixed crowd of other random alumni, both very young and very old, ninety-percent of whom he wouldn't even know.

What genius had thought that was a good idea?

It was going to suck.

In a town as small as his hometown, everyone within his mother's orbit, even peripherally, knew what he did for a living. He'd be bombarded with questions ranging from the inappropriate to the ridiculous.

How many confirmed kills do you have? What's your longest shot? Is being a SEAL really like on television? Are you on SEAL Team Six?

As if Team Seven wasn't good enough?

He hated all that shit. The dread he felt just thinking about it had him reaching for the bottle of Roloids on the nightstand, which he realized he'd better shove into his duffel for the transport.

But what he really hated—what was likely the underlying reason for his needing to stock up on antacids—was the battle that continuously raged within him just below the surface. A war between what he owed his family versus the responsibilities of his military career.

Somewhere lost in the middle was what he owed to himself. Some semblance of a personal life. Friends who weren't part of his team. Maybe a wife and kids of his own.

He'd get around to all that...one day.

That day was not today.

CHAPTER TWO

“Come with me as I get ready for my big date...” Bailey Knowles smiled at the camera.

Her cell phone was currently attached to the clip on the ring light, angled so it would show her move to the teeny tiny closet in her bedroom. Given city apartments, she was happy to have any closet at all.

She flipped quickly through about a dozen hangers, each filled with designer clothing, all of which she’d been given for free as part of her endorsement deals.

She wasn’t really looking to choose an outfit. She knew exactly what she had to wear. It was the dress that the national retail chain had shipped to her. The one she’d contractually agreed to wear in exchange for the ten-thousand dollars they’d deposited into her account.

Pulling the November-appropriate wool dress out, she spun to face the camera, held it up against herself and said, “Perfect.”

A click of the tiny remote control hidden in her hand and she ended the recording.

Dropping the fake smile, she tossed the outfit onto a nearby chair to be donned later and popped her cell out of its holder.

She typed out the appropriate hashtags, added a catchy caption and then tapped the screen to post the short video to her account.

That done she moved back to the ring light. A few quick adjustments and she had the light and the cell phone set up to capture her, close-up, at her dressing table.

With the clothing endorsement complete she could move on to pimping the makeup line for which she was a brand ambassador.

The job of an influencer was never done...

She hit the button to go live on her TikTok account.

“I’m Bailey Knowles and it’s time for Makeup with Bailey!” she said with exuberance. “Today, I’m going to show you how I take my natural daytime look and kick it up a notch for a night out on the town with my man. I’m going to do that by playing up my eyes and lips. And I can’t wait to show you the new lipstick I discovered...”

The lipstick she’d been well-paid to apply and mention during her next five make-up focused live broadcasts.

She stared into the mirror, but because of how she positioned the cell phone, it appeared to her viewers as if she looked at them as she talked directly to them like a friend. “What I like about this lipstick, besides the fact it’s organic and made by a small woman-owned BIPOC company, is the color selection they offer—”

Motion caught her attention, momentarily drawing her focus away from the two hundred viewers—and growing—who’d already joined the live broadcast in the past minute.

“Um, the selection of colors ranges from light to dark and all the shades in between. I chose for tonight a—”

This time what she saw in the mirror wasn’t just a flash of motion she could write off to her imagination. It was definitely a person.

A scream tore from her throat as she spun to face the black clad, masked intruder.

Man. Woman. She couldn’t tell and it didn’t matter. Someone was in her apartment. With her. While she was alone and defenseless.

Flight versus fight wasn't even a choice. She had nothing with which to defend herself unless she wanted to pelt the intruder with tubes of lipstick.

Still screaming, she grabbed her cell phone from where it leaned against her mirror and ran.

In her tiny yet costly city apartment there wasn't much choice of where to run. The person was between her and the door so she went the other direction, to the bathroom where she slammed the door and flipped the lock.

She leaned back against the door, bracing with her legs to keep him, or her, from kicking it in.

Then her mind flashed to all the other things the intruder could do. Shoot through the door, even though she hadn't noticed a gun.

Chop through it with an ax—yes, she'd seen that old Jack Nicholson movie and that scenario had been horrifying enough then when it hadn't been happening to her for real.

She needed to get away from the door and hope the lock held. And she needed to call for help. Thank God she'd had the sense to grab her phone.

Backing up until her back was pressed against the sink vanity on the wall farthest from the door, she glanced down at the cell gripped in her hand and realized she'd been live on TikTok the entire time.

Thousands of reactions and comments streamed by. For once in her career she didn't need or want the outpouring of viewer engagement. She needed real life help, not virtual. Her viewers didn't know her address. They couldn't send help or call the police.

Hands shaking, she managed to tap the screen to end the live but before she could navigate to dial 9-1-1, a call came through to the cell.

The name *Alexander Barrington* appeared on the display and she almost dropped the phone trying to answer with her trembling fingers. Hell, her whole body was vibrating but she somehow managed to connect to the video call.

“Xander,” she wheezed, breathless.

“Bailey. Are you all right? My assistant just called me and said you were being attacked.” Xander, managing partner of the Paragon Agency, was Bailey’s entertainment lawyer slash manager slash agent.

Right now, when she was too scared to even manage to dial 9-1-1, the older man was also her savior.

“Oh my God. Xander, they’re in my apartment.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. They wore a mask. They were right behind me in my *bedroom*.” The harrowing tale felt even more horrifying as she voiced what had happened—what was still happening—aloud.

Xander turned to someone standing nearby but out of the frame.

“Call 9-1-1.” When he focused back on her he asked, “Where are you now? Are you safe?”

“I’m locked in my bathroom,” she whispered.

Xander relayed her apartment’s address to the unseen person then his gaze met hers through the cell. “The police are on their way. Are they still in the apartment?”

“I don’t know. Don’t hang up, please,” she begged.

“I won’t. I’m on my way there now and I’ll stay on the line with you the entire time. I promise.”

“But I’m in Brooklyn. You’re in Manhattan.” She’d be dead by the time he made it to her.

“Believe it or not, I just happen to be in Brooklyn.” He smiled. Apparently the man could maintain his cool and remain calm both in negotiations and life threatening emergencies. “Help is on the way. Stay there with the door locked.”

“I will.” She didn’t see that she had any other choice.

The longest ten minutes of her life passed by until finally, Xander said, “Bailey, I’m here. So are the police. Can you open the door and let us in?”

Xander and the police had arrived at the same time? In her opinion, that said a lot for the response time of her manager but not so much for that of the Brooklyn PD.

“I’m afraid,” she said, her voice shaking.

She hadn’t heard any noise, any indication the person was still there waiting for her, but she still couldn’t bring herself to unlock the door and give up her only line of defense.

What if they were still there silently lying in wait to attack the moment she opened the bathroom door? By the time the police got inside, she’d be a goner.

“I know you’re scared, but we’re right here. I promise you, we’ll break down this door to get to you if anything happens. Okay?”

“Okay.” Tears welled in her eyes as she reached for the knob. Opening the door slowly she got her first look at the destruction. “Oh my God.”

“What’s wrong?”

“They trashed the place,” she told Xander, striding toward the apartment’s door to the hallway. Pissed now, she yanked it open and lowered the phone as she came face-to-face with Xander and two uniformed officers.

Xander Barrington was at least ten years older than she was. Always impeccably dressed in a suit, and almost always at the office except when he was out entertaining clients, he was the adult in her life while she still felt like she was a kid playing at being one.

That was just one of a dozen reasons their relationship was strictly professional and always would be.

He was like the father she wished she’d had—although she was always careful to never say that to him. She had a feeling the man had a vain streak that might not appreciate the

comparison. But right now, a father to protect her was exactly what she needed.

Xander strode inside her apartment. A man on a mission in a suit that fit like it had been made for him and had probably cost more than her rent.

He stopped in front of her and asked, “You all right?”

When the tears started to flow, she shook her head.

He mumbled a cuss and wrapped an arm around her shoulders a bit awkwardly before pulling his arm back.

That was for the best. His being nice was just making her cry harder, when she wanted to be pissed off.

“Who would do this? Why? And how did they even get in?” She narrowly avoided stamping her foot in anger and frustration as she demanded answers he didn’t have.

“Was this deadbolt engaged?” cop number one asked, stepping up to stand next to Xander after examining the door frame.

He was older and kind of thick in the middle. Stout was an accurate description for him, especially when compared to Xander standing so tall and fit next to him.

She cringed at the question about the deadbolt. “Sometimes I forget to bolt it during the day. But I always do before I go to bed at night.”

“The window to the fire escape is wide open,” cop number two said.

The younger of the two was built like a male stripper, if the thick muscles straining the sleeves of his uniform were any indication.

He came toward them from the other side of the apartment. “Looks like the lock’s been broken for a while. That could have served as both an entry and an exit.”

Xander let out a breath. “Jesus, Bailey. I know exactly how much money you make. You can afford a better apartment than this. A safer one in a building with security. One that doesn’t

have a damn ladder that goes directly from the street to your unlocked window that anyone can climb through. And how many times have I told you that you need a damn bodyguard?”

“I don’t need or want a bodyguard,” she said in a tone that sounded suspiciously like a whine.

He lifted one dark brow. “I honestly don’t care what you want. I’m hiring you one.”

“Xander—”

“Bailey,” he echoed as he typed something into his cell phone.

Probably orders for his assistant to immediately hire the bodyguard she didn’t want and didn’t want to have to pay for.

He raised his gaze to her after sending the text. “Get used to it because it’s happening.”

She sighed. Xander didn’t understand.

He’d grown up with money. She could tell. While she’d grown up with a single mother who didn’t even get child support.

To Bailey, even now, every expenditure was a decision. Anything that wasn’t a necessity was a luxury. On paper, maybe she could afford a more expensive place. Maybe. Given New York City rents she wasn’t so sure.

A bigger apartment with better security came with a disproportionately bigger rent. And yes, she was making money now. A lot of money, but logic and spreadsheets didn’t take into account the deep-seated fear that resided inside her and likely always would. That she couldn’t spend all the money she made.

She had to stash it away for the day when all of this—the sponsor contracts, the free stuff, the followers and the fame—all went away. Because she wasn’t delusional enough to believe this windfall would last forever.

Good things didn’t happen to Jane Bailey Knowles. At least not for long.

One day the universe would realize that.

Realize she was a size sixteen college drop-out making obscene amounts of money for doing nothing more than putting on pretty clothes and make-up on social media platforms that could lose popularity and go the way of MySpace any day.

And when this surreal castle in the clouds she'd built came crashing down, she intended to have an investment portfolio strong enough she'd survive the fall.

With Xander doing things like hiring bodyguards and demanding she move to an expensive apartment, her imposter syndrome and fear kicked in doubly hard.

The tears threatened again. She felt them burning behind her eyes as she said, "Please don't yell at me."

Mouth pressed tight, Xander drew in a breath through his nose. "I'm sorry. I'm not yelling. I'm concerned. You can't sleep here tonight. Hell, you shouldn't sleep here ever again. I think we should move you out ASAP."

She could agree with half of that statement. There was no way she would be able to sleep in this apartment tonight.

Tomorrow, maybe she could hire someone to fix the lock on the window that accessed the fire escape. She couldn't count on the landlord to do any repairs in a timely manner.

With a working lock on the window, she'd feel slightly better. Although that wouldn't stop someone from just breaking the glass.

Xander was right. In hindsight, that fire escape made access to her home scary-easy. Maybe she could get bars installed on the window. Or an alarm—

"Pack a bag," Xander ordered, which seemed to be his normal way of speaking to people—in commands he was used to them following.

She leveled a glare at him. "Yes, sir."

He cocked up one dark brow but ignored her attitude. "Do you have someplace to stay tonight?"

“I can go to Axel’s.”

They had plans for tonight anyway. They were going out to celebrate the six month anniversary of their first date.

She’d just go over early and finish getting ready for tonight there. She probably would have ended up spending the night there anyway. He hated her place.

His apartment was, admittedly, much nicer.

It must be nice to have a record contract with a big advance to spend rather than having to hope and pray the next sponsor contract would come through like she had to.

Looking at least satisfied temporarily with that plan, Xander nodded. “All right. I’ve got the company car and driver waiting downstairs. As soon as you’re done grabbing what you need for the night I’ll drive you over there.”

“Thanks, Dad.” With that plan, she felt lighter and gave in to the impulse to tease him.

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not *quite* old enough to be your dad.”

“No, but you’ve got the tone down perfectly anyway.”

She actually found she could smile, until she turned and saw the mess the intruder had made of her apartment. Then there was no more smiling. Only fear.

He was right. She had to move. The question was, where? And how much was it going to cost her?

CHAPTER THREE

San Diego to Atlanta to Albany.

It was a simple enough trip. Long, but easy given he was flying commercial and no one was going to be shooting at him at any point during the trip.

So far the journey had actually been enjoyable since Quinn had been on the flight from California to Atlanta with one of his teammates—Georgia-native Rich aka *Richie-Rich*.

“November in New York. Ya’ll got snow on the ground there already?” Rich asked as they exited the plane together.

The born and bred southerner was obsessed with the white stuff that had been the bane of Quinn’s existence growing up.

Anyone who had to shovel after every storm, even if it meant a snow day and no school, had a love-hate relationship with snow.

Quinn let out a laugh as he caught sight of the flight board and veered in that direction. “I hope not.”

Stopping in front of it he scanned for his flight number... and caught sight of that dreaded word. DELAYED. The only word worse was CANCELLED. There were a couple of those on the board too.

“What the fuck,” he groaned as he realized there was no guarantee his flight wouldn’t go from delayed to canceled too.

His mumbled cuss had Rich saying, “Don’t like the sound of that. What’s up?”

“There’s a delay.”

More than a delay. Most of the board showed delayed or cancelled flights.

“What the hell is going on?” Quinn asked, not really expecting Rich to have an answer.

What had happened while he’d been in the air crossing the country?

His friend elbowed him in the side and said, “I might have a good guess. Take a look at the TV.”

Another *Whisky Tango Foxtrot* escaped his lips as he turned and glanced at the television mounted high on the wall.

Wind was blowing snow sideways. Then the shot switched to people shoveling out buried cars and a headline that read, *Massive storm wreaks havoc on travel.*

No wonder flights were fucked.

“How long’s your delay for?” Rich asked.

“Five hours.”

“Just come home with me. I’ll run you back here later.”

He almost agreed, but shook his head. “Thanks. Really. But I’ll just hang here and wait it out.”

“You wanna hang here for seven hours when you could be kicking back having a beer and a decent meal with me?” Rich’s dark brows rose.

“Five hours,” Quinn corrected.

“Look again.” Rich tipped his chin toward the board.

Quinn followed the motion and let out a frustrated breath when he saw the new departure time, which had somehow changed since he’d glanced at it a minute ago.

If he left with Rich now, he’d get more than just a decent meal. It would be amazing. Rich’s family owned an award-winning soul food restaurant in Buckhead.

The offer was very tempting but ridiculous. Traffic in and around Atlanta meant they’d spend a good portion of that

down time on the road on a good day. Add in the complication of what looked like sleet that had just begun to fall and the roads would be worse than usual.

The South couldn't handle any type of weather like this. He'd be taking his life in his hands...if they didn't close the road completely because of the freezing rain.

He couldn't do that to his teammate. They'd spent enough time on transports this week.

Quinn's journey might not be over quite yet, but Rich's could be.

Besides, the one predictable thing about commercial airlines was their unpredictability.

Quinn's flight had been delayed out of Albany on his last visit home a year ago—and boy did the knowledge that it had been an entire year carry a heavy amount of guilt with it. But first the delay had been for forty minutes, then for four hours, only to be bumped back again.

They ended up taking off with just an hour and a half delay from the originally scheduled time. If he'd left the airport then he would have been screwed and missed his flight back to base.

Quinn slapped his teammate on the back. "Thank you for the offer, but I'll be fine chilling in the USO."

"Good God Almighty, you New York folks are stubborn."

Quinn's lips twitched. "You're not wrong. You go home and enjoy that beer and good home cooking with your family. I'll see you back in Cali at the end of the month."

"All right. But you need me to come back and get you, I'm just a text away."

"I know you are."

One backslapping hug later and Quinn was alone again. Or as alone as a man could be in the busiest airport in the world. But after being with the team twenty-four/seven for six months, Quinn did have to consciously shake off the

uncomfortable sensation of being suddenly on his own without a team at his back.

He'd wish he was alone soon enough once he got back to New York and had to share a bathroom with his twenty-seven year old sister again. Just like they had while growing up.

And if she thought they weren't going to have a discussion about how she'd moved back home with Mom and Dad during the pandemic but then just never left, she was mistaken.

After one more look at the big flight board to confirm his flight's status and time hadn't changed yet again, Quinn headed in the direction of the USO.

If past experience served, the area—restricted to military personnel and their families only—would be a bubble of calm amid the airport chaos. A place where he could sit and relax. Maybe even take a nap...

When he reached the glass enclosed facility one glance inside told him he'd also have to wait on line to check in. He stopped when he saw a queue formed at the check-in desk.

Apparently his wasn't the only flight delayed.

Stepping to the side, he figured he might as well take the time to call home while he waited for the line to go down. That's when his own reflection in the glass caught his attention.

It was like a stranger looked back at him. Or maybe a ghost of the past. Clean shaven for the first time in about a year, the man reflected back at him appeared five—maybe ten years younger than the man he'd seen in the mirror when he'd finally gotten back to the barracks after the long trip home from deployment.

The differences and the divide between two parts of his life—home and family, military and career—were displayed right there on his face.

But he wasn't going to reconcile his feelings about that standing there in the airport.

He needed to pocket this moral dilemma or psychological break or whatever the hell was happening to him for later. Right now, he needed to call home. Let his Mom know he was on his way. Or at least trying to get there.

The first indication something was up at his parents' house was that his mother didn't answer the phone by the second ring, which she always seemed to manage to do.

The next was hearing his sister's voice saying *hello* after the fifth ring.

"Josie? What are you doing answering the phone? Where's Mom?"

"Nice to talk to you too, big brother."

He could almost hear the eye roll he was sure she'd delivered with that sarcasm laden statement.

"Sorry. But I know your feelings about getting phone calls. And your feelings on Mom and Dad's quote-unquote *ancient* landline in particular."

It was texts or nothing when it came to communication with his sister. He could leave a voicemail for her but she'd never listen to it. Whether that was her form of protest or just sheer laziness, he wasn't sure. Probably a combination of both.

"I figured I'd better answer in case it was Mom and Dad calling."

"Why would Mom and Dad be calling? Where are they?" He frowned.

It wasn't Thursday morning, when his parents went grocery shopping together. It wasn't Saturday night when they sometimes went out to dinner with friends.

"Right about now I guess they should be boarding the boat."

Boat? What the hell?

"Uh, what ship is this?"

A feeling of dread began to settle in his chest. That was followed closely by the knowledge that he was a damn fool.

Surprises were never a good idea. Not surprise parties. Definitely not surprise month-long visits that required official leave and a flight across the country.

He tried not to panic. Maybe it was like a dinner cruise. Or a sightseeing cruise up the Hudson or something. That was something his mother would be all over.

“Dad surprised Mom with this ten-day paddleboat cruise down the Mississippi as an early fiftieth birthday present. They’re taking their time driving there and back so they plan to be gone for two weeks.”

Two weeks. *Fuck.*

“And she didn’t tell me?” he asked.

“First of all, she didn’t know. Duh. You do know what the word *surprise* means, right?”

“It couldn’t have been a total surprise—”

“It totally was. I didn’t even know. Dad like packed a suitcase for her and everything. Then this morning, he put her in the car and they took off for St. Louis. It was kind of hectic and she knows you’re still deployed so—”

“I’m not.”

“Huh?”

“We got home—” He stopped himself since what was home to him and what was home to his sister were too different things. “Back to Coronado a couple of days ago.”

He’d immediately applied for and been granted a month long leave so he could spend Thanksgiving and his mother’s birthday in New York.

He’d even managed to get a last minute flight for a decent price.

What he hadn’t done was call home to tell them he’d be visiting because—again—it was to be a surprise.

He was starting to hate that word.

“What’s the big deal anyway?” she asked just as an announcement went out over the airport’s speakers. “What’s all that noise? Where are you?”

“Atlanta Airport waiting for a flight to Albany,” he revealed.

“Oh, shit,” Josie breathed out.

Oh, shit was right. For once his sister was one-hundred percent correct. This whole idea was a waste—of his accrued leave, of money and of time.

“Mom’s going to be so pissed.”

“No. Josie. Do not say a word. You can’t tell them. They’ll both be so upset they won’t enjoy their trip. Okay?”

“Fine. I won’t say anything.”

Trusting his sister took possibly more faith than Quinn had but at this point he didn’t feel like he had a choice.

“Do you, uh, need a ride?” she asked with such a lack of enthusiasm he knew there was no way she really wanted to drive an hour and a half to the airport to pick him up.

“No. It’s fine. I booked a rental car so I could get around without borrowing a car while I’m home.”

“So I guess I’ll see you soon then.”

Not that soon, but the flight delay seemed like the least of his problems right now.

“I’ve got a delay so I don’t know what time I’ll finally land. I’ll text you when I know.”

“Sounds good.” Josie disconnected and Quinn let out a huge sigh.

“Problem?”

He glanced up and saw a woman had approached him. By the official USO lanyard around her neck that displayed her name as *Blessing* he could tell she was a volunteer.

His knee-jerk reaction was to say everything was fine, smile and wish her a nice day before heading inside. But

something—he didn't know what—propelled him to say, “It seems I'm the one surprised by my surprise trip home to see my parents. I just found out they're away on a two week cruise.”

“Ah. I see.” She tipped her head to one side and seemed to look right into him as she smiled. “But it's not a waste of a trip.”

He frowned at her repeating aloud almost the exact thoughts in his head.

“It's good you're going home. There's someone there who needs you.”

His brow furrowed deeper as the truth of what she said hit home.

His sister—the problem child—was there and alone. He could use some time with her. Maybe get her straightened out. And who knew what trouble she could get into there all by herself.

But how had this woman guessed he was needed at home?

He decided it was a lucky guess, compounded by the facts that she was obviously a people person and he was shit at keeping what he was thinking from showing on his face when not on a mission. And this situation—his parents, his sister, his flight—was stressing him the fuck out.

Give him a weapon and a clear target and he was fine. But throw a family problem at him and he felt like he was spiraling.

He had no plans of discussing any of that with this stranger. No matter how kind she was trying to be.

“You're right. It'll be good to be home,” he said, hoping to end further conversation that would delve into his personal life with this oddly intrusive woman.

Although, she seemed truly kind. Her smile looked warm and genuine, unlike his forced one.

“You don't believe that yet, but you will. Now come. I've got the perfect place for you to wait in the library—that's were

the comfy seats are.”

She led him to the doorway then paused and turned back to him.

“There are a few already seated there. Alex and Ian, both fresh out of the Army, and Danny. He was in the Navy, just like you. I’ll introduce you. I expect one more any moment now. I’ll walk you two back together. All of their flights were affected by the weather, just like yours.”

“Uh. Okay. Thanks.”

Had he mentioned his flight had been delayed? Or that he was in the Navy?

He didn’t think so. But just as he considered asking how she’d known, the woman’s eyes lit as she stared over his shoulder.

“Ah, here he is now. Welcome. If you’ll follow me, I’ll get you two signed in and show you to your seats. I know you’ll all have lots to talk about.”

The new arrival’s gaze shifted from Blessing to Quinn, a frown creasing his forehead as she moved toward the check-in desk.

“Did I miss something?” the new arrival asked.

“Easier to just smile and go with it, man,” Quinn said quietly with the slightest shake of his head.

The man’s brows rose but he tipped his head in agreement. “Gotcha.” He extended one hand. “Roan Thatcher.”

“Quinn Baldwin.” Quinn shook Roan’s hand quickly before they both turned to—for better or worse—check-in with Blessing.

It was going to be an interesting wait here at the USO, but apparently he wasn’t going to be in it alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Slashed in the backseat of Xander's company car, while his fingers flew over his phone, Bailey picked up her own cell and typed in a text to Axel.

Can you talk?

It took forever for him to get back to her. That was nothing new but today, after what had happened, she really needed her boyfriend.

Finally, the cell vibrated in her hand with a text alert.

AXEL

Sorry. In a session. Later?

She'd stopped physically shaking but she was still shaken and she really needed to talk to her boyfriend. Hugging him would be even better. But she knew that his sessions with the band could last for hours and he'd be pissed if she asked him to make the other guys wait while he talked to his girlfriend on the phone.

They'd already reached his street so asking him if she could come over was moot at this point. She was already here. But she should probably at least ask about tonight.

Okay. Can I stay over your place tonight?

Sure. Gotta go.

She'd been dismissed.

That was okay. She had his spare key. She'd just let herself in.

She was supposed to meet him at his apartment before heading out tonight anyway so she knew he'd be home right after his practice or whatever happened at these mysterious and oh so frequent *sessions*.

The car came to a stop and she knew even without peering past Xander that they'd be in front of Axel's building.

Axel lived in Williamsburg, currently the hottest, hippest neighborhood in Brooklyn. Unlike Bailey who lived in the non-trendy part of the borough. But at least it was fairly close and convenient.

Extra convenient when he'd been away meeting with his record label and she'd offered to feed his fish, which is why she had a key to his place.

His tank of piranha had freaked her out at first but she'd gotten used to them. Even started to see the toothy creatures as kind of cute and misunderstood.

The driver opened her door, which was when Xander finally looked up from his cell. "You going to be okay?"

"Yes."

He eyed her then finally nodded. "Okay. We'll talk tomorrow. I'll interview bodyguards if you don't—"

"I'll interview my own bodyguards, thank you. I'm the one who's going to have to be with him or her."

He cocked up one dark brow skeptically. "Will you actually do it?"

"Yes." *Eventually.*

"Okay. I'm trusting you and I will be checking in."

"Yes, Dad." She lobbed that shot over her shoulder as she stepped out of the car.

With an indulgent shake of his head, he said, “Goodbye, Bailey.”

The driver took her large roller bag and the smaller carry-on out of the trunk and placed them on the sidewalk. “Can I help you upstairs, miss?”

“No, thank you. I got it.”

With a nod he returned to the car and Bailey felt completely alone.

Strange how she so often felt alone in one of the busiest cities in the world.

Ridiculous since she was on a sidewalk surrounded by people, next to a street crowded with traffic, in front of her boyfriend’s apartment building where she’d spent the night dozens of times with him.

She shook off the feeling and reached for the strap of the carry-on with one hand and the handle of the roller bag with the other.

Not only was Axel’s neighborhood cool, so was his loft apartment in a renovated industrial building. She took the rattling old metal elevator upstairs and even though it was the opposite of posh—and almost definitely the opposite of where Xander lived in Manhattan—she felt more hip, richer and more successful, just being here.

Maybe Xander was right. She did need a better apartment. It would be great for TikToks too. She could write off at least part of the rent on her income taxes as an office.

She’d look at some listings while she was waiting for Axel to get home.

Upstairs in the hallway outside his door she set the luggage along the wall.

It would take both hands to dig inside her bag—the one Gucci had sent her that wouldn’t even release to the public until next season—to find his key.

Finally, her finger touched upon the guitar-shaped keychain that she’d bought for him to put his spare key on.

He'd rolled his eyes when she'd shown it to him. She thought it was cute. He was probably just playing tough guy and couldn't admit he liked it.

Guys will be guys.

It was the same reason she'd had to buy and bring over toilet paper when he ran out. And milk and coffee. And toothpaste.

The good news was with her here early today if she needed to run down to the store for anything she'd have time before he got home.

With that plan in mind, she swung the door open and paused.

The lights were on inside even though he wasn't home, but he was really bad about not turning them off when he left.

But his keys were also on the table by the door in the catch-all bowl that also contained random guitar picks and batteries for his tuner.

Maybe he'd already gotten home? But she'd literally just gotten that text from him saying he was in a session with the band.

He could have forgotten his keys. He was pretty forgetful. He'd forgotten her birthday earlier that year, until she'd gently reminded him.

In that case, he'd be very happy she was there to let him inside—

A very feminine sounding moan stopped that thought dead.

The male groan that followed was like a knife through her heart.

She didn't need to see it to know what was happening inside Axel's loft bedroom.

Didn't need to see for herself but she climbed the metal spiral stairs anyway.

The rubber-soled ballet flats she'd thrown on with leggings and a sweatshirt for the drive over didn't make any noise on

the stairs.

Axel and the size two blonde he had bent over the mattress as he plowed into her bony ass from behind didn't hear her.

They didn't notice as she pulled the cell phone out of the pocket in her hoodie. Didn't even look up as she hit the button to go live on her TikTok account.

They only turned to look at her after she said aloud, "In case you're wondering, this is why I'm no longer dating Axel Black. See what a piece of shit liar he is? Hey, Axel. Is this what you've been doing every time you told me you were in a *session* with the band?"

He came for her then, latex covered erection bobbing in front of him as he took a step toward her, arm out as if to grab her cell. Or maybe to wrap his hands around her neck. It was a toss up which.

His jeans were down around his ankles. Had he been so anxious to ram into blondie he couldn't be bothered to kick them all the way off his feet?

Whatever the reason, he got tangled in the denim as he tried to come at her.

Axel went down hard, falling face and dick first onto the floor. She heard the crash followed by his scream of pain as she spun and ran down the stairs.

Her only regret was she hadn't gotten the moment he'd realized he'd broken his dick on camera as she ran for her life.

She'd seen him beat a paparazzo with their own camera.

Seen him in more than a few bar fights. Seen him lose his temper at the drop of a hat. She'd never pushed him far enough he'd gotten really angry with her—until today.

She didn't intend to be his next assault victim.

Thank goodness she'd left her luggage outside in the hall. She cleared his apartment door, slamming it behind her and wishing she had a way to barricade it.

Luck was on her side. The elevator was still on his floor. She shoved the cage-like gate to the side, dragged her big wheeled bag inside, closed the gate and punched the button.

She didn't breathe again until she was outside on the sidewalk, in public with witnesses and street cameras in case he did take his anger out on her.

Around the corner she pushed into a coffee shop. She peeked back outside to make sure he hadn't seen her duck into the doorway.

He'd been so mad. She'd seen that expression on his face before but never directed at her.

Scared, she moved farther inside. All the way to an empty table in the back corner.

There she dropped the handle of her suitcase and collapsed into a chair, letting the bag on her shoulder fall to the floor.

Breathing heavily, she kept one eye on the door as fear began to be replaced with anger.

Fucker. How dare he be angry at her? *He* was the one cheating.

Okay, she had gone live—

The live!

She finally took the time to look at the cell clutched in her hand and glanced at the screen. The comments flew past. Dozens. Hundreds. All in support of her. At least the ones she read before she said, "I love you guys. I'm sorry. I'll be back later."

Her voice cracked as she held in tears. For the second time that day she cut her live short, punching the screen to end the broadcast with shaking hands.

Now what? Should she call Xander? He was her entertainment attorney, not her daddy. Or even her friend.

No. She was a twenty-seven year old woman. She could solve this on her own.

But right now she didn't feel like an adult. She felt like a little girl. Without a home. Without even a friend since she'd left upstate New York and everyone she knew behind her to move to the city and try to make it big.

Her cell vibrated and she braced herself for who it might be.

Xander? Had his assistant already called him about the live and he was going to yell at her about her brand and the importance of preserving her reputation?

Or maybe it was Axel, calling to threaten her.

Heart pounding, she lifted the cell and let out a breath of relief when she saw the name on the text.

Josie Baldwin. Her old friend from home. Her best friend all through high school.

The friend she'd been pretty shitty to lately. Ignoring texts. Not returning emails.

But here Josie was, texting her now. Right when she was feeling alone and friendless. Just when she needed her most. And with an offer she couldn't refuse.

JOSIE

Hey! Did you get the invite to the high school reunion this weekend? Are you going? I think it might be cool. Also if you want to stay here at my house you def can. My parents are away. It'll be like old times!

Bailey didn't hesitate. With her hands shaking and tears blurring her vision, she typed in a one word reply.

YES!

For the first time in a long time, she couldn't wait to get back to upstate New York, the one place she never imagined she'd ever rush back to.

CHAPTER FIVE

The drive from Albany to Sidney was actually pretty good... or it would have been if it wasn't overshadowed by the knowledge of how his effort to fit family time into his schedule had failed so spectacularly. How he'd flown across the country to visit parents that weren't even going to be here.

But as far as the actual drive, that was smooth. Fast and easy. A nice change compared to his long ass flight delay in Atlanta. And he'd gotten a free upgrade on the rental car to an awesome SUV with four-wheel drive, which made the hour and a half on the road even sweeter.

The storm that had fucked up flights had hit hardest more north and west.

What snow had fallen in this area had been cleared from the highways leaving just the coating of white on the grass and trees. Enough for atmosphere. Not enough to be a pain in the ass.

Perfect. Snow might be pretty to look at but it was a bitch to clean up and it sucked to drive in.

With no traffic and clear weather, he'd set the cruise control, dialed in the radio and hit the highway. He was standing in the driveway of his parents' house in record time.

While the sun warmed his face, a cold breeze ruffled his hair. He had to admit he loved the crispness of autumn in New York. Fall was the season he missed most after moving to Southern California.

Visiting New York in November meant he was too late to see the leaves change. And apple picking season was long over. But since he'd be out of here before winter officially started he would also—hopefully—miss any major snow. What had fallen was enough for him while he was there. He could go happily back to sunny California having gotten his fill of the white stuff for this year.

It would be nice if he could at least see snow since he'd barely be seeing his parents.

As it was, if Josie was correct—and that was still in question—he'd be leaving just after they'd be getting home from their paddleboat cruise down the Mississippi.

Where the hell did his father come up with that idea for a surprise trip for his mother? Shaking his head, he grabbed his bag out of the back and headed for the house.

He passed his sister's car in the driveway. More accurately, it was his parents' old car that they'd given his sister when they'd gotten a new one.

It served as a physical reminder of why he couldn't be too upset that he was here when his parents weren't—his sister.

What the strange USO lady had said was right. He was needed here, if only to keep an eye on his sister who was twenty-seven going on seventeen. She perpetually avoided growing up and taking on any responsibilities—such as an apartment of her own.

Glancing at the parked car's windshield, he wondered if it was still registered and insured under his father's name.

He growled, getting his frustration out in the driveway before he got inside. It was going to be a long visit if he started fighting with Josie the minute he got inside.

The moment he walked through the door he was surrounded by the sensation of home. Enough so he forgot he'd been annoyed. The warmth and smell of the wood stove burning in the family room. The aroma of something baking in the kitchen—

Wait. Baking? His sister didn't bake and his mother wasn't home.

Had his sister taken up baking like the hoards of people who'd learned to make sourdough bread or whatever during the pandemic?

Possibly.

If it was a fad on TikTok Josie was all over it...for a little while anyway until the next fleeting fancy took hold.

At least baking was one hobby of hers he might actually enjoy before she dropped it and moved on.

As he stood contemplating what exactly he was smelling—cinnamon maybe—a kitchen timer went off.

Perfect timing. With a smile, he dropped his bag right there on the floor where he stood and headed toward the kitchen.

He heard the bathroom door open. Heard the footsteps running toward the kitchen. His sister running to save her creation from burning, no doubt.

Spinning around to mock her new hobby to her face, he turned to see a woman who was most definitely not his sister.

Draped in a towel, she sprinted from the bathroom toward the kitchen.

She looked backward over her shoulder as she called, "I've got it, Josie!"

She glanced forward again and met his gaze with wide-eyed horror as her foot caught on his bag and sent her pitching headfirst with both arms out to break her fall.

Instinct had him taking a step forward to catch her just as the towel she was no longer holding fell. His hesitation about catching her now naked body combined with her momentum took them both down to the floor.

He lay beneath the stranger, horrified. But no more so than she looked, face red as she sprawled on top of him.

This was how they were, staring at each other like two deer in headlights, as Josie stepped into the room to witness

their shared humiliation.

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry,” the mystery woman burst out with as she tried to grab for the towel that was no longer wrapped around her lush body.

Her wiggling around as she lay on top of him did not help the growing situation in his pants.

It had been a long sexless deployment and his body was ready to break the dry spell with this curvy hottie with the wild mop of shoulder-length brown curls.

“It’s fine. Really,” he said, trying to reassure her just as her knee hit his balls while she tried to squirm off him.

He curled up on a groan as he felt the pain shoot from his groin to his gut.

“Oh, no. I’m so sorry.” On her knees, she managed to wrap herself in the towel again but was having trouble standing up without the use of her hands.

He would have helped her except he was still in the fetal position trying to breathe through the pain.

“Welcome home, big brother,” Josie said, amusement in her voice. “I was coming to tell you we had a house guest but it seems I’m a little late.”

“Yes, we’ve met,” he said, getting slowly to his knees where he took a second hunched against the nausea before attempting to get upright.

The mystery hottie had finally gotten herself on her feet and covered, but the red that painted her cheeks remained.

He took a step forward, hand extended. A bit formal considering how they’d met but he really wanted to know her name.

“I’m Quinn,” he said, waiting for her to respond in kind.

Her blush deepened as she took his hand for barely a moment then drew hers back to continue clutching the towel.

Adorable. This trip might not be a waste after all.

Josie snorted. “She knows who you are, dork. It’s Jane. From high school. ”

“What?” He cut his gaze from his sister back to the woman in question and swallowed hard.

This was his sister’s nerdy little friend? The girl who’d spent more of his senior year in this house rather than at her own.

She was the hottie? The woman he’d been imagining fucking since first laying eyes on her? Or more accurately, since lying beneath her.

“I go by my middle name now. Bailey,” she supplied, not meeting his gaze for more than a second at a time.

New name. New adult body. But she was still his little sister’s bestie. And the woman his cock was much too interested in.

And she was staying here?

This was not good.

CHAPTER SIX

*B*ailey's crush on Quinn Baldwin began in ninth grade on the night of her first sleepover at Josie's house.

Quinn was a hot shot senior. First string on the varsity football team. The guy every girl wanted to date and every boy wanted to be friends with.

In contrast, she played flute in the school band, was the last to be chosen for the team of whatever sport they were playing during gym class, and had to suffer through wearing jeans a size too big and rolled up at the ankles because her penny-pinching mother wanted her to have room *to grow into them*.

Sadly, she'd stopped growing vertically when she reached five foot, but had continued to expand horizontally.

Quinn Baldwin was pretty much the opposite of Jane Bailey Knowles in every way. Right down to his name. She knew boys named Quinn didn't even notice girls called Jane. Forget about dating them. Just like she'd been convinced that jocks didn't date band nerds. And seniors didn't date freshmen.

It was a small but comforting list of reasons why Quinn never gave her the time of day. Then that spring Quinn had started dating Cassie Hart—a freshman theater geek proving jocks did date nerds.

Cassie was something else too, besides being the opposite of Quinn on the social ladder and popularity charts of Sidney High. While Bailey had been embracing her mother's theory

that she'd grow out of her *baby fat*, Cassie had hit high school and become a legit anorexic, as in officially diagnosed and in therapy for the condition.

Bailey was shattered. Quinn dating Cassie left only one reason why after all of the time she'd spent in this house Quinn had shown no interest in her whatsoever but had noticed Cassie right away.

It was proof, in her mind that guys like Quinn might date a freshman nerd, but they didn't date chubby girls.

Her heartbreak and disappointment lasted until his graduation. That was when he'd turned down a football scholarship, joined the Navy and moved to California, dumping Cassie before he left.

Since his graduating and leaving town couldn't possibly hurt more than his dating Cassie had, his moving away had been a relief.

No longer would she have to see Quinn pressing Cassie up against the lockers, kissing her in the three minutes between classes until the bell rang and she stumbled late into class with lips swollen and eyes glazed.

And without Quinn in school as a daily distraction and a reminder she wasn't good enough, Bailey thrived during her final three years of high school.

She was still battling her obviously mislabeled *baby fat*, but she became the best player in the band, taking on multiple instruments like she was born playing them.

Her grades put her at the top of all her academic classes, including the advanced placement ones.

Even her social life, both live and on social media, improved. That might have been aided by her finally being old enough to get a good after school job so she could afford to buy her own clothes. Ones that fit.

She graduated high school, dropped the name Jane forever in favor of using her middle name and moved to the city for college—where she failed out the first year.

But she was a survivor. She didn't need a degree to earn a good living. To make a name for herself.

In the past eight years she'd proven that.

But even today, inside her still lived that insecure little girl whose grandmother had said she would have *such a pretty face* if she could just lose that *baby fat*.

Now here she was, back in this town surrounded by those memories.

Her grandmother had passed and her mother had moved to a warmer climate where she spent her days too busy playing cards with her new friends to worry much about her daughter in New York. But all the memories remained.

Just as most of the kids from school had also remained.

She was back to being surrounded by the people who knew her as Jane, the band geek and the klutz who couldn't get to class without tripping on the stairs or her own two feet.

And of course, Quinn was back too to witness her return to geekdom...and the fact she couldn't walk across a room without falling over something.

Humiliation had no expiration date.

"I need to get dressed," she mumbled and pivoted toward Josie's bedroom.

She was almost there when she remembered the oven timer.

She pivoted back. "The cinnamon buns—"

Quinn held up one hand to stop her as she, still embarrassingly in nothing but a towel, took a step toward the kitchen. "No. Go. Get dressed. I'll get them out of the oven."

"Oh. Okay. Thank you. And it's fine if you, you know, wanna eat some. I mean, of course, why wouldn't you? Ha. That's what they're for. Right?" She was babbling. Sounding nothing like the woman who spoke to ten million followers on social media multiple times a day.

Dammit. She'd dated Axel Black—until he'd cheated on her. She'd had her picture on *Page Six*. Her name mentioned in *Rolling Stone*. It was in connection to Axel but still, it was her. Her name. Her picture.

But five minutes with Quinn Baldwin, plus one epic naked fall not just in front of him, but on top of him, had her feeling like an insecure ninth-grader again.

She still hadn't recovered from the embarrassment by the time she came out of Josie's bedroom fully dressed a few minutes later. It was possible she might never recover.

The siblings were in the kitchen. Quinn was drinking a cup of coffee with a crumb-filled plate in front of him.

Josie was sipping on a cup of tea with half a cinnamon-bun on her plate as she frowned at her brother and said, "You *have* to go."

He laughed. "Do I?"

With a huff, Josie looked up at Bailey. "Jane. Tell him!"

Hearing Josie call her by the name she'd abandoned almost ten years ago—the name her mom still called her by on the infrequent times that they talked—was like nails on a chalkboard.

Meanwhile, Quinn pointedly had not looked at her. She'd noticed that specifically. It was hard not to.

"Tell him what?" she asked, heading for the counter.

She eyed the cinnamon rolls sadly. She'd sneak out later and eat one in private, if there were any left. But not now.

Keenly aware of Quinn in the room, she reached instead for the tea kettle, still steaming on the burner.

"That he has to come to the reunion tonight," Josie answered.

Turning with a teabag in her hand, she shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not sure I even want to go."

"See?" Quinn said pointedly to his sister.

His siding with her warmed her insides more than the hot tea she'd just poured would.

Josie spun back to Bailey. "But you *are* still going, right?"

"Yes. I told you I would." A promise was a promise. Even if the event would be painful.

Cradling the mug, Bailey moved to the table. The farther she was from the temptation of the cinnamon buns, the better.

They were her weakness. More, they were her go-to comfort food. And since finding an intruder in her home and her boyfriend's dick inside another woman she needed some comfort.

"So you're not excited about tonight like this one over here?" Quinn being solely focused on her as he hooked a thumb at his sister had her hands trembling.

She was too flustered to say much but she managed, "You have no idea."

He sniffed. "I might."

"Quinn, it's just stupid to not go since you're here for it. You're *never* here," Josie reiterated while glaring at her brother.

Bailey found herself as invested in Quinn going to the dreaded high school reunion as Josie was. Going out to a bar with Quinn, even in a group for something that was by no means even close to a date, was a teenage dream come true.

And there was something to be said for the old adage that misery loved company. It seemed he was as unenthusiastic about going as she was.

Why he was reluctant, she didn't understand.

She knew her own reasons. Her millions of followers and five-figure sponsorship deals didn't matter half as much to her classmates or her self esteem as her current dress size and her past embarrassments.

But what was Quinn's reason?

He was a Navy SEAL for God's sake, and still as good looking as he'd been in high school. Maybe better looking. No thinning hair. No beer belly. More muscles. More sexy chin stubble...

Playing it cool, or attempting to, Bailey lifted one shoulder. "I mean since you are here, it seems silly not to stop by for an hour."

"Yes!" Josie slapped a palm against the table, sending the crumbs on Quinn's plate jumping. "That's what I'm saying. And it's not like you need a ticket or something. It's at the Muddy River Inn where you know you're going to end up a dozen times before you fly back anyway. Just come. Have a beer then you can leave."

Drawing in a breath, Quinn let it out as he leveled a stare on his sister. "Fine. I'll go. But we're taking two cars. I'm not getting stuck staying there because you're not ready to leave—but shit. No. Then you'll be driving your car home after drinking—"

"I'm not going to drink. I can drive home," Bailey offered.

He cocked up one dark brow and asked, "You sure?"

For the first time he seemed to look at her. Really look at her. Eye-to-eye. And God, his eyes were gorgeous. Green with flecks of brown and gold...

Seconds of silence ticked by between them and she realized that not only had she not answered his question, but both siblings were focused on her, waiting.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure."

"Okay. It's settled then. We all go. Two cars. Seven p.m. departure time." Josie pointed at each in turn. "Be. Ready."

Feeling lighter, Bailey stage whispered to Quinn, "She sounds serious."

"Yes. Very." He smiled, displaying a dimple that had her heart fluttering.

That smile was for her.

Quinn Baldwin was smiling at her and it was sweeter than any cinnamon roll.

Maybe things had changed in the last eight years.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“*I* didn’t know you and Bailey were still such close friends.” Quinn broached the subject with as casual a tone as he could muster, torn by his own feelings as suspicion and lust warred within him.

“Well, I mean we haven’t seen each other in person for like...years. But yeah, we weren’t ever *not* friends. You know?” Josie answered with a typical Josie-like non-response.

No, he didn’t *know*.

Josie shrugged as she continued, “It’s been hard with her living in the city since graduation. I mean we hadn’t seen each other in forever, but from the minute I picked her up at the bus station, it’s like she was never gone. Except for her name. It’s hard to stop thinking of her as Jane.”

Funny, Quinn was finding the name change comforting. It helped keep Jane the child who’d followed Josie around separate from Bailey the woman who’d given him a hard-on.

Maybe he was being overly cautious *because* his dick really wanted to get to know Bailey better.

He pushed that thought aside and concentrated on getting a straight answer out of Josie.

“So she just showed up out of the blue?” he asked, getting back to his mostly unanswered questions. “What has she been doing in the city all these years? What’s she do for work? Does she live alone?”

This was an investigation. His SEAL training had drilled a healthy level of suspicion into him. He definitely wasn't asking about Bailey's living situation for personal reasons even if he did find himself wondering if she was single.

And he really shouldn't be thinking about her naked on top of him, but some things couldn't be helped. But he was damn right going to inquire about how she happened to be installed in his parents' home while they were away.

Was she homeless? A grifter? A con artist? A damsel in distress... That last idea gave him pause.

He pushed aside the guilt that maybe she wasn't up to anything nefarious. Perhaps she just really missed her friend.

"How long are *you* staying?" Josie asked in a whiplash-inducing change of topic as she turned the questioning back on him.

"Few weeks. Why?" he asked when she made a face.

"I figured she could move into your room instead of sleeping on the roll out trundle in mine."

He frowned. "Why is she even sleeping here at all? What about her own house?"

"Her mom moved away years ago."

"So she's like moving in here?" He figured after the reunion she'd go back to the city, where Josie said she lived.

Josie shrugged. "I don't know. Some...things went down in the city. She just needs a place to lay low for a while."

Some things *went down* and she needed to *lay low*? What the hell? Was his sister harboring a criminal? A fugitive?

He opened his mouth to get to the bottom of this as Josie let out a huff. "Look, Quinn. I reached out to ask if she was going to the reunion and told her she could stay here if she wanted. She said yes. And then when she got here, we had a long talk about all that's been happening in her life and *I* suggested that she should hang around town for a while after the reunion. She didn't ask. It was all me, so chill with the third degree."

“So you just invite random people to move in for an undisclosed amount of time?”

“She’s not *random people*. She practically lived here when we were younger.” She scowled at him.

“I just would like to know why a girl you haven’t seen in years is suddenly hiding out in our parents’—”

“Hey! You look great!” Josie said loudly.

She shifted a wide-eyed glare between Quinn and, he assumed, Bailey standing behind him in the doorway. They’d have to continue this conversation later.

“So, we ready to go?” Josie asked in an overly animated approximation of a normal person.

Quinn let out a groan at the impending reunion as Bailey agreed with a less than enthusiastic, “I guess.”

“You two, I swear.” Josie shook her head. “Just come on. You’re both going to have a great time. You’ll see.”

“We’ll see, all right,” Quinn grumbled, earning him a shy smile from Bailey.

What was her story? If he did nothing else tonight, he intended to find that out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The reunion was as bad as Bailey expected it to be—and she'd just walked in the door.

On the up side, she didn't have to face it alone. She, Josie and Quinn walked in together, but that had led directly to the down side of arriving with the Baldwin siblings—the overwhelming female attention directed immediately at Quinn Baldwin, the elusive Navy SEAL.

Quinn was barely in the door when he was whisked away by alumni members of the football team plus a few former cheerleaders.

Although is anyone really a *former* cheerleader?

It seemed like that identity clung to them like the oh-so-tight shirts used to cling to their bouncy boobs on game day. Just as *theater geek* clung to Bailey. And the name she couldn't seem to shake no matter how hard she tried.

Jane.

“Here you go, Jane. Have a great time!”

Bailey stared down at the preprinted name tag the helpful, cheerful and oh so young recent grad manning the table just inside the door of the bar had just handed her.

Jane Knowles was printed in a big bold font. And lucky her, the name tag even had her high school yearbook photo next to her name.

Lovely.

During that period of her life, her hair had been too short, which made it also too curly, or more accurately frizzy since she had yet to discover the necessary hair products to tame her mane. The whole effect gave her head a round, unmoving dandelion appearance. More Brillo than *Breck Girl*, an old timey term her grandmother always used to use when she talked about someone with pretty hair for some reason.

And of course that photo had been before she got contact lenses in college, and prior to her recent laser eye surgery. The Jane in the photo stared back at her through the least expensive—and least fashionable—prescription glasses her single mother could afford, front and center on her face.

Josie retrieved her name tag, pinning it on while looking around. “This place is packed.”

“Of course, it is. Isn’t it every graduating class since like forever?” Bailey asked while shoving the name tag into her purse.

“That’s what’s going to make it fun! All the upper class men we used to drool over will be here.”

Bailey didn’t need to come here to drool over her high school crush. She’d been doing that since Quinn had walked through the door of Josie’s house.

Josie, finally glancing at Bailey, frowned. “Why aren’t you wearing your name tag?”

“They put Jane on it.”

Her frown deepened. “I think Jane is a nice name. It’s better than Josephine.” Josie scowled.

“But you’re not Josephine. You wanted people to call you Josie—which is totally adorable—and we do. So why can’t I be Bailey?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll try. I just keep forgetting. You were Jane for the whole time we were in school. And I still say it’s a perfectly good name.”

Bailey sighed. “Maybe it’s not the name. It’s that I don’t want to be who I was then.”

“I liked who you were then. You were my best friend.”

Were. Bailey’s heart clenched. The distance, both in miles and in friendship, was her fault.

“You’re still my best friend,” Bailey admitted.

Aside from her followers online, and Xander who was contractually bound to her, and her asshole ex-boyfriend Axel who was no longer part of her life, Josie really was the only person she could count as a friend.

“Aw. Thank you. And I’m so glad we’re still friends.” After a hug, Josie pulled back. “A friend I can keep calling Jane?” she asked

“No. I’m someone new now and I think that deserves a new name.”

“Okay. I get it.” Josie nodded. “So, *Bailey*, let’s get a drink.”

“Can I just run to the bathroom first?”

Nerves made her have to pee. Always had. Before the start of a show, even if she was behind the scenes on stage crew, she’d get so nervous she’d have to run to the bathroom.

She hadn’t felt like that in years. But here she was, rushing off to the bathroom to pee, even while her mouth was dry and she’d kill for a glass of water.

Of course, there was a line since the bar was packed.

The wait for the restroom didn’t bother her but the company did.

“Hello, Jane,” Cassie said.

Of course she’d run into Quinn’s high school girlfriend. This was a reunion. What did she expect? And dammit, Cassie was still willowy thin. Tall with perfect hair and teeth and clothes.

Fellow theater geek, Cassie was the girl who’d landed all the leads. Who got to be the star, which gave her a confidence Bailey would never attain.

She got to wear the pretty costumes and collect the flowers during curtain calls, while backstage Bailey had been dressed in all black to remain invisible during the dramas. Or she had been in the orchestra pit during the musicals. Again, unnoticed. One among many nameless faceless musicians.

In hindsight, that seemed all pretty symbolic since Cassie was the girl Quinn noticed. The one he dated. And Bailey—Jane—was the one he mostly ignored.

“Hi, Cass. And actually, it’s Bailey now.”

Cassie frowned. “Why?”

“Well, I—”

A scream, or maybe more of a squeal, interrupted.

“Cassie Hart! Oh my God. Look at you.” Cassie was pulled away by their former chorus teacher and school play director, Mrs. Rossi, before Bailey could dazzle her with her follower count.

The bathroom opened up and Bailey took that opportunity to slip inside. Between the wrap dress and the tights and her shape wear, it took longer to put herself back together than she’d anticipated within the confines of the small stall.

Someone knocking on the door had her rushing as she called, “Be right out!”

She quickly washed and dried her hands and unlocked the door, only to face what seemed like the whole squad of cheerleaders from a decade ago.

Great.

“Um, sorry. Go ahead.” She sidled past them, happy to get away but their giggles and hushed whispered seemed to grow louder, following her as she tried to put distance between them.

What was so funny?

“Bailey!”

She glanced up at the sound of her name being called over the music blaring through the sound system to find Quinn

standing nearby.

With a glance at the group of women still clustered by the ladies room door, he grabbed her by the elbow, saying, “Come here.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, confused as Quinn moved closer.

He turned them so her back was against the wall and his body shielded hers from view as he faced her.

“What are you—” She found further speech impossible as he reached around her, encompassing her in his arms, trapping her between the wall and that of his muscular body.

He leaned closer and her eyes widened. She bit her lip as she watched his face move near and she anticipated their first kiss.

But why would he suddenly be kissing her?

They’d just gotten there. He wasn’t drunk. But he was definitely in kissing range. And his hands were on her hips and moving toward her butt.

Oh my God, this was happening...

And then he moved his hands behind her and with one quick tug, Quinn yanked the hem of her skirt from where she must have tucked it into the waistband of her tights.

“Oh, my God.” Her eyes widened further as realization hit.

It was bad enough having the mean girls laugh at her, but to have her lifelong crush be the one to notice and fix her all while she’d assumed he was going to kiss her... There were no words for the humiliation.

“Please tell me I didn’t do what I think I just did,” she whispered, too appalled to even enjoy that Quinn was still so close, practically pinning her against the wall. His attention solely on her as he completely ignored the stares and whispers of the group of females nearby.

This scenario, him, her, this close, had only happened in her dreams...and now during the most embarrassing moment

of her life.

She flashed back to landing naked on top of him and amended that, moving this to one of the top two instead.

“It’s okay. It’s fixed. You’re good now.” His dimple-laden smile almost had her believing it. Almost...

“*Good* is not a word I’d use to describe how I’m feeling right now. I swear to you, I’m usually very cool... or at least moderately cool. And really well-dressed. It’s just being back here. In this town. Around those girls. I crossed the town line and it’s like I’m an awkward fourteen-year old again.”

“I know what you mean. Being back here...” He shook his head and let the sentence fall away, but he still didn’t move.

His nearness had her heart thundering so loudly she could barely hear herself as she asked, “How can you understand? You, Mister Popular Jock.”

“I mean that’s the problem. I’m not that guy. I work in the dark—usually literally. Stealth mode. I’m one of a team of silent nameless, faceless operators. That team is nothing like the one I was on in high school. I’m not a star. No one is singled out. We do our job and do it well because if we don’t people die. But everyone here is acting as if being a SEAL is like being a rock star. Like I’m going to tell them tales about my latest op.” He shook his head again.

“Now I get why you didn’t want to come tonight,” she said.

After a quick glance over his shoulder at the still-staring posse of mean girls, his gaze met and held hers. “Ditto. All I knew was that you and Josie were besties. I guess I didn’t realize how horrible girls could be to one another. I’m sorry about that. And them.”

His kind words were going to make her cry—which might be the only thing that could make this situation worse.

Close to tears, she said, “You have to stop being nice to me now.”

“Why?”

“I’m not used to it.”

He had to notice the shine of the welling tears in her eyes.

Quinn shook his head. “Jeezus. High school really did a number on you, didn’t it?”

High school and the last two days of her life. The intruder. Axel. The loss of what she thought of as her safe space—her apartment. It was all too much.

“You have no idea,” she managed to get out past the tightness in her throat.

“Come on.” He reached for her hand and her eyes widened as he tugged her toward the back door.

She planted her feet, causing him to stop and glance back at her as she said, “I can’t leave. Josie—” She motioned toward the bar.

“Just for a minute...”

“Okay.” She wasn’t about to say no to that offer, for many reasons.

Outside they found the back deck of the bar blissfully empty.

There, the overly loud music was muted to a more bearable level. There were no cliques of mean girls. Not even any smokers at the moment, probably because it was November and freezing outside. And, choosing fashion over comfort, she hadn’t worn a coat because she’d left the city in such a hurry she hadn’t packed one that would match her outfit.

She was an idiot.

Or maybe not... Quinn took one look at her shivering and took a step closer, rubbing his hands up and down her arms.

“Little better?” he asked, his gaze locked on hers.

“Yes. Thank you,” she said in a breathy voice that didn’t sound like her own.

His chest rose and fell as his hands stopped moving. His gaze dropped from her eyes to her lips. She watched the

Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallowed.

Finally, he took a step back and dropped his hands away. "Ready to go back in and face the crowd again?"

Pulse pounding harder in her ears than the bass line of the song on the jukebox, she nodded. "Sure."

With Quinn by her side, she could almost believe she was ready for this reunion.

He turned to her as he opened the door and said, "I'm going to finish the beer the guys poured for me then head out. You and Josie will get home okay?"

So much for it being her and Quinn against the world. "Uh, yeah. Sure. Fine."

With a nod he was gone, back to the cool kids leaving her behind once again.

CHAPTER NINE

Memories of last night were still kind of a whirlwind blur as Bailey stumbled, tired and possibly still a tad bit tipsy, down the hallway the next morning.

As she squinted against the glare of the sun streaming through the home's windows she realized she could hear the shower running.

Josie had still been asleep so that left only one person it could be. Quinn.

The vision of her high school crush naked and soapy beneath the stream of steamy water managed to cut through one of the worst hangovers she'd had in recent memory.

That was saying something since until recently she'd been dating a shithead rock star who'd built his reputation on being a party boy. After trying to keep up with him and the band who were all party experts for six months, she knew first hand what "partying like a rock star" felt like.

Last night's alcohol consumption had surpassed that.

Pushing Axel out of her mind, she let the memory of Quinn at the reunion replace it.

Had he almost kissed her or was that all in her imagination? A projection of what she'd wanted to happen.

The only thing she knew for sure was that a) the mean girls were still bitches and b) she still had the ability to humiliate herself even without the mean girls' help.

Quinn having to cover her butt was proof of that.

With a sigh, she went through the motions of making coffee for Quinn and tea for herself.

Thank goodness the Baldwin's had a good old fashioned Mr. Coffee. Possibly the same one they'd had when she used to hang out here with Josie after school.

Water and grounds in. Coffee out. Anything more complicated and she'd have been screwed.

She needed caffeine, Advil and a gallon of water. In that order. And then, after all that, possibly she could handle some breakfast. Something full of carbs to soak up any residual alcohol in her.

French toast. That should do it. Maybe cooking would take her mind off her misery.

A while later—long enough she was just flipping over the second batch of toast in the hot pan—Quinn made his way to the kitchen.

He was freshly showered and dressed, but the damp hair and clean smell of soap kept the vision of him naked and wet uppermost in her mind.

“What smells so amazing?” he asked as he walked through the door.

Amazing.

Bailey tempered her excitement over the comment. Quinn was complimenting the food. Not her.

Anybody could make french toast.

“I—uh—made breakfast. There's a plateful keeping warm in the oven and this batch is just about ready, if you're hungry.”

“You always cook like this?” he asked, eyeing the pan as she flipped off the heat and reached for a spatula.

She cringed. “I'm sorry. It's rude of me to just make myself at home.”

“I'm not complaining. Believe me.” He accepted the plate she held out with three slices on it.

“You sure it’s okay? It’s just I cook when I’m...” She stopped and shot him a glance.

“When you’re what?” he prompted setting the plate down and glancing at her as he reached into the drawer for a fork.

“Nothing.” Shaking her head, she pushed the syrup closer to him as a distraction.

What had she thought she was going to say? She cooked when she was heartbroken, stressed, worried, hungover... all of the above.

Her cell phone vibrated with a video call alert and Xander’s name and face appeared on the screen. The perfect distraction to get her out of this conversation.

She grabbed the cell and said, “Sorry. I gotta get this.”

Fork in one hand and knife in the other as he bent over the plate on the counter, Quinn nodded. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Good. He was occupied. Her almost embarrassing confession was forgotten.

Next up, she had to deal with whatever had Xander calling her this early on a weekend.

It couldn’t be good.

In the living room, she shot one more glance toward Quinn, who was happily stuffing his face in the kitchen before she tapped the screen to connect.

Putting on her camera smile and wondering how much of last night’s mascara was smeared under her eyes, she said, “Xander. Hey. What’s up?”

“Bailey,” he said in his low *you’re in trouble, young lady* voice.

Uh oh.

“*What* is going on?” he asked in a tone that didn’t sound at all casual.

Shit. She should have taken the call somewhere else. The bathroom. Outside in the cold. Somewhere. Anywhere besides

here.

A video call was the equivalent of having the call on speaker phone. Quinn could hear every word in the next room.

She punched the button on the side of the cell to lower the volume as she continued to hold her phone up toward her face.

Trying to whisper, and genuinely confused as to what she'd done now, she asked, "What do you mean? What's going on?"

Seriously. What could be wrong?

She'd hidden the live video of Axel naked. She'd taken care of that right away while she'd been hiding from him in the coffee shop since she didn't know enough about the law to determine if it could get her in trouble or sued.

She was currently hidden away in the tiniest of towns in upstate New York. She'd spent most of the night in a dive bar with her best friend and a bunch of people who probably didn't even remember her and if they did it was by a different name than she used now.

Who could have seen her?

There might have been a hundred past graduates of her high school in attendance, but there wasn't any press.

"Where do I begin?" Xander asked, sounding like a father again.

He drew in a breath, hopefully about to launch into an explanation that would clear up this mystery, when a hair raising scream from the vicinity of the hallway dragged her attention away from the phone call.

Quinn, ever vigilant, was already halfway down the hall before Bailey could get her feet to move.

She'd only taken one step when Josie flung her bedroom door open and ran out, cell phone clutched in her hand.

Her hair was a mess from sleep, last night's makeup still rimmed her eyes giving her the appearance of a raccoon, and

her feet were bare as she ran into the hallway in her pajama bottoms and long-sleeved thermal shirt.

“What’s wrong?” Quinn demanded.

Knowing Josie, Bailey figured it could be anything from a spider to a mass murderer and everything in between.

“Where’s Jane—Bailey?” Josie raised her gaze and spotted Bailey past Quinn’s bulk blocking her view.

“Get out of the way,” Josie said. She pushed past, bumping into him on the way as she shouted, “You’ve gone viral!”

Xander, momentarily forgotten on the cell still clutched in her hand, said, “*That* is what’s going on. You have, indeed, gone viral.”

“Which post?” she asked, frowning as she glanced between Xander on her cell and Josie.

She’d been woefully negligent of her influencer duties since the break-in. It had been almost forty-eight hours since she’d posted anything. An unheard of amount of time.

Josie thrust her cell in front of Bailey’s face. “The one on TikTok from last night.”

“I didn’t post last night.” Bailey’s gaze whipped from Josie’s cell to Xander’s image on her own cell phone. “I swear, Xander. I didn’t post last night. We were at our high school reunion and I was drinking. I never post if I’ve been drinking. You know that. It’s a rule. I never break it.”

“I guess when you asked me to record you on your phone it posted or something.” Josie shrugged. “But look. Over a million views!”

Bailey’s eyes widened. “I told you to record me, not to post it.” Panicked, Bailey grabbed the cell and stared at the screen in horror. “Holy shit.”

Quinn moved to stand behind Bailey and watch the video on Josie’s phone over her shoulder.

“Ah, it’s Mr. Hashtag Grey Sweatpants Hashtag Doorframe Lean himself,” Xander said, dark brow cocked

high.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Quinn asked.

“Shh!” Bailey hissed as she watched the horror play out on screen, all while memories began to creep back. One by one.

Her renewed rage over Axel. Her continued frustration over the music career she’d given up. That last round of tasty Fireball shots that had made this all seem like a good idea.

And the song.

Oh my God, the song.

On the screen she watched herself, seated cross-legged in her pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt. Quinn’s guitar, adopted by Josie after he’d left it there when he’d joined the Navy, was in her hands.

She looked up from the strings to the cell and asked, “Are you recording?”

“Yup. Good to go,” Josie’s voice said from out of the frame as only her thumbs-up showed on screen.

After a nod, she started strumming. Then she began singing.

At least she sounded good. Amazingly. Even drunk and on a cell phone the audio quality was good. And, more amazingly, the song itself was good.

Horribly embarrassing in its raw emotion and truth. Nothing she would have admitted to anyone in words, it clearly expressed her hurt and anger over Axel’s betrayal. And it was out there in the world for people to see—she glanced at the views—one point three million times.

Holy shit.

On screen she moved through a simple chord progression, eyes closed as she sang. Words of love and betrayal. Anger and hurt. Verse after verse. Muscle memory and years of lessons and band performances coming back to her in her drunken state.

Quinn came into frame on the video and she sucked in a breath as he leaned against the doorway and watched her sing and play. He was any girl's dream in gray sweatpants and a tight white T-shirt. His hair mussed just enough to be roguish and sexy as hell. His muscles bulging as he gripped the door frame over his head.

On-screen Bailey hadn't noticed him there behind her. She ended the song on the final cords, opened her eyes and looked up at the phone and Josie behind it. "That's it."

That's when the video ended. The TikTok circled back to the beginning, about to replay on a never ending loop so she hit the button to pause it and silence the phone.

Last night replayed in her memory.

They'd gotten home late, leaving Josie's car in the bar parking lot and ordering a ride since, after the mean girl encounter, Bailey had failed miserably at being the designated driver.

She and Josie had had a heart-to-heart about Axel and how badly he'd hurt her when she'd first arrived from the city. But last night had been more of a *fuck him, fuck the mean girls, fuck everybody, let's get drunk* kind of vibe.

That's when the song had popped into her head.

Even drunk, she'd wanted to get it on video so when she was sober she could evaluate if it was anything or not. If it was good, at least it wouldn't be lost. If it wasn't, it could go into the never-to-be-seen again file.

But Josie had accidentally hit the button to go Live rather than just record.

People had seen her playing then, and were still watching it now. Hours later, the hearts and comments were still coming in. And yeah, more than one mentioned the mystery man in the gray sweatpants leaning on the doorway.

"So, who'd like to explain this?" Xander asked, again reminding her of his continued presence on the cell in her other hand.

She thrust the second cell phone back toward Josie as she said, “I didn’t know it posted. I can hide the post right now or delete—”

“Don’t you dare delete it! Have you seen your follower count? You just hit eleven million on Instagram and surpassed that number on TikTok thanks to that video. People are reposting it all over the web. It’s on every platform racking up views and comments.”

Eleven million people followed her now. And they were all witness to her heartbreak. But only one really mattered. Quinn.

She raised her gaze to meet his and saw something she couldn’t name there. Pity? God, she hoped not. Understanding, maybe? Mixed with a little bit of shock when he heard the eleven million number.

“Xander, just tell me what you want me to do,” she begged.

She was past trying to guess what was best for her career or what her manager wanted. She didn’t even know what she wanted.

“We need to strike while the iron is hot,” he began, the exuberance evident in his tone. “I want to capitalize on this before TikTok, which has the attention span of a gnat, moves onto something else.”

She sighed, wishing they all would move on. “Okay. So what do we do?”

“I’ve booked you two hours of studio time for late this afternoon here in the city. You’re going to record your song—that song—and then we’re getting it up on Spotify. It is *your* song, right? You wrote it? Please tell me you own the rights?”

“Yeah, it’s mine. But you told me music wasn’t part of my brand. That I could only focus on fashion and beauty.”

“That was before I knew you could sing. And you didn’t tell me you wrote songs. Or could play guitar.”

“She plays like ten instruments,” Josie piped in. “Our band teacher said she was like the Swiss Army knife of our high

school band.”

Quinn let out a snort and Bailey remembered his being forced by his parents to go to every one of Josie’s school band performances during his senior year. Of course, Bailey had been performing too, not that he’d noticed her back then.

He was noticing her now, thanks to the song that told the world her boyfriend had fucked around on her with a skinny little model. The song Xander wanted on Spotify so the rest of the world who might not have already caught it on social would hear it.

Great.

“Can you get to the studio by four-thirty today? Where are you anyway?” he asked.

“I’m upstate. I guess I can make it back. I won’t make the morning bus but there’s a train out of Albany if I can get a ride —”

“Jeezus, Bailey. Considering what happened in your apartment, will you *please* act like you earn *eleven thousand dollars* a post and take a damn car service instead of mass transit? I beg you.”

“Ten thousand,” Bailey corrected as her gaze skittered over to Quinn, whose poker face briefly registered that dollar amount with the twitch of a brow.

On the screen Xander shook his head. “Not anymore. Your price just went up with that new follower count.”

“What happened in her apartment?” Quinn asked after grabbing her hand so his face showed on the screen and he could speak directly to Xander.

The enormous dollar amounts being thrown around like it was nothing wasn’t what had Quinn joining the conversation. It was Xander eluding to the intruder.

Xander cocked up one brow. “Oh, so you didn’t tell Gray Sweatpants here what’s up? Please, allow me. Someone broke into Bailey’s apartment. Walked right off the fire escape and into the window while she was there, alone, because she

insists on living in a shit building like a damn pauper and not hiring security.”

“It’s not like it’s a slum. It’s just...modest,” Bailey defended softly.

Over her protest, Xander continued, “I told her she was not to spend another night in that apartment and she was supposed to have hired herself a bodyguard. I don’t suppose that’s you, is it, Sweatpants?”

Quinn’s eyebrows crept up at the nickname. “The name’s Quinn. And no, it’s not me. Was the break-in random or were they targeting Bailey specifically?” he asked.

Bailey shook her head. “I’m sure it was random.”

“It’s definitely not random,” Xander answered at the same time. “They tossed the place and now we know why. Stuff is starting to show up online for sale. *Your* stuff, Bailey.”

She sucked in a breath as she reached for the back of the sofa unsteadily.

“What stuff?” Quinn asked.

“A dress and a pair of shoes. I recognized both as being from sponsors. And they’re her sizes.”

Bailey paled further at that information, shooting Quinn a glance.

“I’ve heard no mention from Bailey of her needing or hiring security,” Quinn, now in possession of the cell, told Xander.

Quinn’s gaze moved back to where she stood still braced on the sofa.

“You might be fine here in town with me and Josie, but you’re not traveling to the city alone. And not on mass transit. Not gonna happen. Not on my watch.”

“I like this guy,” Xander said. “So, Quinn, what do you suggest?”

“This is upstate New York. It’s not like I can call and have paid security over here in an hour.” He paused barely a second

before he continued, “But I can do it.”

“Perfect,” Xander said.

“What?” Bailey asked over him.

“I’ll drive her to the city for the recording session. I’ve got some experience with close personal protection.”

“Somehow I thought you might.” Xander’s grin wasn’t quite villainous, but it was close. He did like when he got his way.

Ignoring Xander, Quinn focused on Bailey. “My rental’s big enough we should be able to move a lot of your stuff out of that apartment while we’re there.”

“Move it to where? I don’t have another place yet,” she said as the situation spun out of her control.

“Here,” he said as Josie squealed out a *yay* loud enough Bailey had no problem hearing it over her thundering pulse.

CHAPTER TEN

One was every bit of suspicion he'd had about why Bailey had suddenly reappeared in his sister's life.

He understood now. Her world had been turned upside down.

She'd been targeted by an intruder in her own apartment. That had to be frightening for her.

Changing location had been smart. A good start, but it wasn't nearly enough.

After witnessing the video call conversation Quinn could see the man who must be her manager pretty much ran her life. But after the break in, that was a good thing.

When Bailey probably would have stayed there, scared and unsafe, Xander had told her to get out of the apartment and Bailey had actually done it. Left her home even though she had no plans of where else to go.

And thanks to that song, Quinn knew she'd been cheated on.

Whoever the asshole ex-boyfriend was, he'd been the one person she should have been able to trust, to count on, to turn to at a time like this, but she no longer could.

The protector in Quinn wanted to wrap her up and keep her safe. The one problem was, he wasn't sure if it was Jane, his little sister's bestie from a decade ago, he was protecting, or Bailey, the hottie he couldn't stop thinking about naked.

But he'd had plenty of time to think about it today while sitting next to her during the mostly silent car ride. Three hours in fact, the time it would take to drive to the studio Xander had booked.

She sat in the passenger seat, quiet unless she was answering, with the shortest sentences possible, his questions about the radio station or if she wanted him to pull off at the rest stop.

“Are you warm enough?” he asked, trying to keep the lines of communication open since he could see she wasn't happy.

Whether that unhappiness was because of the cheating ex, the spur of the moment recording session, or Quinn's new role as bodyguard he wasn't sure. Maybe a combination of everything.

She'd been staring out the side window and startled at his question. She glanced over to say, “I'm fine.”

Two words rather than one. A plethora of riches.

He chewed on his lip as he nodded, then said, “Good.”

She went back to her silent contemplation, but not for long. After a deep inhale and exhale she picked up her phone, something she'd done a good dozen times in the past hour.

He hadn't bothered to tell her that cell signal was spotty at best. He and his family had done this drive countless times. Every year to see the Christmas decorations in the city.

From the time he and Josie had gotten cell phones, car games took a backseat to their obsession with finding signal on the long road trip.

Quinn happened to know they were entering a green zone—what Josie had dubbed the area of rare strong cell service.

Bailey discovered the signal. He knew when she let out a little gasp, just before her fingers started flying over the screen.

Another bigger gasp followed.

“Everything okay?” he asked, glancing in her direction.

Her eyes cut from the phone to him. “Um...yeah?” The rising inflection in her voice added a question mark to her statement.

“That sounded more like a question than an answer.”

“Uh, it’s just the tabloids have picked up the story.”

“What story?” he asked.

“The song video. From last night.”

“Okay. So what’s the problem? All you did was sing. People liked it. And that’s great. I hope you get tons of sales, or views, or downloads or whatever the hell Xander is hoping for. Is that worthy of a story?” he asked. “Do the tabloids care about music now?”

“Not so much about music. About me. And my ex-boyfriend. And...you.”

“Me?” He frowned before realization hit him and he nodded knowingly.

He remembered the hashtag gray sweatpants. And Xander’s nickname for him.

“Ah... They’re mocking me for wearing sweatpants, aren’t they? Is that a fashion *faux pas*? Don’t worry. I can handle the criticism.” He chuckled.

After being in full kit for too many hours a day over the past six months, he couldn’t give a flying fuck what some reporter wannabes had to say about his relaxing in comfortable clothes in his parents’ home while on leave. In the middle of the night, no less.

She opened her mouth to say something that was interrupted by her cell phone aggressively vibrating in her hand.

“It’s Xander,” she supplied before he even asked.

Somehow that revelation wasn’t a surprise. “Go on and answer it while you have signal. I have a feeling he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Hitting the screen, Bailey didn't answer with hello, but rather, "Don't worry. We're on schedule to arrive at the studio early. I promise."

Xander snorted. "I wasn't worried. You might run on *Bailey time*—meaning half an hour late for everything—but I had a feeling Captain Sweatpants is a stickler for punctuality."

Quinn's brows shot high as the man's nickname for him got progressively worse with every conversation.

"I'm calling because we have to discuss how to respond to the rumors that your hired muscle over there is your new boyfriend."

"Um, what now?" Focus no longer on the road, Quinn's gaze whipped to Bailey and the cell phone screen.

"The gossip rags picked up on you and Bailey being together in the middle of the night in less than formal attire. They assumed you're together."

"So correct them," he suggested simply.

"Not that easy. Axel's fans are vilifying Bailey thinking she was already messing around with you while she was dating him. But Bailey's fans love you and love the idea of you two together. They're shipping you already."

"Shipping us?" He frowned.

What the hell did that mean? Shipping them where?

Bailey's gaze cut sideways to him. "They're... pushing us to be in a relationship. With each other." She cringed.

"They already gave you a couple name. *Bailquinn*," Xander informed them.

"What?" Quinn asked on a laugh.

"Bailey plus Quinn," Bailey explained before turning her complete focus back to Xander on the phone. "How did they even find out Quinn's name?"

"They tracked him down through his sister's TikTok. She tagged you and named him in a picture taken last night at some bar."

“Jeezus,” Quinn breathed out.

Anonymity was lost in the age of the internet. Especially when one had a sister like Josie.

He’d often mocked her for posting absolutely everything—including every meal she ate. Now, as the latest subject of her posts, he wished she’d stuck to food.

“So, we need a plan,” Xander continued.

“Here’s an idea. How about the truth?” Quinn suggested.

“That’s a starting point. We’ll go from there. So what is the truth?” Xander asked. “Where did you two meet? When? Please tell me you weren’t fucking around with him while you were with Axel. I mean I can spin it if I have to but I’d like you firmly on the high ground and Axel the only cheater in the relationship.”

“Axel *is* the only cheater in the relationship. Quinn is my best friend from high school’s older brother. That’s all. Until yesterday, I hadn’t seen him for like a dozen years.”

“Good. I can work with that. I gotta go but we’ll work on a press release on this end. You stay off socials until we talk again. It’s radio silence until we’re ready for you to make your statement. And *get that song recorded*,” Xander ordered.

“But—”

Xander disconnected before Bailey could say anything more.

The guy was a shark but that might be a good thing. She needed someone strong on her side to defend her during this clusterfuck.

Next to him, Bailey sighed. One glance told Quinn she was stressed. He could see it in her posture. Her shoulders were up near her ears. Her neck stiff.

“I know he’s tough, but I think he’s good for you,” Quinn said, keeping his voice gentle. She didn’t need him badgering her too.

“I thought Axel was good for me too so…” She shrugged.

“Did you really?” he asked. “From what Josie said he’s a rock star with a player reputation.”

Not exactly marriage material.

The thought of Bailey getting married caused Quinn’s brows to draw low.

He’d always considered his little sister—and her friend—too young for that. But just because he wasn’t looking for forever quite yet didn’t mean anything. The two girls—women now—were more than old enough.

Bailey shrugged again in response to his question. “I thought he’d changed. For me. For us.”

On the tip of his tongue was a response that he forced himself not to voice.

People don’t change.

Not deep down at the core of who they really are. At least not without some radically life altering event.

She shook her head. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not. We’ve all been wrong about people one time or another.”

That was true of him and his feelings about Bailey. She wasn’t simple or silly. All the things he’d used to dismiss her years ago as not a full person. Just his sister’s shadow. Not worthy of a second look or thought as he tried to decide what his future would be.

That second look now, years later, revealed how wrong he’d been. She was so much more than he’d assumed. Deep. Damaged. Devastating...

He drew in a breath as a sideways glance had him imagining wrapping her in his arms. Comforting her. Then fucking that look of sadness, that insecurity, right out of her eyes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The GPS's computer announced, "*You have reached your destination.*"

"We're here," Quinn said unnecessarily. "Ready to go inside and sing about what an asshole your ex is?"

She managed to answer with a, "Yeah."

Meanwhile something else occupied her mind.

Bailquinn.

Face burning, heart pounding, Bailey wanted to crawl beneath the seat as Quinn, acting like nothing was wrong, walked around the car and opened the passenger side door for her.

She loved her followers but that couple name was too much. She couldn't even imagine what Quinn thought about it, even though he really was behaving like things were perfectly normal. Business as usual.

Maybe that was it. This was all just business to him. She was his job. He was her bodyguard. Even if just that word—bodyguard—and the thought of Quinn protecting her body had her heart beating faster, it also meant that she was just work. Another responsibility. The latest in a long line of things he was tasked to protect.

And now she was supposed to go inside to her first ever recording session. Bare her soul singing the lyrics she'd come up with while under the influence of Fireball shots and heartbreak.

She wasn't a singer. At least, not a professional. Xander had only had to tell her that once for her to believe it to her core.

His opinion only added to what had already been proven. That she couldn't cut it against all the talent in New York. That's why she had dropped out of her college music program before they had a chance to kick her out.

She remembered the conversation with Xander from earlier in the year like it was yesterday. She'd just signed with his firm—Paragon. She'd been singing during a post as she put on her make-up during a live tutorial. Just a few bars of Christina Aguilera's *Beautiful*.

The post hadn't been up for more than an hour when the call from Xander came through.

Bailey, you're not a singer. You're an influencer and you're great at it. Don't try to do everything. Be everything. That's the path to mediocracy and failure. You're on the road to success. No detours. Okay? No more singing.

Boy, how things had changed. Here she was at a recording studio that he'd booked. He was practically forcing her to sing, which made the whole thing nerve wracking. Made her not want to do it.

Would he drop her if she refused? Would she lose all her sponsorship deals if he did? Worse, would her singing really suck and disappoint him?

“What's wrong?”

She realized she'd slowed to a stop just shy of the door. Glancing up at Quinn, she saw the concern in his frown.

“I don't want to do this,” she whispered.

His dark brows rose but he nodded and said, “All right. Can you tell me why not?”

“I'm not a singer,” she voiced the mantra running on repeat in her head.

He laughed. “The internet thinks you are.”

Quinn held up his cell phone for her to see.

“Josie texted again. Your views just topped two million. So the way I see it, the song is out there either way. You want to leave it like that, that’s fine. We’ll get back in that vehicle, drive to your apartment, pack up your stuff and head upstate. Or you can go in there, record a professional version and earn some well-deserved money off those millions of people enjoying the song you wrote and sang. It’s your choice, Bailey. I’ll do whatever you say.”

In the fading light he stood there between the car and the studio door, key in hand, and she believed him. He would go along with whatever she decided.

“Xander—” she began.

“Fuck Xander. What do you want?” he asked, his gaze intense as it bore into her.

“I want to sing.”

He smiled. “Then let’s get inside.”

The door of the studio opened a whirlwind of introductions, questions, instructions...

She was hustled inside and before she knew it found herself behind a wall of glass that separated her from Quinn and the female producer seated at the mixing board. On her side of the divider she slipped the earphones over her head and took in her surroundings.

It was set up to accommodate multiple musicians playing an array of instruments. Enough for a full band plus some. And there she stood all alone.

She moved to the piano and sat. Adjusting the microphone, she glanced at the window. With the lights bright on her side of the glass and dim on their side, she could barely see the two of them.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the producer said through the intercom.

She nodded. Not sure whether Quinn’s presence was a comfort or a complication, she tried to tune him and

everything else out.

Setting her hands on the keys, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and began.

You said that you and I were meant to be,
The songs you sang, yes they were all about
me.
But you whispered lies, so quick to deceive.
You said that you loved me so I would
believe... all you say.
I hid my fears when you said I was the only
one,
But now I know and I'm so over and done.
You said you're with the guys, but you lie...and
I cry,
I hope you both just die.
Late nights.
Our fights.
Your lies.
Her eyes... on you while your arm's around
me,
Around the town.
You burned it all down.
Go away.
There's nothing more to say.
It's black and white,
There are no shades of gray.
You said that you and I were meant to be.
You said she's no one but I'm not blind, I see.
You whispered lies, so quick to deceive.

You'll screw her too but that's fine... it won't
be me.

I hid my fears when you said she was no one.

But now she's in your bed and I am so over and
done.

You said you're with the guys, but you lie...and
I cry,

I hope you both just die.

Alone.

At home.

Just me.

But maybe... that's how it's supposed to be.

I drown.

The clown.

You burned it all down.

You said you loved me and I was so quick to
believe...

“Holy shit,” the producer said after the last word faded away, reminding Bailey she wasn't alone.

Bailey opened her eyes and glanced up past the microphone. Her gaze collided with Quinn's before she yanked it away and found the producer.

“How was that?” she asked, her voice sounding breathless to her own ears.

“Fucking amazing. Girl, where have you been all my life?” the woman asked.

She smiled as she swiped the tears she hadn't realized had fallen on her cheeks. “Do we need to do it again?”

“I'd like to try it once with you on the guitar this time instead of the piano. I'm thinking for the crescendo, I can mix the two instruments. Give it a little more depth. Then to bring

it back down, have the last line be acapella. What do you think?”

All she could think was how this was starting to feel really real. This was no longer something she was noodling with for fun in Josie’s bedroom on Quinn’s old guitar. This was a real song. Her song.

Holy shit.

“Um. Yeah. Good.” Nearly incapable of speech, she stood and moved to the stool next to where a guitar was braced in a stand.

Two hours later she had a song. A real song, professionally mixed so that it sounded like something she’d hear on the radio—which the producer assured her would be the case very soon.

She was still in a daze when Quinn paused just inside the door of the studio and asked, “Ready to head to your apartment?”

Bailey nodded.

She was exhausted. Nothing sounded better than being in her own home, safe because Quinn would be there with her. She had no doubt he’d lock it down and keep her secure. No one was getting inside tonight.

“Maybe by way of some Chinese take-out?” she asked.

He grinned. “You got it. I could go for some of that myself —” Quinn stopped as he opened the door and the darkness of the November early evening turned bright with flashes. “What the fuck?”

“Paparazzi,” she answered, not that he would be able to hear over the photographers calling out her name and yelling questions over each other.

Keeping her at his back, Quinn took a single step toward them and said in a tone that left no doubt he expected them to comply, “Back. Off.”

The barrage of shouting continued, the paparazzi undeterred.

“Bailey! Were you cheating on Axel?”

“Is this your new boyfriend?”

“Bailey, are you sleeping with your bodyguard?”

“How do you feel about Axel being seen leaving a club and getting into a limo with two women last night?”

Bailey winced at each question lobbed at her, pulling herself in until her shoulders were by her ears in an effort to disappear. Hide. Make herself a smaller target.

In contrast, Quinn seemed to expand in the face of the confrontation. Growing larger as he appeared to be immune to the din from the crowd.

Like a football player heading for the end zone, he cut a path forward. With one hand out in front while the other gripped her arm tight, he pulled her, making slow but steady progress toward the car.

She could see his determined and impossibly calm, intensely focused expression didn't waver as he kept glancing back occasionally to check on her. Then one reporter reached out and grabbed her arm and Quinn's demeanor changed.

He yanked her close with a force that had her crashing into his hard body. He held her tight against his side, his arm around her as he put himself between her and the photographer.

In a deep, low voice Quinn leaned in toward the photographer and said, “Touch her again and you'll regret it.”

She felt his growled words vibrate through her.

The photographer must have felt the truth of Quinn's threat as well. He took one step back, but the encounter caused an increased flurry of shutters snapping. By tomorrow—forget that, probably by tonight—Quinn's *touch her and die* expression was going to be plastered across every media outlet.

Given the number of paparazzi here, they'd be lucky if the story was contained to just the tabloids and they didn't end up in the traditional press.

What would Quinn think then?

The whole *Bailquinn* thing had been bad enough, but he'd seemed to roll with that just fine, brushing it off like it was all ridiculous. But that was when it was confined to comments on social media.

Would he feel the same when his name and picture was on *Page Six*, the infamous, world renowned, celebrity gossip column of the *New York Post*? Or worse, on TV on *Entertainment Tonight* or *TMZ*?

As he dragged her toward the car, she supposed they'd soon find out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“*I*s it always like that for you? With the paparazzi?” Quinn asked.

It took Bailey a second to digest the question. The fact that Quinn was currently sitting in the living room of her apartment devouring some Chow Fun was so surreal that it made it hard to concentrate.

Of course he'd only sat down to finally eat after he'd checked and secured every window and the door. That included literally nailing the windows shut. Her expressed concern over the nail holes and her security deposit had earned her two raised brows and a growled *fuck the landlord* from Quinn.

“It wasn't before Axel. I mean yeah, I had tons of followers on TikTok and Insta, but they were online. They didn't literally follow me around...until I was first seen with Axel.”

“Then it was game on?”

She nodded.

Quinn let out a snort. “I googled him. Doesn't seem like he was worth all that trouble.”

“Uh, thanks? I guess.”

His gaze met hers. “I mean you can do better.”

“Says you. Quinn, girls like me don't end up with guys like Axel.”

“Well, for one, you did. And two, why not?”

Bailey snorted. “Quinn. Look at me.”

He shook his head and shrugged, still looking confused.

“I’m not a size two,” she elaborated.

And she wouldn’t be one anytime soon since she’d downed half an order of dumplings in spicy peanut sauce, one egg roll and had now moved on to her entree.

He frowned. “I don’t know shit about women’s sizes but if by *a size two* you mean skinny like most models, then you’re nuts. Men don’t want that.”

“You can’t say that. You don’t know—”

“Okay, I agree I can’t speak for *all* men but I can speak for myself.” He put down the white cardboard Chinese food container and leaned forward putting his face close to hers.

She put her own beef and broccoli down on the table, heart pounding as his gaze locked on hers from just inches away.

“Bailey, I’ve liberated hostages who’d been starved during captivity. Felt their bones jabbing into me as I carried them because they were too weak to walk. They couldn’t help what happened to them, but as for all the women who starve themselves in some quest to be more attractive? I can tell you I personally want someone with a woman’s curves beneath me in my bed.”

His gaze dropped briefly to her mouth and after that speech of his, that was all it took to make her lose all sense of reason. To make her lean forward to close in on Quinn’s mouth.

Eyes wide, he jerked back. “Whoa.”

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry,” she gasped, her heart thundering.

Oh no! What had she done? He hadn’t been talking about *her* being under him in his bed. Not at all.

He shook his head. “Don’t apologize. I didn’t mean—”

“No, I know. Of course, you weren’t talking about me. That’s silly. It’s fine. I don’t know what I was thinking.” Jumping up, she pivoted toward the door of her bedroom, calling over her shoulder as she stumbled away, “I’m tired. Going to bed.”

“Bailey, stop. I meant I didn’t mean to pull away. I was just taken aback.”

Quinn’s pursuit was immediate. He reached to grab her but she was just fast enough to slam and lock the bedroom door before he could.

Leaning her forehead against the wood, she said, “Make yourself at home. There’s a spare blanket and pillow inside the ottoman. See you in the morning.”

She’d tried to sound upbeat. What had come out sounded fake. Forced. Over the top in a deranged psycho kind of way.

The ridiculousness of the situation began to creep in on her. She couldn’t stay locked in there all night. The only bathroom was accessed through her bedroom. She’d have to open the door in case Quinn had to use it at some point.

Ugh, she was so stupid.

“Bailey, open this door,” he said.

His voice, even and calm, sounded as if he was pressed right against the other side of the door. Just inches away. That had her pulling back just a bit.

“Bailey, this situation isn’t cut and dry. It’s complicated—”

“I know. I understand,” she answered, again overly brightly.

“No, you don’t. So open this door so I can explain.”

“It’s fine. I’ll see you in the morning,” she said again and realized how dumb it was.

More than the bathroom issue, tomorrow they’d be in the car together for hours. Then there’d be no escaping him or the humiliation of how she’d tried to kiss him and he’d pulled away.

Could she escape out the bedroom window? She clearly had to escape this situation somehow. Possibly even move to another country. London might be nice...

“Bailey, if you don’t unlock this door, I’m going to kick it down. Since I’ve kicked in more than a few doors and know what kind of damage it does, I can tell you that you really will lose that security deposit. So please, open the door.”

He’d reached a level of measured calm that really did remind her of a psycho killer. Much scarier than her previous assessment of her own maniacal bubbling. Her excessive enthusiasm was more comic book villain and far less intense and scary. Nothing like this overly-controlled version of Quinn sounded now.

Believing his threat about kicking in the door, she flipped the lock and then took a big step back as she watched the knob turn.

Quinn opened the door slowly, wide, but he didn’t cross the threshold. He remained standing in the opening, his hands braced on the doorframe. His eyes closed briefly as he took and released a big breath. Then those eyes, like murky green pools filled deep with emotion, raised to focus on her.

“When I tell you it’s complicated, that it’s not you, it’s most definitely me, you think it’s all bullshit,” he began in a firm but gentle tone. “It’s not.”

She dropped her gaze to the floor as she said, “No, I don’t. It’s fine—”

“It’s not *fine*. You still don’t believe me.” He sighed as he dropped his hands from the doorframe and took a step forward.

Standing right in front of her, he reached out and lifted her chin with two fingers, forcing her to look at him.

“I need to focus to protect you. In my world, lack of concentration costs lives. Between the intruder and the paparazzi, there’s clearly a threat here. I can’t—I won’t—let anything happen to you because I’m distracted by something going on between us.”

His intensity, protectiveness, sheer power and control and determination had her wishing for so many things. Quinn to change his mind. Some privacy so she could savor the memory of this moment alone with her battery operated boyfriend. Thirty or forty pounds or so to miraculously drop away in the next thirty seconds in spite of his claims to like curvy women...

All she could do was nod.

He returned her nod and began to turn toward the door, but paused, glancing back. "And Bailey. Never tell me things are fine when they're not. I need you to be honest with me at all times. You hear me?"

"Yes," she managed, though in a rough voice.

"Good. Now come finish eating. We'll make a game plan for packing up and storing all your stuff, then you can go to bed. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

She didn't doubt it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An incoming text had Quinn glancing down at his phone.

JOSIE

What's happening there!? Bailey isn't answering my texts!

Not giving in to his sister's love of texting and hatred of speaking on the phone, he hit to connect the call.

"Quinn, why is nobody answering me?" she asked without saying hello.

Apparently Josie was so desperate for news she didn't even complain he'd called instead of texted. "I don't know who else you're talking about but I did get back to you, just now, and Bailey is sleeping."

Sleeping peacefully in spite of his sister's text because Quinn had silenced Bailey's phone when she wasn't looking. The damn thing pinged constantly with what he suspected were alerts for all the apps she was on. And Bailey would jump and check every single alert.

It wasn't healthy. If he'd had more time, he'd have gone into settings and turned off all her notifications.

"Well, wake her up!" Josie demanded.

"No." He wasn't going to change his mind but he was curious so he added, "And why?"

"Olivia Rodrigo commented on her song!"

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“Wha—do you live in a hole? She’s a singer. She wrote *Driver’s License* and *Vampire*. I know you’ve heard her.”

“Don’t be so sure about that. What did this comment say?”

“It said, and I quote, *Sing it, girl* with two exclamation points!”

“Oh. That’s nice, I guess.”

“Nice? It’s freaking amazing.”

“Okay.”

Josie sighed into the phone. “When are you going to be home?”

“Hopefully by tomorrow afternoon.”

“All right. Tell Bailey to text me the second she wakes up.”

“Yup,” he said, not intending to do anything of the sort.

“So, you’re sleeping there in the apartment with her tonight?” Josie asked, her voice heavy with insinuation.

“Yes, why?”

“No reason. It’s just that I’ve watched her videos. That apartment is pretty small.”

“Yeah. So?”

“There’s only one bedroom...”

“Jeezus.” He realized what she was hinting at. “I’m sleeping on the couch. Don’t tell me you bought into that BaileyQuinn crap on the internet.”

“Bailquinn. And maybe. Why not? I see how you look at her.”

Shit.

“I don’t look at her any way,” he denied.

“Mmm-hmm.” As she said that, he could envision his sister’s smug face in his mind. It had his hand itching to hit the

End Call button as she continued, “It wouldn’t be a problem if you liked her, you know. She’s been in love with you forever.”

“No, she hasn’t.” He scowled even as his pulse inexplicably kicked up.

“Uh, yes she has. You were just too self centered in high school to see it.”

“If that’s all true, that was in high school. We’ve both grown up.”

“No. She’s still as into you now as she was then.”

“Please don’t say that.” He squeezed his eyes closed and drew in a breath, remembering the near kiss, his reaction to it, *her* reaction to his rejection...

“Why not?” Josie asked.

Because he was into her too. Because it was too tempting to think about being with her. Because being together was impossible. Because he’d hurt her tonight without meaning to by just pulling away from a kiss. What would she do if anything happened between them then he left.

Being serious long distance didn’t work. And he wasn’t going to make his little sister’s best friend, the girl who’d been in love with him since ninth grade, a vacation fling. Bailey wasn’t a girl he could do casual with.

“I’ll text tomorrow to let you know what time to expect us back.” With that, he hit to end the call before she could piss him off any further.

If only he could disconnect his brain as easily as he had the call.

His mind kept going back to that moment. She’d almost kissed him and damned if he hadn’t wanted to kiss her back. To tumble her onto that bed and show her that his pulling away had nothing to do with her and everything to do with him. His own conflicted feelings about his attraction to her. His desperation to keep his love life on the back burner while he was still active in the teams.

He couldn't turn off his brain, but he could redirect its focus. He opened the cell's browser and began searching the name his sister had mentioned on his phone. Olivia Rodrigo—whoever she was.

He was shocked when the name not only came up but in connection with Bailey's in an article by an actual news entity.

Reading past the headline, he had to think that maybe this was a big deal and not his sister's usual over the top enthusiasm.

With the new heartbreak ballad "Your Lies", Bailey Knowles joins Olivia Rodrigo, Billie Eilish and Lana Del Rey in a growing list of female musicians enacting revenge on former flames with break-up anthems.

Most of the article was behind a paywall but what he could read mentioned Bailey's ex-boyfriend by name.

Down the rabbit hole now, Quinn typed in *Axel Black* and the screen filled with results.

Seeing this was going to take awhile, he leaned back on the sofa and made himself comfortable as he settled in to start reading.

It didn't take long to realize Axel's career, if you could call it that, began when he was a DJ who'd rubbed elbows with the hottest celebrities in the music industry.

Basically a party boy with a deep contact list.

Then he opened his own record label and released his album—Quinn guessed the inspiration to start his own label was because no existing label wanted his album. One short listen told him the man had no talent. At least in Quinn's opinion. Axel had nothing like Bailey's skill.

Nevertheless Axel earned a viral following by performing his songs live, sometimes accompanied by his celebrity friends, on Instagram and TikTok.

Quinn flipped through the long list of websites his search had returned. Skimming the headlines he soon realized Axel

was a player. A party boy as famous for his romantic life as his music and celeb connections.

And amidst that long list of the famous *It Girls* he'd been seen with was Bailey's name.

Opening one link Quinn navigated around the multitude of ads on the page to read the flimsy article. Light on facts. Heavy on click bate.

Then he got to the comments.

A few stuck up for Bailey, obviously on her side of the rift. Most were proof that people were horrible when they could hide behind a keyboard. Vicious. Ignorant. And completely adverse to the use of punctuation and the basic rules of grammar.

who is this nobody who broke Axels heart? bitch ain't even famous

celebrity adjacent is the new celebrity

100% that's the only reason Axel is anybody at all

Bailey is more of a celebrity than Axel did you even listen to her song???

that cheating cow will be nobody again now that Axel dumped her

her eleven million followers say different

this conversation is exactly what is wrong with America

can't take it move to Canada you snowflake

As the commenters devolved into name calling Quinn lowered the cell. No wonder Bailey was rattled in the car, if she was reading this shit.

Quinn flashed back to the studio time where he witnessed Bailey lay her heart and soul open for him to see all the

emotion inside. Notorious party boy or not, Axel had cut her deep with his betrayal.

He'd seen the pain as she sang. Both that night in Josie's room and again in the studio.

God, she was talented. She'd stood from the piano bench where she'd played her heart out while singing and moved to the guitar where she was equally proficient. Equally moving.

He remembered her playing a bunch of instruments when she'd been in band with Josie. Back then he'd written it off to nerd skills. Now, he had to wrap his head around the fact that she was a legitimate musical prodigy. And more than that, he had to wrap his head around the fact that watching and listening to her was a huge turn on.

Thirteen years later, Bailey's nerd skills were giving him a hard on.

He couldn't deny he'd almost kissed her during the short time he'd been at that damn reunion he probably shouldn't have gone to. Out on the back deck, he'd been inches away from kissing Bailey before common sense hit him up side the head.

Then today, here in the apartment... He wanted to kiss her. Hell, he wanted to do way more than kiss her and he shouldn't.

He was leaving for the other coast in just a couple of weeks and didn't know when he'd be back. And she was Josie's friend, the girl who'd practically lived with them when she was a kid. A one night stand, or even a two-week stand, was out of the question.

Maybe if he kept repeating the reasons they'd start to sink in deep enough that his brain and his dick would both listen. So far, it wasn't working.

Close personal protection meant he had to be close. And damn, this was all feeling far too personal.

Given he couldn't seem to control his libido around her, a smart man would put as much distance between them as he

could, but as long as he was the one protecting her, that was the one thing he couldn't do.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Do you want the good news or the bad news?” Xander asked over video chat the next morning.

“Um, good?” Bailey glanced around at the chaos surrounding her and realized she could use some good news.

She’d woken to find her life scattered across the apartment floor, except for the stuff that Quinn had fit with military precision into the few large cardboard boxes he’d found waiting by the door to be recycled.

Of course, choosing good news first still left the dread of the bad news hanging over her head.

“Your song hit number one on Spotify,” Xander announced in a satisfied tone that had her wondering if he’d already figured out the Paragon Agency’s percentage of her recent earnings.

That tidbit about her song hitting number one brought Quinn’s head up, drawing his focus away from the box he was packing.

“Wow. That’s great. Thanks.” Bailey tried to rally herself to an appropriate level of enthusiasm.

At the same time she braced herself for when the song would fall—first out of the top ten, then out of the top one hundred until she was barely a memory earning pennies, fifteen percent of which the agency would take.

How many downloads did it take to be number one? Hundreds? Thousands? A hundred thousand? More?

She had no idea. But every download represented another person who had heard her heartbreak. Another potential commenter—good or bad. She felt... exposed.

The urge to curl into a ball and hide under the covers was strong. If only the covers weren't already folded and awaiting transport.

And this was the *good* news.

“Now, for the bad news...” Xander began.

Bailey drew in a breath. Might as well get it all over with now. “All right.”

“Axel released a new song.”

Quinn was somehow right there next to her. He laid a hand on Bailey's shoulder and said, “Let me guess. It's about Bailey.”

Xander nodded. “Captain Sweatpants got it in one.”

Quinn let out a breath but didn't respond to Xander's nickname, possibly because he was actually wearing his gray sweatpants at the moment.

Instead Quinn moved so he was facing Bailey. “Don't give Axel the satisfaction of saying or doing anything. He's looking for attention. Don't give it to him.”

“I agree with the captain. You do need to get back on social. You have sponsor contracts to fulfill, but don't mention Axel or the song. Business as usual. You're a brand ambassador. That's all you talk about. The products. Nothing about him or his song. Someone compliments your song, you thank them and move on. They ask about the relationship, you ignore the comment like you didn't see it. Do you hear me, Bailey?”

A frown creased Quinn's brow as he leaned in to speak to Xander on the cell. “She's not a child. She's a professional. She'll be fine.”

That had Xander's brows shooting high.

“Is that all? We’re kind of busy here,” Quinn asked as he leveled a stare on Xander’s image on the cell.

“Just one more thing. Bailey, did you put a video of Axel naked with another woman on TikTok?”

Oh, shit.

Now it was Quinn’s brows that shot high as his gaze shifted to Bailey.

She forced her gaze back to Xander as she responded, “I took it down immediately.”

She’d only wanted to document his infidelity and since her TikTok app was always open on her cell... Of course, in hindsight it was an epically stupid idea. One that could cost her.

“Bailey, things are never truly gone from the internet. You know that.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” she whispered. “How much trouble am I in?”

“You tell me. There are copies people grabbed before you took it down everywhere, including a heavily censored one that aired on TMZ. I think we can expect some sort of response.”

“A legal response?” Bailey asked.

All her scrimping to save money, build herself a nest egg, and it could all go away if Axel sued her. Even if she won, the legal fees alone could bankrupt her.

Xander bobbed his head. “Maybe. And other...”

“Other?” Quinn asked.

Xander pressed his lips together. “I have to ask you. Bailey, does Axel have anything on you?”

“Like what?” she asked.

Quinn drew in a breath, his gaze on her. “He’s asking if there’s any chance you two might have...made a sex tape.”

Her eyes flew wide. “No.”

“What about texting nude photos?” Xander added.

She felt the blood drain from her face.

Her breath came fast and shallow when a memory surfaced. Light headed, she swayed.

Quinn reached out to support her just as Xander said, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Mortified, she finally forced herself to meet Quinn’s concerned gaze before she dragged her focus back to her manager as she whispered, “Yes.”

Xander let out a sigh. “I’ll call the team and tell them we’re working today.”

On a Sunday. The team was going to hate her. She forced her gaze back to Xander. “I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’ll spin it. Not my first celebrity nudes and I’m sure they won’t be the last. Keep your cell on.”

Xander disconnected without saying goodbye, which left Bailey alone with Quinn and her shame.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“It’ll be okay,” he said.

“Will it?”

“Xander says it will. He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to lie to spare your feelings.” Quinn’s crooked, dimple-filled smile appeared. “So, you caught Asshole Axel in the act on camera?”

“Yeah... He...” She swallowed. “He fell while chasing me and from the screaming I think he kind of really hurt his... dick.”

Quinn bit his lip to control, albeit badly, a smile. “You still have that video?” he asked.

“I made it private but yeah, it’s still in my TikTok.”

“I might need to see that one day.”

“Why?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Besides the fact I’m betting him falling and breaking his dick is hilarious, it’s the perfect Karmic payback for his cheating on you. Since I’ve made it my career to make sure bad people get their due, I’m always looking for a good dose of bad Karma.”

Looking for a good dose of bad Karma. That sentiment was worthy of a T-shirt or a bumper sticker. Or even better, a song!

She’d have enjoyed it more if she didn’t feel like she might be due some Karmic payback for her own actions.

“What about me? Am I a bad person? Do I deserve it if Axel does post...” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

God, she’d been so stupid. She should have known better than to send him a naked selfie.

She hadn’t wanted to. It took her an hour to get even one shot she thought looked good enough to send.

But he’d been away, traveling with the band. When he’d asked for a picture she’d been more afraid he’d look elsewhere if she said no. So many girls were always hanging around the band.

She’d never even considered he’d use it against her—

“Hey.” Quinn’s voice brought her head up. “You are not a bad person. And even if he is a dick and posts your picture, it won’t be the end of the world.”

Said the man built like a carved marble statue of some Roman god. All hard muscles and beautiful lines.

Any nudes of Quinn floating around the internet would raise his public profile and his self esteem. As opposed to hers, which would only do the opposite.

Nudes—ugh!

After being so damn stupid she deserved whatever she got.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wearing the T-shirt and sweatpants he'd packed in anticipation of spending at least one night in the city, Quinn stood at the stove, pushing the scrambled eggs around in the pan so they didn't burn.

He'd finally convinced Bailey that they both needed some food. It was late for breakfast but early for lunch. Luckily she had eggs in the fridge. Even he could handle cooking those. And he figured they should use them up since she was moving out and, hopefully, not coming back.

Not that it was such a bad little apartment. Or at least it wouldn't have been if he didn't see security nightmares everywhere.

The lock on the building's front door to the street was broken so people didn't even need to be buzzed in. Not that a crook would need to use the front door since the fire escape led right to a window in her apartment that had a broken lock.

He'd nailed that shut last night, which wasn't ideal. If there was a fire, she'd have to break the window to use the fire escape. But again, he didn't plan on Bailey being in this apartment after today.

While he renewed that vow to himself as he pushed the now solidified scrambled eggs around the pan, he glanced up to see what Bailey was up to.

Given the entire apartment was about the size of his parents' living room, he could see Bailey clearly where she'd

cocooned herself into the corner of the sofa on the other side of the room.

She looked adorable in an oversized sweatshirt, her head bowed over her cell phone. Her legs were curled beneath her, while a blanket draped over them in spite of the heat blasting out of the apartment's radiators.

He'd had to say her name three times before when he'd asked if she wanted toast before she'd lifted her head and noticed he was speaking.

Realization hit him. There was only one thing that would have her so rapt.

Axel.

Quinn would have guessed she'd done another deep dive into the gossip sites and the threads of vicious reader comments except he heard the sound of low tinny music.

The volume of whatever had her attention glued to the phone was low but he could just make out the strains of a song, thanks to the fact he was barely ten feet away from her in the cramped city apartment.

If he were a betting man, he'd wager she was listening to Axel's song. The one bashing her in retaliation for hers about him.

Time to save her from herself.

He turned off the stovetop burner and scooped the eggs onto two plates. After grabbing two forks from the drawer in the surprisingly efficient kitchen area, he headed toward her on the sofa.

She looked up from the cell clutched in her hands guiltily as he held the plate out to her and said, "Eggs."

"Thank you."

"You can thank me by not letting that get to you." He tipped his chin toward the cell she'd laid right next to her on the sofa, as if she couldn't stand the thought of it being as far away from her as the coffee table.

Collapsing back into the nearby chair, he shoveled the first scoop of eggs into his mouth as she asked, “Not let *what* get to me?”

Her innocent act didn’t work on him. He’d watched both Bailey—when she’d been called Jane—and Josie attempt to lie back in the day. Neither girl was good at it.

“Axel’s song. I’m guessing you’re listening to it and I get it. I’d listen too. *Once*. But it sounds like you’ve got it playing on repeat.”

“TikTok automatically repeats,” she defended, the reprimand throwing her into shy mode as she had trouble maintaining eye contact.

“Then close the app,” he suggested. “Hell, delete it.”

She looked as horrified as if he’d suggested she cut off her right arm. “I can’t. That’s how I earn a living.”

He cocked up a brow. “I’m sure you can manage to do your job without obsessively listening to his song.”

She shook her head. “It’s become a trending sound. It’s *everywhere*.”

He didn’t TikTok and had no clue about trending sounds but he knew one universal solution that worked for all annoyances related to the necessary evil of modern technology.

“Then turn off the volume and mute the damn thing,” he said.

She pressed her lips together, out of arguments. Which would be good, if she didn’t look so bad—as in miserable. She looked adorable, her hair barely contained in a messy bun as she snuggled on the sofa. But he could see the unhappiness clearly shining through all of this morning’s forced smiles and cordiality.

Quinn swallowed his last forkful of eggs then leaned forward, setting the plate on the low table before leaning his forearms on his knees. “Bailey, he’s not worth your time.

Besides, you're a way better musician than he is. His song sucks compared to yours."

The lyrics were full of obscenities. The chords simplistic. The melody almost non-existent. What it did have was lots of loud drums and shouting into the microphone which he couldn't bring himself to classify as *singing*.

Axel's song wasn't getting nearly as many likes or listens or whatever as her song on the site he'd checked. That made Quinn extremely happy but probably was driving Bailey's narcissist ex-boyfriend nuts.

"You heard his song?" she asked, looking surprised.

After Xander's call, he'd googled while she'd been in the shower, just to see what bullshit lies Bailey's asshole ex was spreading about her.

And he might have also been on his cell searching for any leaked nudes of Bailey. Strictly so Xander would be able to demand the picture—or pictures, plural, he didn't know how many—be taken down. Of course.

In his search he'd found Axel was getting very nasty on social media and in his comments to the press.

It all made Quinn's protective side kick in hard.

He could keep his cool fine on a mission, even when faced with some of the worst of the world's bad guys, but this was personal. This was Bailey. If he ever ended up face-to-face with Axel, Quinn couldn't guarantee they'd both walk away from it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*B*ailey felt sick to her stomach. It seemed every new comment was worse than the last. She'd been called every name in the book by Axel's fans. Horrible hateful things —

“Stop.” Quinn snatched the cell out of her hand.

She glanced up. “I need my phone.”

“If and when you need it, I'll give it back to you.”

“You're a bully.”

“And you're a glutton for punishment. So which one of us is worse?”

“Fine.” She pouted just as her cell vibrated in Quinn's hand. “Did you switch it to vibrate? I always leave the ringer on.”

“That's your first mistake.” Brow cocked high, Quinn shot her a glare before swiping across the screen of the cell.

Her eyes flew wide as she jumped up. “You're answering it?”

“It's only Josie,” he said before he focused back on the screen and said, “What?”

“She didn't text me back. Did you tell her?” Josie asked, excitement clearly in her voice.

“Tell me what?” Bailey asked, making a grab for the cell.

All Quinn had to do was hold the cell higher to keep it out of her reach. “She just woke up and no I did not tell her.”

“Tell me what?” she demanded again. “And I did not just wake up. I’ve been up!”

With a sigh, Quinn handed the cell to Bailey. “Here. I’ll clean up breakfast.”

Feeling guilty, she called after him, “Thank you.” Then focused on the video call.

“Why didn’t you reply to my texts?” Josie demanded.

“They all just said *call me*. Which I was going to do.” After she’d checked what Axel, and more importantly the internet, was saying about her.

“Fine. But I can’t believe Quinn didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?” she asked for the third time in as many minutes.

“Olivia Rodrigo commented on the TikTok of your song!”

“Really? Wow. That’s really nice.”

“Right!? That’s what I thought. She’s so amazing.”

“Yeah, she is.” Unlike most of the rest of the commenters.

“Okay, you told her. Now let us get off the phone so we can finish packing and get home,” Quinn called from the sink in the kitchen.

Bailey cringed. “He’s right. I didn’t even start packing the stuff in my bedroom or the closet yet.”

“But you really might be home by tonight?” Josie asked.

Bailey raised her gaze to Quinn, who nodded. “That’s the plan,” she told Josie.

“Yay! Okay, I’ll let you go. But only because I want you to get home sooner. Not because my brother told me to.”

“Duly noted.” She smiled at the ongoing sibling rivalry.

Her life sucked, but it would suck less in the Baldwin house with her best friend... and her best friend’s hot brother.

They disconnected and Quinn came over with a box of trash bags. “So, about the bedroom and the closet. You’re not going to like this idea but I think the best way to pack up your towels and bedding and all your clothes is in trash bags. They’ll be easier to fit into the vehicle and we’re out of boxes.”

She glanced at the closet she could see through the open bedroom door and envisioned all the beautiful designer clothes inside, so many with the tags still on them, and sighed.

“I know. You’re right. Will it all fit?” she asked, doubtful.

“I’ll make it fit... carefully. Promise. You hiding anything else around here? A storage room in the building’s basement perhaps?”

“Nope. Just what you see here... and three plastic storage boxes under my bed hidden by the dust ruffle.” She cringed. “Still think it’ll all fit?”

He drew in a breath. “I guess we’ll see. I’ll grab those and run them and the cardboard boxes down to the SUV. Then we can fit the bags in around them.”

“Quinn.”

He turned back. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

That heart melting smile was back. “You’re welcome. Now finish your eggs and go get dressed...so there are a few less clothes to pack.”

Two hours later her apartment was empty of her stuff, except for the furniture. There was no way that was going to fit in Quinn’s rental but he had actually managed to get all the bags of clothes inside. Plus the smaller boxes filled with products from the brands who sponsored her—which was considerable and earned her a few eye rolls when he saw how much makeup she was bringing with her.

“You don’t need this stuff,” he’d said.

“This *stuff* earns me thousands of dollars per post,” she’d replied.

“I’ll make it fit,” he’d agreed, unable to argue with that.

And he had. Made it fit.

She was going to have to list her furniture for sale. Most of it—the chairs, the sofa, the cocktail table—were old used stuff she’d bought second hand.

The rest—her nightstand and the desk she used as a dressing table—was cheap pressboard she’d had shipped to her from Walmart and assembled herself.

It was nothing she’d thought she was too attached to. Everything had seen better days. She should just give it all away. Free to the first person to respond to the listing. Even so, she was feeling a bit sentimental about leaving it all, even if it was clear they couldn’t take it with them.

They couldn’t see out the back window of the vehicle, but after he maneuvered out of the parking space, they’d only be looking forward, right?

A text came through from Xander and she reevaluated that plan.

XANDER

Please tell me you’re still in the city.

Quinn had just started the engine and as nostalgic as she was feeling about leaving her apartment, she was looking forward to getting back upstate. But Xander’s text had her laying a hand on Quinn’s arm.

“Hang on a second. Xander just texted. We might not be out of here yet.”

He cut the engine and leaned back in his seat. “Go on. Call him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Bailey,” Quinn said, his tone flat. No nonsense. Quinn was starting to sound like Xander sometimes.

Great.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Stop being sorry. And I don’t mean stop saying it. I mean stop feeling it. Your apartment getting broken into so it’s not safe for you to be here alone is *not* your fault. Xander texting —*not* your fault.”

“You spending your leave driving me around and helping me move *is* my fault,” she countered.

His gaze met hers. Intense. Sincere. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be.”

Her cheeks heated. “Okay.”

He tipped his chin toward her cell. “Make your call. I’ll wait.”

She tapped the screen to call Xander, who answered not with *hello* but with, “Where are you?”

“Sitting in front of my almost empty apartment.”

“Good. You have a radio interview.”

“Wait. What?”

“I got you booked for an interview on a local radio station. Oh, and bring your guitar. They want you to sing live on air.”

The guitar that was buried behind a dozen bags of stuff? Bailey turned, worried, to look at Quinn.

He replied to her unspoken question with a single nod. “What time?” he asked.

“Um, when?” she relayed to Xander.

“An hour. I’m texting you the address.”

She sent another concerned look at Quinn, who bobbed his head again.

“Okay. We’ll head over now,” she said. It might take an hour to find and free the guitar from the carefully packed car.

After disconnecting she turned to Quinn.

“I’m so sorry.” After their recent discussion, she cringed the moment the words were out of her mouth.

“Again, *nothing* for you to be sorry about. This is a good opportunity for you.”

“But the car. It’s all packed and now we have to excavate ___”

“I know where your guitar is. It’s near the top. I can get to it without too much trouble.”

“But now we’ll be getting on the road late.”

He shrugged. “We’ll make it home before full dark.”

“And what if Xander calls back with more *opportunities*?” she asked.

“Then we’ll spend another night here.”

“On the bare mattress in my apartment?” she asked.

“I could find the bag with the bedding and towels. Or we’ll check into a hotel.”

Quinn managed to dodge whatever roadblocks she threw at him. But if she was honest it was more the flutter that the thought of checking into a hotel with Quinn gave her that had her finally giving in.

“Okay,” she said.

And when that single word earned her that dimple-filled smile, she started to hope Xander would call back with another interview.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The door of the radio station had yet to slam shut behind them when the attack came.

Half a dozen photographers rapid-fired a volley of questions and flashes at them as fast and furious as any enemy attack Quinn had experienced while in the teams.

“Bailey, look over here!”

“Quinn! How long have you and Bailey been together?”

“Were you together while Bailey was still with Axel?”

“Bailey, any response to Axel’s song?”

What the fuck? How the hell did they find her here so fast?

He’d been caught in the middle of many an attack in his years in the military. They trained to be prepared for even the surprise ambushes.

They were taught to be on constant alert. To always expect the unexpected. But he hadn’t been expecting an attack while walking Bailey out of a radio station in Manhattan.

Given they’d encountered the paparazzi once already while coming out of the recording studio, he should have known better. He wouldn’t be caught by surprise again.

Luckily training kicked in. Quinn snapped into protective mode—one arm around Bailey, one out as he cut a path through the press of reporters between them and the parked vehicle.

Quinn had to think that although Bailey's manager was overbearing and bossy, Xander was correct about one thing. Bailey needed security. And as frightening as the thought was, if he hadn't happened to be there—at the right place and the right time—he'd bet she wouldn't have hired protection.

Shouting questions was one thing, but the close proximity and aggression of some of the paparazzi created a very real physical threat.

“Back off,” he warned in a tone he hoped conveyed that he wouldn't hesitate to use all of his skills to defend Bailey.

He unlocked and swung open the door and, head down, Bailey slid into the passenger seat. When she lifted her face to glance at him he saw how scared she was.

Cussing under his breath, he slammed her door and, not trusting anyone, clicked the key fob to lock her inside while he moved around to the other side. With a warning glare at those who dared to move too close to the vehicle, he unlocked the door, slid inside and engaged the locks again in a matter of seconds.

Glancing at her, he asked, “You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

Listening to her tone, not her words, he decided she was not fine. But she would be. As soon as he could get her out of this God forsaken city and back upstate.

Although, given that people now knew who he was, being home was no guarantee they'd be paparazzi free.

He should probably call Josie and make sure there weren't any reporters staked out in front of his parents' house.

Thank goodness his mother was on that cruise. She probably would have invited the paparazzi in from the cold for dinner. That was the kind of woman she was.

Quinn navigated out of the parking space, possibly bumping one of the photographers—unintentionally of course—with the rearview mirror on the way.

He had no intention of getting into a chase with the photographers, but he did need to get away from them so he could talk to Bailey. Call Josie. Basically regroup. Form a game plan.

Spotting a restaurant with valet parking out front, he glanced at the clock in the dash, did a quick calculation as to when they'd get home if they stopped, then swung in.

Bailey's head came up. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you—and me—something to eat. It's been hours since those scrambled eggs."

"Are you sure?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Yup." He nodded as the valet waited for him to unlock and open the door.

"They're probably going to write that we came here on some sort of a... date." Bailey could barely look at him as she said it.

He leaned forward enough to catch her eye. "Bailey, I don't give a fuck what they write. Come on."

Opening the door, Quinn didn't miss the guy's focus flick to take in the amount of stuff tightly stowed in the vehicle.

Acting as if he normally drove around with an entire apartment in the back, Quinn didn't offer any explanation as he accepted the parking slip with a quick, "Thanks."

So far, the plan was working. There was only room for one car in front of the restaurant by the valet stand so Quinn got Bailey out of the car and in the door before the paparazzi could get to them.

Of course, they'd be waiting for the two of them to come out, but that was a problem for later.

"Reservations?"

"Nope," Quinn answered the man at the podium matter of factly.

It was late for lunch and too early for the dinner crowd and the place was nearly empty. He wasn't going to apologize for

his lack of reservation.

“Just two of you?”

“Yup.”

With a nod, the man grabbed two menus and turned toward a table in the front by the windows.

“Um, something in the back please,” he said, stopping him mid-step.

“Of course.” He pivoted and led them to a small table in the back.

Away from the sunlight coming in the front windows, lit only by the sconces on the wall, it was dim and secluded.

“Perfect. Thank you.”

“I’ll send the server right over.”

During the whole exchange, Bailey hadn’t spoken.

Ignoring the menu in front of him, he leaned forward. “What’s up?”

Bailey shot him a glance that said *what do you mean, what’s up* before she said, “You saw them.”

“The photographers?” he asked.

“Yes.” She nodded.

“You said they’ve been like that since your first date with Axel.”

“Yes, but then they were looking to get a shot of him. Now, they’re after me.”

They’re after me.

Her choice of words described exactly how she must be feeling. They matched the hunted look in her eyes. The caution that tensed her muscles and kept her shoulders high and her chin low as if she were trying to make herself a smaller target.

“They’re not going to get to you. Not with me here.”

“But you’re not always going to be here,” she whispered.

And that, in a nutshell, was why he was fighting the urge to slide in next to her on her side of the booth. To kiss her until that haunted expression left her face.

All he could do was protect her while he was here. And forget about her when he was gone.

He could do the first.

The second might be a problem.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*B*ailey's cell vibrated with a text alert, drawing her attention away from the salad she'd been picking on.

One glance at the name on the display had her groaning.

"What?" Quinn asked, the hand holding a french fry that looked absolutely amazing poised halfway between the plate and his mouth.

She raised her gaze to his. "It's from Xander."

"Groan-worthy, I agree. What's he want now?"

She tapped the screen to open the text and see. "He wants to know if we're still in the city."

Quinn drew in a deep breath. "I have a feeling we're not getting home tonight."

"Whatever it is, we don't have to—"

"Bailey, whatever it is, if you want to do it, we'll stay and do it."

"But all the stuff in the car."

"Both of the overnight bags we brought with us from upstate are accessible. The rest of the stuff can stay right where it is. That said, if you don't want to do whatever Xander has planned for you, we tell him we're already upstate and can't get back because of the snow."

"Is there snow?" she asked, eyes wide. Had there been a storm? Did he hear about it from Josie?

He shrugged. “Don’t know and neither does Xander. I’ve found that people who aren’t from upstate New York believe whatever you tell them about our weather. We can tell Xander three feet of snow fell on the highway and I bet he’d believe it.”

Her lips twitched. “Okay. Guess I should find out what he wants then.”

“I can’t wait to hear,” Quinn said, voice dripping in sarcasm as the juicy, fat, medium-rare hamburger he’d just picked up dripped its savory juices onto his plate.

Mouth watering, she reached for the cell still on the table next to her plate. The piece of broiled chicken breast on her arugula salad dressed with lemon and olive oil caught her eye.

She should have ordered the burger.

Picking up the cell she glanced around them, not wanting to disturb anyone nearby by making a phone call.

She and Quinn were the only patrons in the back of the restaurant so she tapped the screen to place the call and pressed the phone against her ear.

“*Good Morning, America,*” Xander said in lieu of hello.

“Good Morning, America?” Bailey repeated.

Quinn’s eyes widened as he watched the half of the conversation he was privy to.

“*Good Morning, America.*” Xander laughed. “Tomorrow. Three minute segment in the eight o’clock hour. They want you in the makeup chair by seven.”

“Why?” she asked.

“What do you mean why? The way your song is going. Not to mention the Axel thing.”

The Axel thing. He made it sound so nominal. Just a small thing. But it was all the radio station had wanted to talk about. It had been horrible. She was tired of being the sideshow in everyone else’s carnival.

Not anymore.

“No,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Xander asked.

“I don’t want to do it.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t feel comfortable.”

She heard Xander take in an audible breath. “Is Quinn there?”

This was serious. Xander hadn’t called him Captain Sweatpants.

“Yes.”

“Put him on, please.”

She didn’t like Xander trying to go over her head, as if Quinn were the boss of her and she’d do what he said.

Was Xander delusional?

Quinn was on her side and he didn’t take any shit from Xander. Her manager’s charm that always got her to agree to his plans even when they conflicted with hers didn’t work on Quinn.

It was for those reasons, and the fact that watching Quinn put Xander in his place might be fun, that she handed over the cell. “He wants to speak to you.”

One dark sexy brow cocked up as Quinn took the cell and said, “Yes?”

She quickly realized how frustrating it was to only hear one side of a conversation.

Xander must have been doing all of the talking because Quinn wasn’t saying anything and his expression gave away nothing.

All he did was grunt once and then say, “Okay,” followed by, “No,” before he lowered the phone and tapped to disconnect the call.

She snatched the cell back as she asked, “What did Xander say?”

“He explained what they’re offering.”

“What do you mean, offering?”

“Apparently they’re willing to give you the interview questions in advance and not bring up he who shall not be named. They’ll also like you to sing live on air. Oh, and they’d put us up in a suite in some Times Square hotel for the night.”

“And?”

“And what?” Quinn asked as he went back to his food.

“What did Xander ask that you said okay and then no?”

Drawing in a breath, he directed his focus away from the burger and back to her. “He asked if I’d relay all that information to you, to which I agreed, then he asked me to convince you to do it, which is when I said—”

“No,” she said, finishing his sentence.

He nodded. “Correct.”

“So you think I shouldn’t do it?” she asked pushing her plate farther away.

Her appetite for the salad was completely gone thanks to the stress of this decision. Not to mention the fact she’d never been all that enthused about that salad to begin with.

Quinn shook his head, chewing. “Never said that.”

“So you think I should do it?”

He cocked up one brow. “It doesn’t matter what I think. What do *you* want to do, Bailey?”

“Hide under a blanket and binge the Great British Baking Show for a day—or three.”

He nodded. “Then that’s what we’ll do. I can’t say I’ve ever watched that show but I’m game to give it a try. I’m sure Josie will be right there with you too. When we’re finished eating, we’ll get in the car and be sofa-bound. You can be under that blanket in front of the television in three hours.”

The picture he painted sounded nice. So why did she feel so completely unsettled rather than relieved?

She knew why. She didn't always do what was best for her.

"They really wouldn't ask any questions I don't want them to?" she asked.

Quinn raised his gaze to hers. "That's what Xander said."

She breathed in then let it out. "*Good Morning, America...* That show is pretty huge."

He nodded. "Must be since even I've watched it."

"That kind of exposure would be really good for my career." Amazing, actually. The kind of publicity you couldn't buy.

He tipped his head. "Mmm-hmm."

"Maybe I... should do it?"

"If you want to, sure. You should. Do it." He shrugged.

"Okay. I'll do it. But I already told Xander no." Now that she'd made the decision, the panic hit. What if it was too late?

What if he'd already called the producers and told them she'd said no? What if they'd already filled the slot with another interview? And even if they didn't, she'd look like a capricious diva, changing her mind every two minutes.

"Call him back," Quinn said simply, as if she hadn't just screwed up the biggest moment in her life.

"Okay. I will." Her hands were shaking so badly, her mind spinning so fast, she couldn't even do the simplest thing. Couldn't find him in her contacts to call him back.

Where the hell were her recent calls on this damn phone?

Most of her waking moments were spent staring at her cell, but now when her life depended on it she couldn't even make a simple phone call? She found her contact list but it was alphabetical by last name.

What was Xander's last name again?

What the hell? How could she not remember?

One big strong hand blocked her view of her screen as Quinn plucked the cell out of her trembling hands.

He tapped the screen a few times, then pressed the cell to his ear. After what was probably just a few seconds, but felt more like two eternally slow minutes, Quinn said, “She’ll do it.”

She watched as he remained quiet for a moment. She’d do anything to hear what was happening on the other end of that line.

Finally, Quinn said, “Text Bailey the info for that hotel suite.” Then he held out the phone. “He wants to talk to you.”

Relieved but still shaking she said, “Hello?”

“Never let that man go.”

She cut her gaze to Quinn before saying, “Um, what?”

“Whatever it costs, make sure he doesn’t leave.”

“Why?”

“Besides the fact he’s a miracle worker, have you been on social since that radio interview?”

The radio interview?

Quinn wasn’t even in the room with her for that. She might have been less flustered—felt less ganged up upon by the three DJs, if he had been.

“No, I haven’t. Is it...is it bad?”

“Hell, no, it’s not bad. It’s great. Your fans love him. The way he protected you from the paparazzi. They’ve got you two practically married off.”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard, very thankful Quinn couldn’t hear what Xander had said. “I guess that’s good.”

“Always a master of understatement.” Xander chuckled. “So, I was thinking...”

“Always dangerous,” she quipped.

“It’s about time you released a second song,” Xander continued.

“Another one?”

“Strike while the iron is hot. Maybe a nice love song about a certain tall, dark and dangerous bodyguard...”

Afraid he might be able to hear Xander through the cell pressed against her ear, she shot a glance at Quinn.

His expression remained passive. That didn't help the situation with Xander and his unrealistic expectations of both her song writing ability and her relationship with Quinn.

“I—I couldn't,” she protested

“I'm sure you could if you tried. Just think about it, okay? Texting that hotel address to you now. Get some rest. And don't stress your voice. Gonna be an early morning tomorrow and you have to sing.” Xander disconnected the call before she could argue with anything he said—one of his favorite tricks. Although, as promised, the address for the hotel came through in a text.

Fine. He could think he was getting his way just because he got the last word in but it didn't mean she was going to do anything he said.

Meanwhile, Quinn had finished his burger and was leaning back in his chair, watching her. He pushed his plate, which still contained a mound of fries, forward. “Go on. Eat. I remember how much you love fries.”

He remembered that?

Her cheeks heated. How many times had she stuffed her face in front of him as a kid? And now she was pretending she wanted the dumb salad in front of her.

Screw it. Reaching out, she grabbed a fry. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Finish them. I'm good.”

She just might finish them. She needed some comfort food. And it wasn't like Quinn would be seeing her naked anytime soon. Make that naked *again*, she amended as scenes from their embarrassing reunion ran through her head.

Nope. Quinn was just what Xander had said he was—her tall, dark and dangerously sexy bodyguard. Nothing more—it didn't matter how many fans thought otherwise.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Quinn stepped through the doorway of the top floor suite first and glanced around the living and dining area.

“Wow.” He let out a long low whistle then moved aside for Bailey to come inside.

Her eyes widened as she saw the space. She might make inconceivable amounts of money to post TikToks or whatever, but judging by her reaction she wasn’t any more used to accommodations like this than he was.

He dropped the bags he’d carried in, double locked the door, then headed for the two bedrooms and two bathrooms.

This place was more than double the size of his housing on base. Hell, it felt almost as big as his parents’ house and a hell of a lot fancier. Right down to a bidet in the one bathroom. He wouldn’t even know how to use one of those. Out of curiosity he was going to have to google and find out.

He was just about to suggest they check out the room service menu to see what they could order later—on the studio’s tab, of course—when his cell rang.

Glancing down, he raised a brow when Josie’s name and picture appeared.

“Calling instead of texting. This must be dire. What? Did Bailey and I fail to reply to a text in a timely manner?” he asked with as much attitude as he could muster.

“You and Bailey checked into a hotel room together?” Josie squealed.

“Jeezus.” Shaking his head, Quinn blew out a breath.

The paparazzi were nothing if not efficient. They’d just walked in the damn door.

“Need I ask how you know that?” he asked.

“It’s all over the internet.”

He strode back to the doorway and peered into the living area. As he expected, he found Bailey staring at her cell phone. No doubt she’d discovered the story already. *Great.*

“It’s nothing. Xander booked Bailey on a talk show for tomorrow morning. They’re paying to put her up at a hotel.”

“Put *you and her* up at a hotel, you mean,” Josie corrected.

“Since I’m currently her security, yes, I’ll be staying here too.”

“In the suite?”

He blew out a cuss. “Yes, in the suite, which is as big as Mom and Dad’s house, by the way.”

“So that’s it? Nothing more? You’re *just her security*? You do know that romance with the bodyguard is a hot romance trope, right?”

“Jeezus, Josie. You too? Enough with this *shipping* shit.”

“Shipping, huh? Listen to you using the lingo and correctly too. And it’s the internet shipping you two, not me.”

“The internet doesn’t know what the hell it’s talking about,” he grumbled.

“Mmm-hmm, we’ll see.”

Drawing in a breath, he refused to justify her insinuation with a response and instead changed the subject. “We’ll try making it home again tomorrow right after the morning segment. *If* Xander doesn’t come up with any more gigs for her in the meantime.”

“All right. Oh, Mom and Dad called.”

“Shit. Please tell me you didn’t let them know I’m home.” His mother would never forgive herself, or his father, if she

knew she was missing one of his admittedly too rare visits for a river cruise.

“Well, you’re not home, are you? You’re there. But yeah, don’t worry. I lied for you.”

He rolled his eyes at her acting like she didn’t lie all the time for far less worthy reasons. “Thank you.”

“She also asked if I’d start to get the Christmas decorations down from the attic so *you* can do that when you finally do get back.”

Ah, the cost of Josie’s telling that little white lie for him was finally revealed.

“I’ll get the boxes down. I’ll even hang the lights out front.”

“Good idea. Dad fell off the ladder doing that last year.”

Quinn bit out a cuss at the reminder of the cost of his being across the country—when he wasn’t out of the country completely. He really did need to get home more often.

He was just thinking how he wouldn’t mind getting done with all this city bullshit and getting back upstate with Bailey sooner rather than later when Josie burst out with an, “Oh, shit.”

“Oh my God,” Bailey gasped at the same time.

The outbursts were in stereo. Josie’s from the phone in his right ear. Bailey’s from the living room to his left.

“What? What happened?” he asked them both at once, hoping one would answer.

Josie answered first. “Google alert. A nude photo of Bailey just hit the internet.”

He got a look at Bailey—speechless, pale—and echoed his sister’s reaction. “Aw, shit. Uh, look, Josie. I gotta go.”

“Fine. I have to call Bailey anyway.”

His knee-jerk reaction was to tell her no. Leave Bailey alone as she wrapped her head around this rather than

rehashing it, but then he reconsidered. “Actually, yeah. Give me two minutes to talk to her then call Bailey. Keep her calm. Keep her talking to you so she doesn’t spiral.”

He needed Bailey occupied because he had something he needed to do. But before he did... He turned back to the bag he’d dropped on the bed of the smaller bedroom—the one he’d take for the night.

There wasn’t much inside, just toiletries and enough clothes for tonight and tomorrow. He easily located what he was looking for—a black hooded sweatshirt.

With the item in one hand, he moved into the living room where Bailey was seated still looking shell-shocked and panicked.

“Hey. You okay?” he asked.

“No.” She shook her head.

She raised her gaze to his and he could see the misery behind her eyes.

“I can’t believe he actually did it,” she said in a voice so low, so defeated, he could barely hear her.

Quinn, on the other hand, had no problem believing it.

Axel was proving to be as petty and vindictive as any other narcissist. He was real brave when hiding anonymously behind his cell phone. Quinn was anxious to see how he fared when facing the consequences of his actions with someone in person.

“I think you should call Xander. Get him on top of this. And then talk to Josie. That might make you feel better about things. She’s very good at man bashing.”

“Okay.” She nodded, looking numb.

“Good. I have to go out for a little while—”

“You’re leaving me?” Her eyes flew open in panic.

“No,” he said with a measured calm to reassure her. “I’m going out for a little while just to check on some things.”

“What things?” she asked with panic in her voice.

“Hotel security. Those paparazzi are sneaky. They’ll be even more fueled up now. I just want you to be safe. And if you stay in this room, with the door locked, you will be. Don’t open it for anyone. Okay? I’ll be back in time for us to order dinner so there’s no need for you to open that door after you double bolt it behind me.”

“All right,” she agreed weakly.

“Come on.” He tipped his head. “Walk me to the door and then lock it behind me.”

He didn’t like leaving her. Liked how scared and vulnerable she looked even less. But he hated the thought of Axel getting away with what he’d done.

Quinn had been playing defense for days. Time to go on the offense.

After waiting to hear all the locks engage, he pulled out his cell phone. While in the elevator he got on the internet.

The bad thing about this generation was that they posted everything online.

The good thing about this generation—when you were looking to locate a certain someone—was that they posted everything online.

It took Quinn the length of the elevator ride down to the ground floor to find Axel.

Absolutely ridiculous. Did no one value privacy anymore? Not to mention security.

Shaking his head, he headed out onto the sidewalk, sweatshirt balled in his hand.

Around the corner from the hotel he descended down the stairs into the Times Square and 42nd Street subway station and bought himself a Pay-Per-Ride MetroCard from the machine there.

Pulling the hood up over his head after slipping on the sweatshirt, he walked onto the subway platform just as a train

pulled up.

Eight minutes later he emerged on Houston Street. Thank you, Axel, for tagging the restaurant in an Instagram post from fifteen minutes ago.

Judging by the picture, and the amount of food and alcohol on the table, not to mention the number of women surrounding him, he expected Axel to still be there gorging himself. At least long enough for Quinn to implement his plan.

Sunset was early this time of year, for which he was enormously grateful. He was most comfortable operating at night. And even with the lights of Manhattan fighting off the dark, there were still pockets of pitch blackness if one sought them out.

The front door and sidewalk in front of the restaurant was bathed in neon and light but the back, that was a different story.

A dark alley led to open patio seating—currently empty due to the chill this time of year—and the back entrance to the restaurant.

Quinn didn't know Axel, but he knew his type. And he knew what would appeal to him.

He scribbled a note on the back of one of the flyers a street hawker had shoved in his hand. A promise that he had incriminating dirt and photos of Bailey Knowles that he'd be willing to share for a price. All Axel had to do was walk out the back door and follow the alley to where he'd meet him on the street behind the restaurant. Alone.

He folded the note then printed in big block letters Axel's name.

Spotting a kid handing out menus for a neighboring restaurant, Quinn held a twenty-dollar bill up for him to see. "Wanna earn a quick twenty?"

The boy looked at him suspiciously. "What would I have to do?"

"Hand this note to the hostess right inside that restaurant."

“Inside Emilio’s? That’s it?” he asked, still looking wary.

“That’s it.”

After a quick glance over his shoulder at the neighboring restaurant, where no doubt the guy who’d hired him to pass out flyers was, the kid reached for the twenty and the note. “All right.”

Quinn watched just long enough to see the kid open Emilio’s door, then he took off at a sprint, which got him around the corner and to the alley behind the restaurant in more than enough time to see his prey emerge from the back door.

Hook, line and sinker.

Axel was alone, as requested, and looking very eager to acquire this supposed dirt about Bailey.

Asshole.

Time to teach this spoiled brat a lesson.

The move was quick, practiced over countless hours of training and real world experience over the past thirteen years.

Clad in black, Quinn was invisible. To Axel, it would seem like the attack came out of nowhere.

One moment the skinny rocker sporting an over abundance of jewelry was walking while staring down at his cell phone—the next he was in a chokehold from behind. His face pressed against the rough cold brick of the alley wall. One arm twisted—hopefully painfully—behind his back.

“Man, just t-take whatever you want. Cash. Gold. This is the new iPhone. It’s worth like a grand. You can have it. Just don’t hurt me.”

Quinn let out a snort. “I don’t want your shit,” he said in a low whisper behind Axel’s ear.

The amount of body spray the guy had layered on was so strong Quinn had to fight the cough tickling his throat. At least his choking on Axel’s stench would help disguise his voice.

“Then wh—what do you want?”

Quinn had to be fast. In a city teeming with people day and night, he couldn't count on no one stumbling upon them. Time to get to the point.

“You're going to stop this bullshit smear campaign you've got going against Bailey Knowles. No more anonymously leaking photos. No more songs about her. No more riling up your so-called *fans* to go after her. Nothing. I see or hear that you've said anything other than *no comment* about her and I'll find you. I promise you won't like what happens to you when I do.”

To emphasize his point, Quinn pressed Axel harder against the wall while shoving his arm up, knowing the added pressure on the awkwardly bent joints would feel like his bones were close to breaking, his tendons tearing.

Axel's whimpering was punctuated by begging. “Please. No. Don't break my arm. I play guitar, man. It's my life.”

He played, but not well in Quinn's opinion. But mediocre musician or not, he needn't have worried. Quinn knew exactly how much pressure it took to break an arm—or a neck—and this wasn't nearly it.

“Give me your phone,” Quinn demanded.

“Yeah, sure. Take it. It's in my hand.”

“Unlock it,” Quinn instructed, releasing some of the pressure so the guy could look down at the cell.

“Yeah. Sure. It's got facial recognition. Shit. It's too dark. Hang on. I'll open it with the code—”

That was when—as Axel was busy trying to enter a code with shaking hands—Quinn took a step back, then turned and ran.

In seconds he was around the corner, the sweatshirt off and balled up in one hand. His red plaid long-sleeved flannel worn open over a white thermal T-shirt made him look completely different than the dark hooded figure who'd gone into that alley.

Just in case there were security cameras and Axel got it in his head he wanted to pursue his assailant, now Quinn looked like any guy who'd run outside quick without a coat. Maybe to put money in the parking meter.

Hopefully Axel was smart enough to go back inside and enjoy his Italian meal and fleeting fame. Since his song sucked so bad, Quinn had no doubt that singing career was going to be short lived.

Bailey, on the other hand. She was going to be a star... He was just sad he couldn't stick around long enough to watch her rise.

CHAPTER TWENTY

*B*ailey would have thought the shame of knowing the entire world could currently be looking at a naked picture of her would have been her biggest concern. That Xander, Quinn, her mother and her eighty-year old music teacher from high school could right now be seeing her making a kissy face while cradling her naked boobs in her hands.

It wasn't.

The fact Quinn had gone out an hour ago and not come back yet was what had her checking the time on her cell every five minutes and chewing on the inside of her lip.

Should she text him? Or have Josie text him? He had said he'd be gone for a little while but in her mind that had meant like maybe ten, twenty minutes. Not an hour.

The man had barely left her side over the past two days and now he'd left her for like a whole sixty minutes!

She didn't know whether she was more worried for herself or for him. She was locked safely in a suite in a five-star hotel. While Quinn was missing.

Maybe something was wrong. What if something had happened to him?

Just as she was about to really start to panic, and possibly hyperventilate, she heard the locks slide in the door.

Someone was using a keycard to get in. Quinn? She hoped so. But as instructed she'd put on the deadbolt and the chain,

so whoever it was wouldn't be able to open the door.

She jumped off the sofa and ran to the entrance of the suite.

“Bailey, it's me.”

Quinn. Finally!

Hands trembling and in a rush, she had trouble getting the locks open but when she managed it, she flung the door wide and demanded, “Where were you?”

Walking past her he said, “I told you. I went to check on security.”

She slammed the door and locked it again, grateful that anger and annoyance had replaced her fear and helplessness.

“That took you *that* long?” she asked, hands on her hips.

“Management tried to give me the runaround.” Quinn dropped a sweatshirt on a chair and finally turned to look at her. His cheeks and the tip of his nose were pink, as if from the cold.

She frowned. “Were you outside?”

His brows quirked up at the question. “Of course. How else could I look for weak points in the perimeter? Service doors and fire egresses are often overlooked by security in public buildings where the focus is on the main entrance.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. He was acting all military, talking about security and egresses. Why? To throw her off? Again, why?

What could he have been doing for the past hour that he'd have to hide?

Maybe it wasn't Quinn acting strangely but rather her. She had to face the fact that this whole situation had made her paranoid.

Truth be told she hadn't felt normal since the break-in at her apartment.

She might have a chance of having her life settle down if she weren't on this sudden and disjointed press tour Xander was throwing at her one appearance at a time.

With a sigh, she raised her gaze to Quinn. Damn, he looked good in flannel. And that thermal stretched tight across his pecs didn't hurt.

"Thank you. For taking care of me," she said, hoping it made up for her earlier suspicion.

He flashed that knee-buckling smile. "Always."

Always. If only that were true...

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*T*HE BALLAD OF BAILEY AND THE BODYGUARD
BAILEY KNOWLES'S PROTECTION TO PAPARAZZI
"BACK OFF!"

"SUITE" LOVE—BAILEY KNOWLES AND BODYGUARD QUINN
BALDWIN CHECK INTO FOUR-FIGURE / NIGHT DELUXE SUITE
TOGETHER

Quinn scanned the headlines and let out a sigh. He and Bailey might have escaped the city yesterday morning—with a bit of maneuvering and the help of the television studio staff—but they couldn't escape the press coverage.

Someone—his money was on Josie—had gotten up early, gone to the store and bought all the newspapers that featured him and Bailey.

His own picture scowled back at him in black and white from the page. The version of him in print had Bailey protectively under one arm while he cut a path between the photographers with the other.

It wasn't what he wanted to see first thing in the morning before he'd even had a cup of coffee.

His cell vibrated in the pocket of his sweats and he added *taking a phone call* to the list of things he didn't want to deal with this morning.

It was still early. Bailey and Josie were both here. His parents were on a cruise hopefully enjoying a buffet breakfast or sleeping late.

That only left the team. Or worse—command. Even while on official leave he was subject to being recalled for a mission.

Shit.

Freeing the cell from his pocket, Quinn let out a breath of relief when he saw Rich's name. He smiled. This he could probably handle as he poured his first cup of caffeine.

“Yo. Richie Rich. What's up down there in HotLanta?” Quinn asked.

He noticed how just talking to his teammate had him feeling different. Like the SEAL was taking over.

SEAL Quinn made quick definitive decisions. No doubts. No waffling.

Civilian Quinn—the son, the brother, the friend—was guilt-ridden. He second-guessed his decisions and worried about the future.

It was no wonder he preferred operating in SEAL-mode.

“I think the better question is what the hell is going on up there in New York? Because I know I can't be looking at a picture of my teammate threatening a photographer. Dude, did you take a private security gig for some singer?”

“Shit. The story reached all the way down there?” He'd been hoping the coverage was limited to the local New York press.

After a pause, Rich said, “All righty then. I guess that's a yes. And to answer your question, gossip rags are national, my brother.”

“And you read that garbage?” Quinn asked.

“Can't help what's in my face while I'm on the check-out line at the store. I just didn't expect to see you and your girl on the cover. Now, if I'm allowed a follow-up question, what do you think command is going to say about you being splashed all over the press?”

Quinn groaned. “That part wasn't my intention. I was just helping out a friend.”

“And by friend, do you mean that hottie you’re escorting to fancy restaurants and spending the night with at five-star hotels? That friend?”

“Nothing’s going on. She’s a good friend of the family. Nothing more.”

“All right. Sure. I believe you.” The lack of sincerity in Rich’s tone had Quinn sighing.

“So tell me, was that the only reason for this call? To badger me?” he asked.

“Actually, there is something else. I got a call from a buddy on base. Things are starting to ramp up there. They’re stepping up trainings. One of the teams has been put on one-hour recall. I’m thinking our days of leisure on this leave are numbered. Thought you’d like a heads up so you can plan accordingly. You know, as far as *good family friends* are concerned.”

He hated to admit it but Rich was right. If the team got recalled, he’d have to be on the next flight out. That would leave Bailey without protection.

Bailey and Josie would both be here all alone if he left. It wouldn’t be hard for someone to locate them here. Not with Josie’s habit of posting everything on social. She probably tagged the exact damn location.

That familiar burn in his lower esophagus kicked up. He realized he hadn’t felt it since arriving home, but now he’d need some antacids to go along with his coffee this morning.

Cell still pressed to his ear, he pivoted toward the door to head to his room and saw Bailey hovering in the doorway. “Hey, Rich. I gotta go, but keep me informed if you hear anything more.”

“Will do, brother. I’ll see you in the papers!” Rich disconnected before Quinn had a chance to respond to that, which was for the best.

“Hey,” he said, pocketing his phone and focusing on Bailey.

“Hey,” she said, so softly he barely heard her.

“Want coffee? It’s made.” He swung a hand toward the machine on the counter and the mug he’d just poured for himself.

She gave him a half-hearted head shake. “No. Thank you. I’ll make myself tea.”

“Don’t know how you drink that. It’s like dirty water, but okay.”

He smiled. She didn’t.

She’d probably seen the headlines already on her phone. That would explain her mood.

Right now he needed antacids and a plan to protect her if he had to leave. In that order.

He’d get done what he needed to *then* he’d deal with cheering up Bailey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“*G*ood morning.” Josie practically sang the greeting as she padded into the room.

She was dressed already, wearing an oversized snowflake sweater, stretch pants and furry boots. Meanwhile, all Bailey had done this morning was throw a hooded sweatshirt on over what she’d slept in—namely pajama bottoms, socks and a long-sleeved T-shirt.

“Mmm-hmm,” Bailey mumbled as she buried her face in the oversized mug she’d snagged from the shelf for her tea.

Coffee pot in hand, Josie glanced over her shoulder and frowned. “What’s wrong with you?”

Besides the fact she’d walked in on Quinn telling someone on the phone she was just a family friend and nothing more?

Bailey let out a snort. “Let’s start with these.” She gave the newspapers a little push with one finger. “Do your parents’ subscribe to all these papers?”

“No. I ran out to the store and grabbed them this morning.”

“Um, why?”

“Because it’s all part of my plan for you.”

“You have a plan for me?”

“Of course.” Josie turned back, mug in hand. “Want to hear it?”

Bailey lifted her brows. “Do I have a choice?”

“No,” Josie said and sat down in the kitchen chair opposite Bailey’s. “So, listeners are eating up that song you wrote about Axel and they’re clamoring for more. So you need to write more.”

Now Josie sounded just like Xander.

“About what?” She only had one man bashing heartbreak song in her. At least as far as Axel was concerned. She had plenty of feelings about Quinn right now...

“I’m thinking that since the internet already has you and Quinn in a relationship, write a love song. Give the public what they want.”

“A love song about Quinn?” she whispered, eyes wide as she glanced toward the hall to make sure he couldn’t hear. “Uh, no.”

“It doesn’t have to really be about him, but they’re going to assume it is anyway. And they’re all going to buy it because it’s about you two and as the evidence proves, they’re obsessed with you.”

Bailey shook her head. “No. I couldn’t.”

“I’d think you’d be happy about everyone shipping you two. Getting a new boyfriend is the best revenge against your old boyfriend.”

“But it’s not real,” Bailey protested.

“A fake boyfriend is just as good as a real one,” Josie pointed out.

With a sigh, Bailey begged, “Can we change the subject please?” Before Quinn came back into the room and heard everything.

“Okay. So back to your career. If you don’t want to write a love song, then just write any old song. It doesn’t have to be about falling in love or whatever. They’ll eat up anything you release right now so why not take advantage of it?”

It was like Xander had occupied Josie’s body. *Strike while the iron is hot.* Take advantage of her fifteen-minutes of fame before the internet moved on to someone else. Maybe Josie

should go work for Xander at the Paragon Agency—and leave her alone.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I can.” Bailey finally raised her gaze to find Josie staring at her.

“You can tell me to mind my own business, but can I ask you something?” Josie asked.

“Can I stop you?” Bailey lobbed back.

“No.” Josie leaned forward. “What *is* happening with you and Quinn?”

She felt her cheeks heat. “Nothing. Like I told you.”

Josie leaned back and planted one foot on the edge of the chair as she hugged her knee. “That’s fine. I know I’m being nosy. You don’t have to tell me—”

Her best friend thought she was lying? She wished she were. Unfortunately, she was telling the complete truth.

Bailey let out a short laugh. “Josie, there’s honestly nothing to tell.”

“You’ve spent day and night together since he got home,” Josie argued.

“Yes, and nothing’s happened.” Undeniable proof, as if she needed more, that Quinn wasn’t interested in her like that. She raised her gaze to Josie. “I think we’ve become... friends.”

Josie cringed.

“No. It’s fine,” Bailey protested. “I mean, he’s great. He’s a sounding board when I need to talk. He supports my decisions, no matter what. Quinn is actually turning out to be a really great... friend.”

She was starting to hate that word.

“But are you happy with that? Being in the friend zone?” Josie asked.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Definitely. It’s fine. Good actually. Really good...”

If she kept lying to Josie, she'd eventually be able to lie to herself.

Friend zone. Maybe that was the song she should write next. She had lots of feelings on the subject.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Quinn walked into the local haunt and felt like Scrooge on a ghost-led tour of his past.

He couldn't count the number of times he'd been inside the Muddy River Inn over his lifetime.

From when he was a child and his parents would bring him and Josie here for hamburgers and french fries as a special birthday dinner treat. To senior year in high school when he wasn't old enough to drink legally but the older brother of one of the guys on the football team was behind the bar and would sneak them a shot if the owner wasn't around.

All those memories seemed to belong to a different person. Another lifetime. Yet in spite of that this place was achingly familiar. Comforting.

Even more so when he spotted his school mate Carter behind the bar.

Carter had the unique distinction of having attended two high schools due to his mom moving them across the county line when he was sixteen. He had played football for both Mudville and Sidney, legendary rivals. And damned if Carter didn't come out of that experience with good buddies in both schools.

Knowing Carter—always with a smile and a joke, not to mention that he also had a regular shift pouring drinks at the Muddy River—Quinn would bet Carter had kept all those friends to this day.

Dark brows rose as his old friend spotted him walking in the door. “Well, well, well. Look what the cat finally dragged in.”

“I was here for the reunion,” Quinn defended, taking a seat on the bar stool.

“For like five minutes,” Carter countered.

Quinn wobbled his head. “It was closer to an hour.”

Carter scowled. “Not long enough to catch up on the last thirteen years of living apart.”

“No. Not enough,” Quinn agreed. “But I’m here now.”

“Shocking, but yes. How long are you in town for?” Carter asked, his hands braced on the bar he’d been wiping down with a rag that looked like it had seen better days.

“That’s up in the air—”

The sound of the door opening had Quinn and Carter both glancing toward the entrance.

“And that’s why I called this guy to come meet me,” Quinn continued as Mark walked through the doorway, followed by another man. “Although I didn’t expect Chris,” he added.

“Small town, man. Word spreads fast,” Carter said.

“Yeah, I’m starting to remember exactly how small and how fast,” Quinn mumbled.

After saying hello to Carter, Mark Peyton and Chris Boffo settled on the bar stools on either side of Quinn.

The SEAL in him didn’t like his back to the door and didn’t like the feeling of being hemmed in by Mark and Chris, even if they had been his closest buddies once upon a time.

“How about we move to a table?” Quinn suggested.

“Oh, no. I want in on whatever this little meet-up is and I need to be behind the bar so you’re staying right here.” Carter slapped one palm on the scarred bar top.

Quinn let out a sigh. “Fine.” He braced himself then turned to Mark. “I called because I might need your help.”

“*Might*. Thirty-one years old and he still can’t just outright ask for help.” Chris shook his head.

“That’s how he always was,” Carter pointed out.

Mark snorted. “Remember the summer he was riding his bicycle everywhere when his car broke down rather than ask for a ride?”

“Uh-huh.” Chris nodded.

Defeated, Quinn conceded. “All right. All right. But this time I’m really not sure if I need your help or not. It depends on circumstances out of my control.”

Although, was that really the truth? Because whether he got called back early by command or not, he was still going back at the end of the month. His leave was finite. And when he flew back to California, whenever that was, Bailey would be alone. Unprotected.

Of course he would try to convince her to hire security—preferably a company he’d vetted himself. He’d go over her head to Xander if he had to, to make sure she didn’t continue to take risks. That was one reason he’d demanded she give him Xander’s contact information.

But he knew Bailey would be stubborn and it wouldn’t hurt to have the local guys he trusted—one who was in position to actually help—keep an eye on her.

By some twist of fate Mark, the guy who’d grown up looking for ways to get around the law, was now a sergeant in the Village of Sidney Police Department.

“Okay. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, for now...” Mark lifted his chin as he tossed a twenty dollar bill on the bar. “Carter, three beers please. On me. Four if you can have one for yourself. Quinn, you talk.”

This wasn’t meant to be a group meeting. It was clear it had turned into one and maybe that wasn’t the worst thing. The more eyes looking out for Bailey, the better.

Quinn explained the situation—the break-in, Axel, the paparazzi. As he laid it all out he realized how many fronts the threats against Bailey came from.

“Wait. So this Bailey you’re talking about. She was in our school?” Mark frowned.

Chris nodded. “I thought the chick your sister was hanging out with looked kind of familiar at the reunion. But the name Bailey doesn’t ring a bell at all.”

“Her name was Jane in high school. She was in Josie’s class.”

“So she just up and changed her name?” Chris asked.

“Actually, I think that’s kind of cool,” Carter said. “Good for her.”

Chris pursed his lips and nodded. “Better than getting a boob job, I guess.”

Quinn was seeing what was meant to be a very serious conversation devolving pretty quickly. Not a surprise considering he was dealing with Chris Boffo, voted *Class Clown* their year.

“Anyway,” he began in an attempt to get the conversation back on track. “If I get recalled and have to leave, I’ll need someone to keep an eye on Bailey. She seems to think everything is fine and she doesn’t need protection.”

“From what you’ve said,” Mark began, “she does.”

At the same time, Chris completed Mark’s sentence with, “She’s delusional.”

Carter snorted out a laugh. “Yeah, I’ve found women really like when you tell them that, Boffo.”

“I’m just saying.” Chris scowled.

“I’m going to look into hiring a private security firm and get her some close personal protection for when she travels. But I know since she doesn’t take the threats seriously she won’t accept security while she’s at my parents’ house.”

“I got you covered, Baldwin. I’ll make sure to schedule some extra patrols. My guys are driving around aimlessly most days anyway. I can have them swing past your parents’ house a few times a day.”

Chris’s brows rose. “Wait. So she’s like living with you?”

“Not *living with me*. She’s staying in my sister’s room. For now,” Quinn corrected.

Carter nodded. “Now I remember her. She and your sister were joined at the hip in high school.”

Chris let out a humph. “Yup. She looked pretty cute when I saw her with Josie at the reunion. So Baldwin, I’m not a cop like Mark here but I’d be all over that *close personal protection* gig if you need an extra hand.”

Quinn sent him a glare to accompany his definitive, “No.”

Chris narrowed his eyes. “Hey! I didn’t mean it like that. Jeez. I’m a married man with a kid. I’m talking about earning some extra money. That kinda shit pays well. But never mind. I got my own job that keeps me busy anyway.”

Quinn wasn’t sure if he believed Chris or not, but it didn’t matter. Mark would ramp up patrols. Chris likely wasn’t going to be any help at all. And Carter would only be useful if Bailey happened to be here while he was on shift, but he’d take what help he could get.

Chris had to leave and Carter had to take care of actual customers, which relieved a bit of the stress of this gathering.

Funny how Quinn could be surrounded by his SEAL team twenty four-seven for months at a time but ten minutes at a bar with his former team—of the football variety—stressed him out.

What did that say about him? Was he such a SEAL he couldn’t relate to civilians anymore? Couldn’t mix with the real world?

That was a question—and a problem—for another day.

When they were alone, Mark looked up from where he’d been peeling the label off his beer bottle. “I understand you’re

worried. Don't be."

"Oh, yeah? And why not? Please tell me. Why shouldn't I worry?"

"Because she's got a good head on her shoulders."

"She didn't hire security after the break-in," Quinn countered.

"No. But she got out of the city immediately and came to probably the safest place she could. A small town in upstate New York. No paparazzi. No rock stars. Your parents' house. She came to her best friend. And you."

"My parents are away. My sister is...my sister. And I'm going back."

And dammit, he wished he knew when that would be.

"Quinn, you're not Superman. And you're not a one man team—not when you're on some secret mission or when you're here with us."

Duly chastised, Quinn drew in a breath and tried to believe the words.

Mark continued, "How about this? My guys are always jonesing for overtime, which the higher ups are cracking down on. I'm sure they'd rather protect Bailey than bounce at the college bars to earn extra money. How about I run it past a few of them I really trust? See if they'd want to take on protecting Jane slash Bailey in their off hours."

Guys... That word put a bitter taste in Quinn's mouth. Whether they'd earned Mark's trust or not, Quinn hated the idea of any man protecting Bailey instead of him.

Mark started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Quinn asked, glancing up.

"Your face. Looked like you ate one of those pickled eggs over there in the jar behind the bar. You're jealous," Mark accused. "You hate the idea of any man besides you being that *close* and *personal* with Bailey."

“What? No. That’s ridiculous.” Quinn’s denial rang hollow since Mark’s guess was dead on.

“I’ve got a female on my crew. She’s got a kid. Lives with her mom. Single. Looking for cash but can’t do that bouncer shift. How about I offer the position to her? Better?” Mark asked.

Relief flooded through him. “Yeah, that would be good. And *not* because I’m jealous, but because I think Bailey would respond well to that suggestion.”

He could sell her on the idea of helping out a single mom who needed the money. She’d feel good about that.

He’d loop in Xander to make sure she didn’t change her mind after he left.

After he left...

Every time that thought crossed his mind he felt a little sicker about it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The notebook mocked her. Not because she had no ideas, but because she had too many.

Bailey currently had a list of a dozen song ideas. Five of the concepts had viable working titles she really liked. Two had actual lyrics. And she'd only been sitting there for like an hour.

Dammit. She hated when Xander was right. She did have more songs in her. Of course she could never admit that to him or he'd be relentless. Asking for more and more. More than she had to give.

Xander's extreme confidence and workaholic nature tended to spill over into what he demanded of the clients he worked with.

But since Quinn was out—somewhere, he hadn't said where, doing something, he hadn't said what—she'd been so out of sorts she'd decided to try to write.

What was with all the mystery from Quinn lately anyway?

In the city he'd disappeared supposedly to *check security*. And now he was pulling a disappearing act here too.

Was he dating someone? Maybe she lived in California. They could be talking on the phone. Or video chatting. Or having phone sex...

She felt sick to her stomach at that thought.

Although maybe his having a girlfriend in his life might make his absolute rejection of her a bit easier to swallow. It

hadn't worked that way when he'd started dating Cassie though—

Her eyes flew wide as a new thought hit her. What if it was Cassie? She'd been at the reunion. They could have reignited their relationship.

More lyrics flew into her head as her feelings about Quinn and whoever he was seeing had her emotions roiling. As they spilled out, she jotted them down.

This was definitely not a love song like Josie had suggested. If anything it was more of an anti-love song.

So be it. It would pair nicely with the song about Axel's betrayal. She probably could populate a whole album with just love sick songs. Or sick of love songs.

Tapping the eraser end of the pencil on her notebook she considered possible titles for an album of songs about one-sided love. Heartbreak. Love not returned. Then it hit her.

Unrequited.

That was the perfect name for an album by a woman who was always there but never seen. A wallflower.

Wallflower.

That would be the perfect title for a track. She'd have to google to make sure it wasn't already taken. She was certain she wasn't the only girl to fall for a guy who barely knew she existed. Then, once he did, put her firmly in the friend zone.

She was still writing faster than her hand could keep up, her penmanship so horrendous she could only hope she'd be able to read it later, when the front door opened.

Glancing up she realized not only was Quinn home, but it was now dark outside. Bleary eyed from staring at the page for so long, she asked, "What time is it?"

"Dinner time. I brought home wings, fries and fried pickles from the Muddy River Inn. Where's Josie?" Quinn asked, looking around.

"She had some work to do in her room."

“Work?” Quinn’s frown added to his look of bafflement.

“Yup.”

Meanwhile the aroma from the bag he carried was enough to have her mouth watering and tonight she wasn’t going to pretend she wasn’t hungry and really wanted a salad.

Tonight she was going to eat like she wanted to.

Quinn didn’t want her in that way. She might as well fill the hole in her love life with food. It had worked well for her before.

Getting up from the sofa, she moved toward Quinn and took the bag. “I’ll get plates and napkins.”

He followed her into the kitchen with a laugh. “You know better where stuff is than I do.”

“I make it my business to know my way around. You don’t get curves like this by being a slacker in the kitchen.” She smiled at her own self deprecating joke.

Meanwhile she didn’t miss how Quinn’s gaze had dropped down her curves and come back up.

He was probably thinking how she should be jogging with him every morning. SEALs were all about fitness and perfect bodies. His girlfriend was probably a triathlete. They probably worked out together back in California.

Bailey pictured her all tan and blonde with inhumanly long legs and hard, lean muscles. A *Malibu Barbie* doll come to life. And Quinn would be her perfect *Navy SEAL Ken*.

“So what did you do all day?” she asked, trying to sound casual as she reached for plates.

“I want to talk to you about that, actually,” he said looking uncomfortable.

She paused, plates momentarily forgotten. Finally, she remembered they were in her hand and set the stack of three down on the counter. “Oh?”

“Can we sit down?” he asked.

Uh oh. No good conversation began with *you'd better sit down.* Shaking, she lowered herself into the nearest chair.

“So my leave is up in a couple of weeks. I was lucky to get that long approved to begin with,” he began.

She nodded.

“But there are a couple of problems. One, I’ll be leaving no matter what at the end of the month...” He swallowed. “If not sooner because there’s a chance I could be called back early.”

Ah, there it was. The icing on the cake.

Just when she was trying to accept he’d be gone in just weeks and she probably wouldn’t hear from him because—*friend zone*—now he was telling her he could be leaving early.

She would soon be forgotten as he got back to living his real life. Accepting that, she nodded again. “Okay.”

Frustration radiated off him. “No. Not okay. I don’t want to leave you without security, whenever the time comes. The paparazzi. The intruder selling your shit online. Axel. His fans.”

Security. That was what he was worried about. Of course. Always the hero. The great protector.

She shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

“Stop trying to be so stoic. It’s okay to need someone, Bailey. To have someone there who has your back. And I don’t mean Josie. I mean a trained person.”

“I don’t need security. Quinn, seriously. I sat here on your sofa all day.”

“And before that we were dodging photographers everywhere we went in the city. I almost ran one over with the car. They’re aggressive and they’ll do anything for a story. Bailey, you know this.”

“Fine. I’ll think about it.”

“No. You’ll do more than that,” he began in a low firm tone.

The timbre of his voice, the set of his jaw... Quinn in protector mode did something to her inside and it definitely wasn't friendship she was feeling.

"You'll promise me if you travel, someone goes with you," he continued. "And again, I don't mean just Josie. She's no protection. And if things change and the paparazzi decide to come here and follow you around town, you get protection even if you are just sitting here on the sofa all day."

She opened her mouth to protest and again he didn't let her.

"That happens, it's not just for you but for my family as well so you can't argue with me about that."

He was right. She couldn't. She'd never put the Baldwins in danger. But were the paparazzi really a danger? All they wanted was a photo...

"*And*," Quinn went on. "I'm going to call Xander and make sure he knows what we spoke about. That he should hire someone if you don't do it on your own."

Her eyes widened. "You're going over my head?"

"I'm trying to save that pretty little head of yours from danger."

Pretty...

No. It was just an expression. He hadn't meant anything by it. But it would be nice if he did.

"Okay." She nodded.

"Okay?" he asked as if he didn't believe his ears.

He'd heard right. She was defeated and tired. Of all of it.

This roller coaster of being in love with Quinn, of having him care so much about her, but not in the way she wanted, it was exhausting.

But it would be good fodder for her anti-love album.

"Hire whoever you want." And with that, she grabbed the top To-Go container and dove into the first of many hot wings.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The text came in the middle of the night. Didn't the bad ones always?

He was being recalled. He had to check in on base by zero eight hundred the day after tomorrow. That meant he had to get on a flight ASAP.

That in itself would have sucked even without all the rest. The fact he was going to miss seeing his parents completely. That he had to leave Bailey in the hands of strangers. Hell, he didn't even want to leave Josie. If nothing else, she'd become his ally when it came to keeping Bailey safe and happy.

Leaving now threw the control freak in him into a tizzy. The part of him that wanted to handle everything himself, to make sure it was done right.

It was like an itch that needed to be scratched. One he couldn't reach. The kind that could drive a person nuts.

He slumped into the kitchen and grabbed juice out of the fridge rather than make coffee and wake up the household at two in the morning. He'd grab some at a rest stop on the drive to the airport.

Glass in hand, he headed for the family desktop computer in the study to look up flights. And damned if there wasn't a seat on an early flight out of Albany that morning. If he packed now and jumped right in the car, he'd make the morning flight no problem. It was so last minute it wasn't even very expensive. The airline would be happy to fill the seat rather than fly partially empty.

It also meant he'd be sneaking out before Josie or Bailey woke. He didn't want to. But waking them now, especially with this news—he couldn't do that.

Besides, he didn't think he could take saying goodbye to Bailey knowing he was leaving her alone. Unprotected.

It couldn't be helped. When command summoned, he had to go.

With no choice, he shoved what little he'd brought with him back into his bag then sat down to pen two notes. One to Josie—that one was easy. And one to Bailey, which was a lot harder.

What tone should he take? Business-like and matter of fact? Friendly? More than friendly...

Ugh.

After too much thought and time he didn't have to spare he finally scribbled what he needed her to know and got on the road.

At the airport, still before dawn, he texted Xander and Mark about the current situation and that he might be out of touch for a while. The damn woman didn't seem to take her own self preservation seriously enough for him. He'd have to depend on both of them to keep Bailey safe.

He had a feeling his life was going to be a whirlwind the moment his boots hit the ground in California. Command didn't call an operator back from leave unless the team was getting spun up for something big. And fast.

With all that was happening in the world at that moment, it could be any number of things—all of them big.

Where would he be?

Wherever it was he couldn't let worry about Bailey occupy any portion of his mind while he was there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Quinn was gone. He'd left in the middle of the night without a goodbye.

Bailey had woken to a note in the kitchen instead of the man himself.

She felt numb and she couldn't even blame him for that.

How could she? He defended the world from bad guys just as surely as he'd defended her from the paparazzi. And defending the world was a hell of a lot more important than escorting her to interviews.

This was what life would always be like for Quinn. Him running off to put out the biggest fire. Leaving his loved ones behind.

"Hey." Josie walked back into the kitchen after taking a shower. "How are you doing?"

Her tone told Bailey her friend was handling her with kid gloves. Expecting her to be upset about Quinn's abrupt departure.

To prove her wrong she pasted on a smile.

"You mean now that my security detail has left me? I'm fine. I've got tons to do. I probably won't even leave the house for days. Weeks even. I have to catch up on making all the sponsor videos I've been neglecting. And reply to all the nice comments on my socials. And I think I'm going to write some music to go along with the lyrics I've been jotting down. Just

like you said. I should write more songs. I even ordered a blank music notebook the other day online.”

Josie’s eyes popped wide. “Really? Great. That’s amazing. I’m so excited for you.”

At least somebody was. Bailey was the opposite of excited but she was determined. She’d been through this before when Quinn had announced he was joining the Navy at eighteen. He was there one day and gone the next.

She’d gotten through it then. She’d get through it again now.

“So I hate to bail on you, but I’ve actually got some work to do,” Josie began.

“Oh. No. Don’t worry about me. Go. I’m fine. I was just about to get started on some writing anyway. Just going to take my tea with me...”

She hunkered down in her favorite writing chair in the living room that felt more like home to her than anyplace else ever had and just wrote. Lyrics. Music.

The guitar, pencil and the blank music notebook that had amazingly been delivered in one day from Amazon were going to be her constant companions, along with her mug of tea that she refilled throughout the day’s worth of hours.

She couldn’t have Quinn, but she did have her music.

Xander would certainly be happy to hear she was writing when she spoke to him next. She didn’t know how Quinn felt about it because she didn’t hear from him. Not even to let her know that he’d arrived safely. Not that she was watching the time and counting the hours it would take him to fly to California.

Maybe they weren’t even friends after all. Wouldn’t a friend shoot someone a text to say they’d made the journey across the country safe and sound?

Or maybe she didn’t know what friendship was. Not at all. She’d been a shitty friend to Josie this past decade. And Josie had forgiven her and opened her home to her. Gave her

someplace safe to stay. Gave her more than that—unfailing, unconditional friendship.

Josie knew what friendship was. She was a good friend. She should be writing a song about Josie. About friendship instead of love— Sadly, she had a feeling that wouldn't sell. The world was an upside down place. If only she could hide out from it in the Baldwin's house forever.

Maybe the Baldwins would let her stay if she paid them rent.

God, that sounded nice. Not leaving this cocoon of solitude. Doing nothing but a few sponsor videos with the products delivered to the door to make some money. Binging Netflix. Baking sweets. Her and her friend.

The perfect existence.

Or it would have been if Xander didn't decide to FaceTime her the next day when she was writing like the wind, head down, knot in stomach, heart broken.

There had been a single text from Quinn to Josie that announced he was back in California and would be out of touch for a while, but that she and his parents shouldn't worry and he'd call when he could. Nothing to her. Not even a mention or inclusion in his text to Josie.

Out of sight, out of mind. If only that concept worked as well on Xander as it did on Quinn.

With a sigh, she hit to answer her manager's video call. "Yes, Xander."

"How quickly can you get an album worth of songs written?"

She drew back, surprised, though she shouldn't be. Xander always wanted things instantly.

"I don't know. It's not like an assembly line. You can't force creativity to fit your time table," she told him with a frown.

Although, truth be told she'd made huge headway today. Apparently heartbreak and depression were great creative

inspiration.

No wonder all the best creatives were notoriously morose and despondent. Hemingway. Van Gough. Cobain. Woolf. Bailey Knowles... She didn't quite fit in with that line-up of legends, did she? But she was willing to take inspiration wherever she could find it.

Besides, the pouring of lyrics out of her brain and onto the page not only kept her busy and helped the hours pass, it was cathartic. But sharing her pain with the world through an album? That concept was scary. And she had a feeling this phone call from Xander had something to do with that exactly.

“And why are you asking?” she asked. “What’s up?”

“What would you say if I told you I can get you on a concert tour?”

“A what? Are you kidding? I have one song recorded and like five more of questionable quality written.”

“Five songs? Bailey, that’s great! Five plus the first one gives us six. I’m told we should aim for ten tracks for an album. That’s only four more. You can do it. I have faith in you. What’s your time estimate to complete those last four?”

He still wasn't getting it. The guy was an entertainment lawyer at heart who'd never understand that writing legal contracts was nothing like creating a love—or even an anti-love—song.

But he was right. Things were moving along fast in the writing arena and she could have those songs done quickly. That wasn't her only problem with his plan.

“Xander, I’m not a singer.” Yeah, she could play almost any instrument passably, but that didn't make her a vocalist.

“You are,” he argued.

“That’s not what you said six months ago,” she reminded him.

“I was wrong.”

“Excuse me?” She raised her brows. Never in all the time she’d known him had he ever admitted to being wrong about anything. “Who is this and what have you done with Xander?”

“Ha, ha. I don’t admit that often so take it and be grateful. I was wrong. You are a singer. An amazing one. And more important than that, the internet loves you. Strike—”

“While the iron is hot,” she finished his sentence for him. “I know. You say that all the time.”

“Because it’s true.”

She hated to admit it but he was probably right.

“Where would I go on this concert tour? And who would I be with? I wouldn’t be alone, of course. I’d be like the warm-up act for somebody bigger, right?” Or possibly the warm-up for the warm-up.

“This is the best part. You’re not going to believe it but you are going to die when you hear this.”

“All right. I’m waiting.”

“It’s a tour with all the young female greats. Olivia, Lana, Billie and you.”

“As in Rodrigo, Del Rey, and Eilish?” she choked out.

“And you,” he confirmed. “They’re calling it the Broken Hearts or Heartbreak Tour or something like that and they want you on it.”

“The Heartbreak Tour? Xander, I don’t think—”

“It starts at the Staples Center in Los Angeles,” Xander continued, ignoring her attempted protest. “Then San Francisco, Detroit, Nashville, then back east to Philadelphia. It ends at the Garden.”

The Garden. As in Madison Square Garden? Wow.

He was right. She didn’t believe it. And when she started to wrap her head around it, she did almost die. Of stage fright and she wasn’t even on a stage.

“So, I’ll tell them you’re on board and you just work on finishing those songs.”

She opened her mouth and drew in a breath.

Imposter syndrome had her trying to figure out how to tell Xander no. She was definitely not on board. That she didn’t even know if she had four more songs in her and there was a good chance the five she’d already written might suck.

Although between the list of titles and the snippets of ideas for lines and lyrics, she suspected the next four songs were going to flow just like the first ones had. And if they sucked, it would be up to Xander to get her out of the tour. Not her problem.

“And now we get to have a serious conversation about security,” Xander said, moving on with or without her to the next topic of conversation.

Bailey rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Stop rolling your eyes at me. This is serious. And not just because I don’t need Captain Sweatpants flying back from California to beat me up because I didn’t keep you safe.”

“He wouldn’t—Wait, how do you know he’s back in California?”

“He texted me before dawn to tell me he was at the airport because he had to leave... and to demand that I make sure you have proper security no matter what you have to say about it. So here’s me, doing that. Make sure you tell him.”

If she ever talked to him again. Which was doubtful. Apparently he’d texted everyone except for her. Even Xander.

And that was exactly why she needed to do this tour.

“Okay, Xander. Fine. I’ll write the songs. I’ll go on the tour. And I’ll take whatever security you decide to hire for me—but you’re doing the hiring, not me.”

His smile beamed through the cell phone as brightly as one would expect from a man who’d just gotten his way. “I’m on it. I’m really glad you’re doing this, Bailey.”

A small smile bowed her lips. “Yeah. Me too.”
That wasn’t even a lie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Hey, bro. What's happening? Since you're not answering any of my many MANY texts—not that you ever do—I'm going to assume you're somewhere doing something super secret and not that you're just being—you know—you. Email when you can!

Josie

OMG!! Call me if you can! So much is happening here you won't believe it when I tell you!

J

Hello, brother dearest.

Mom and Dad are getting home tonight. During the cruise when they called it was easy to avoid telling them you were here while you were, you know, actually still here. But once they're home I can't keep lying to them in person. You know Mom has that radar for lies. I'm going to have to tell them about your visit. Sorry!

Josie

Hey, Q! Mom is super pissed at you because she missed your visit all because you didn't tell her you were coming. You better message her! Asap!! Dad says hello. Are you ever going to email or call?!

Josie

Hey, bro. So there's a female cop from the Sidney Police Department stationed outside our house like almost every night. And Mark Peyton from high school is always hanging around here too. I'm thinking you had something to do with that. FYI—Bailey is not pleased. But Mom is having the time of her life making cookies and hot cocoa for the police patrols. Things are so weird here! Another FYI—still haven't heard back from you!

Josie

Okay since it's obvious you're not going to call or email I'll just tell you. I've been keeping a secret for like ever and I can't anymore or I'll explode!! Bailey is cutting a freaking album! And she's going on tour! Like a legit country-wide concert tour with Olivia freaking Rodrigo and a whole bunch of other super powerhouse female singers. I can't believe you're missing all this!!!

J

Christ. Quinn hadn't been gone all that long but you'd never know it by the number of emails from his sister. Not to mention all that had happened, according to her. If Josie was to be believed he'd missed a ton of shit happening back home.

Her emails created more questions than they gave him answers. What had happened that Mark had not just police patrols driving by but also an officer stationed outside his parents' house all night? Had there been threats? Paparazzi? Another break-in but at his house this time?

Jeezus. The possibilities had his jaw clenching.

And here he was helpless, waiting around for command to provide either orders for another op or transport back to the states. Stuck in the fucking Negev Desert at a partially constructed base.

He'd gotten on a computer as soon as he could, as soon as internet was actually working, and had found more than he'd wanted to.

Yes, he wanted news from home but not quite this much. Of course it was all from Josie.

He had no doubt he'd have double the number of texts than he had emails. Even though after all these years she should know well enough to email when he was overseas, he knew she'd do both.

She'd cover all the bases even though his phone wouldn't work here and he hadn't been allowed to bring it anyway. Having a trackable civilian cell phone kind of defeated the purpose of classified troop movements to countries no one knew had a US base under construction.

He scrolled back through the messages and skimmed snippets of the emails from Josie.

It was like seeing inside his sister's mind, reading her stream of consciousness. After doing so, he could say his sister's mind was a weird and chaotic place. A hamster wheel of thoughts.

The messages contained more exclamation points than any human should use but he ignored those and devoured every word once again because it was the only way he had to find out what was happening—what had been happening the whole time he was gone—with Bailey.

After rereading them all, he leaned back.

So, according to Josie, there was a police officer stationed at the house. Bailey was recording an album and—holy shit—she was going on tour across the country?

How could that all have happened so quickly?

He remembered how fast her middle of the night post of her impromptu song had blown up and rescinded that question.

An album meant she'd be recording again at the studio in Manhattan without him there to fight off the photographers.

A tour would be even worse. More than the paparazzi there'd be massive crowds, rabid fans, travel to strange cities in different states, overnight stays in hotels he hadn't vetted.

Panicked at the thought, he hit reply and decided to employ his sister's method of typing messages that she felt were urgent—all caps with a few exclamation points of his own.

DOES SHE HAVE SECURITY FOR THE CONCERT
TOUR??!!!

He needed assurance she'd be protected on that tour. When the hell was this thing happening anyway?

As he waited for the reply from Josie, which probably wouldn't come anytime soon given the time difference, he needed to take advantage of what little allotment of time he had left on the one computer they all shared.

Communications could be shitty at best on some ops and this was one of them. He supposed he should count himself lucky to have any way to contact home at all.

While he did have access to the internet, however spotty and slow it could be, he did a quick search, typing in *Bailey Knowles concert tour with Olivia Rodrigo?*

That name which had been so unknown to him just a month ago was becoming increasingly familiar as he saw it everywhere now, thanks to his interest in music and female musicians because of Bailey.

Search results populated the screen. Including photos. He opened one and saw Bailey being accosted by photographers while an older man sporting a gray cropped beard and a bald head held them back.

His pulse raced. Those paparazzi were much too close to her. Closer than he would have allowed had he been her security.

He should be there. He should be protecting her.

There was nothing he could do about that now so he clicked on a result for *The Heartbreak Tour* to torture himself some more by seeing where she was and where she would be going without him.

Heartbreak Tour. That seemed fitting, at least for the first song she'd written and recorded about Axel. But now he had to wonder what the other songs on her album were going to be about. It wasn't too hard to guess the theme of the tour given the title.

Were all of her songs about Axel? He didn't love that idea. Yeah, he was fine with her hating Axel but he didn't want her obsessed with that asshole.

Truth was, it bothered him she'd be giving that much time and attention thinking about any man.

Any man that wasn't him.

Those were not thoughts he could be having. He'd made his decision. He'd done what was best for him and her. For her happiness. For his career. Hell, for her career too if this album and tour were any indication of all the good that came her way after he'd left. Although he couldn't take any credit. Her success—this album, this tour—certainly wasn't the results of his leaving. Just a happy coincidence.

Hopefully she was happy because he was having trouble getting there himself. Even with as proud and awed as he was by her.

Going down the rabbit hole reading about the tour cost him a lot of time and he still hadn't emailed Mark to see what had happened that had him putting a night guard on the house. And he needed to email Xander. Make sure the man knew if anything happened to Bailey because she didn't have proper security, Quinn was going to hold him personally responsible.

But he'd already gone over his time on the computer. And when he turned to glance behind him Rich was standing in the doorway. He raised dark brows and tapped his watch with one finger.

Quinn breathed in, closed out of his inbox and said, “Sorry,” as he stood.

He had to let his friend and teammate get his time on the computer but the wait for news was going to kill him.

Modern warfare gave troops just enough access to communication with home to make them frustrated that they didn’t have more. He’d have to wait for his answers and for his turn.

Richie Rich took his place in front of the computer but Quinn didn’t leave. Instead, he asked, “You hear any news about when we’re getting out of here?”

Rich glanced over his shoulder. “You got somewhere you need to be?” A smile spread across the man’s face and he flashed white teeth at Quinn. “Or is it a *someone* rather than a somewhere?”

“Smart ass,” Quinn mumbled.

“Orders will come when they come.” Rich shrugged and turned back to face the computer and Quinn left to go pout somewhere else.

A calendar hung on the wall near his bunk, nailed there by one of the guys. It had big red Xs on the days they’d been there. But it was hard to have a countdown to when they’d be home when there was no firm date of departure.

Sighing, he looked at the date. He’d missed his mother’s birthday. He really needed to get back on that computer and email her.

Thanksgiving was Thursday. They were going to miss that as well.

Turkey Day wasn’t his favorite holiday—that was Christmas—but it was easily in his top two with Halloween coming in third.

Small town living made Halloween a big deal in the neighboring town to where he’d grown up. His parents would drive him and Josie to Mudville every year and he and his sister would trick-or-treat up and down Main Street. The

houses would be all decked out with skeletons and pirates and spooky clowns. The homeowners would dress up too to hand out candy.

He'd forgotten about all that until now. Until this sudden bout of homesickness.

Halloween felt completely different in Coronado.

There was no crisp chill in the air. There were parties at the bars of course where the women would come decked out in costumes worthy of *Playboy Magazine*. It seemed like every chick was looking to dress up as a sexy something. Sexy nurse, sexy pirate, sexy cat, sexy whatever. But it wasn't the Halloween he remembered.

He glanced at the little letters on the calendar that marked Thanksgiving and envisioned what it would be like at his parents' house without him there.

There'd be coffee and cinnamon buns in the kitchen in the morning. They'd all gather in their pajamas to wait for the start of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on television while the turkey cooked in the oven, filling the house with the aroma of the meal to come.

They'd eat the big meal early in the afternoon. Then his father would settle in his favorite chair to watch the football games on TV. Or at least try to watch until he fell asleep thanks to having a belly full of turkey.

By nightfall they'd all be hungry again. Then it would be time for hot open-faced turkey sandwiches, smothered in hot gravy. His mouth watered just thinking about it.

But alas, it was not to be. Not this year. Not for him. And not for too many years in the recent past.

He flipped the calendar page to December and there was Christmas. His favorite.

His mother would have the house decorated to the hilt, inside and out. Then she turned her attention to baking every kind of Christmas cookie known to man. The television would play a steady stream of holiday movies both old and new. And if the TV was off, seasonal music would fill the kitchen thanks

to the Alexa device he'd sent her as a gift a few years ago when he hadn't made it home for the holiday, which happened far too often.

But maybe—since his first attempt at a visit had gotten so screwed up—he could make it home for Christmas this year. It was a possibility.

He'd been granted a month's leave. He'd gotten to take less than half that before being recalled. He could only hope command would be more sympathetic given the holiday season and their recent mission and approve another request.

Two weeks at home in December would be incredible.

He remembered the dates of Bailey's tour listed online. It ended in December but she'd be back well before Christmas.

Would she be there at his parents' house? Or did her newfound musical fame and album and tour also mean she'd gotten another apartment in the city?

What if she had? So what? He could drive down—or take the train. Just as a friend. That wouldn't be weird. His family always used to go to the city to see the Rockefeller Center tree. Watch the ice skaters. Eat a hot pretzel or street cart hot dog. See the window decorations. Visit FAO Schwartz.

It was a good excuse. He just happened to be there seeing the holiday sights and decided to stop and say hi.

Yeah, right. *That's* what he wanted to do. Just say *hi* as a friend.

He'd managed to keep his mind off Bailey during the actual mission. Hostage rescue was so damn tricky he couldn't split his attention for anything or anyone. But in the off hours. When he was alone in his rack.

That was harder. Then his mind strayed to her. To worry about what she was doing and if she was safe doing it. And to other things—like the memory of the feel of her laying on top of him that first day when she'd tripped on his bag and crashed into him in nothing but a towel.

The memory made him smile. He missed the days of waking up and having her wander into the kitchen in her pajamas. Of watching her sip her tea while he gulped down his coffee.

Memories of that short time they'd been home together were too much of a reminder of what he was missing being single. Not to mention being away from his family.

The team was one kind of family. But it couldn't completely replace his actual one. He even missed his annoying little sister. And his mother's incessant calls. And his dad's annoying habits.

And the problem was, as long as he was an active duty SEAL stationed out of Coronado, there was nothing he could do to resolve this. It was career or family. Trying to satisfy both meant he wasn't doing either justice.

Rich popped his head inside the tent. "I'm done in there if you needed to get back on the computer. You looked like you were in the middle of something."

"Thanks. I forgot to email my mom. It was her birthday last week."

"Oh, man. Of all the things to forget. I'd be in deep shit if I forgot that. Get in there, man, before someone else hops on that computer."

"Yeah. You're right."

While his existential crisis wasn't going to be resolved here and now, he could at least take care of emailing his parents.

But he couldn't mention his plans to try to get home for Christmas. There were too many variables. Would the team be back in time? Could he get another leave approved? Even if both of those things panned out, another worldwide crisis could prevent his leaving.

To avoid disappointing his mother a second time in as many months, his visit for Christmas would have to be a surprise.

As he made his way back to the MWR tent, plans of another surprise visit had him remembering what had happened the last time he tried to surprise his parents and ended up with the surprise being on him.

The words *here we go again* crossed his brain and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

One direct red eye flight from San Diego to Syracuse had Quinn pulling onto his parents' street in time for a late breakfast with his family.

He was dreaming about fresh eggs and bacon from the farm market when the car parked along the curb of the house and the van parked across the street caught his attention.

That was before he spotted the cameras, and the photographers behind them running toward his car.

He didn't like anything aimed at him. Not guns and, though arguably less deadly, not cameras either.

Anger had him clenching his jaw. How dare they be here. His parents were inside.

Bailey wasn't even here yet the photographers remained camped out anyway.

He'd checked. She'd had a concert in Philadelphia this week and tonight was the big finale of the tour at Madison Square Garden. Not that he was stalking her— Okay, maybe he was.

He swung the vehicle into the driveway, not taking too much care or worry about how close he came to the photographer standing there.

“Quinn, are you and Bailey still together?”

“Quinn! Where have you been?”

“Why aren’t you with her on the tour? Are you broken up?”

Sunglasses on against the glare of the December sun, he grabbed his bag from the backseat and locked the car. Head down, he strode toward the house ignoring the shouted questions.

The front door opened and a flurry of camera shutters accompanied his mother and father’s greeting.

Unlike last time, he’d called home to give them a heads up when he’d gotten to the gate at the airport in California and saw the plane there waiting to be loaded and no weather that might delay him on the horizon.

He figured by then chances of disappointment were low and it was safe to get his mom’s hopes up.

“Quinn!” his mother squealed and wrapped him in a hug.

“Hello, son,” his father said, joining them in a group hug that Quinn couldn’t enjoy because they had an audience.

“Hi, Mom, Dad. Can we go inside?” he tried to sound upbeat. Meanwhile he wanted to throttle a couple of people with their own cameras.

“Of course. Come on in. Let me get your breakfast.” As his mom ushered him inside, she actually stopped and waved to the paparazzi before she straightened the wreath hanging there and shut the door.

Quinn’s eyes widened. “Mom! Don’t encourage them. They’re practically trespassing.”

She dismissed his concern with the wave of one hand. “Oh, they don’t mean any harm. They’re just doing their job. Besides, Bailey’s famous, honey. I think it’s wonderful they want to take her picture and help her career.”

His mouth dropped open but he decided to choose his battles. Standing opposite his parents for the first time in a year, next to a Christmas tree bedecked with all the ornaments he remembered from his childhood, was not the time to argue.

Lips pressed tight, he nodded, then received a sharp swat in the arm from his mother.

“Ow. What was that for?” he asked.

Setting his bag down by the door, he fought the memory of his last homecoming and Bailey tripping on top of him. As full and warm as it was, the house still felt empty without her in it.

“That was for sneaking home last month and not telling us,” his mother explained.

He breathed out a sigh. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to ruin your trip.”

“Thank you for that, but next time say something, son,” his father reiterated. “Trips can be changed. Family is more important.”

Duly chastised, Quinn nodded. “Yes, sir.”

After that exchange it seemed all was forgiven. Steak and eggs with a side of pancakes were waiting for him with fresh hot coffee and hot spiced apple cider, both served in Christmas mugs in a kitchen decorated with greens and bows.

Holiday music streamed in the kitchen and as his parents launched into tales and photos of their trip, it felt like no time had passed. Like he’d never been away. Except...

“Where’s Josie?” he asked.

“Chamber of Commerce meeting, I believe,” his mother said.

“Not Rotary?” his father asked.

“No, dear. Rotary meets at night. Chamber is in the morning.”

His father nodded. “That’s right. Can’t keep it straight.”

“Wait. What?” His sister? On the Chamber and the Rotary? “Josie’s a member?” he asked.

“Is she officially a member or is she just doing work for them?” His father turned to his mother.

“I think she might have joined recently,” his mother said. “But she’s been helping them for years. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if she got the community service award at next year’s Chamber dinner. But it was so nice to see Bob get it this year. He works so hard organizing the Santa parade.”

His father nodded as Quinn’s head spun.

What was happening here? Paparazzi on the front lawn. His sister, a respected member of the community.

“Oh, honey, next time you’re out. I need more gummies. I’ve only got a few left,” his father said.

His mom nodded. “Right. I’ll put them on my shopping list.”

Quinn swallowed the coffee he’d had the misfortune of sipping at that very moment.

“Gummies?” he asked.

Any chance his father was speaking about gummy bears? Like the candy. The innocent non-drug-laden kind...

“Pot gummies. They’re really helping your father sleep at night. It’s like a miracle,” his mom explained.

“Where are you getting them?” Quinn choked out.

“The pot store that opened next to the bar. Didn’t you see it when you were here?” she asked.

“I think it might have opened after he left. Remember? We went after we got back from the cruise and they told us they hadn’t even been open a week yet,” his father pointed out.

“You’re right.” His mother nodded.

Gone was the feeling of familiarity. His old home might have looked normal inside at first glance but just beneath, everything was upside down. He felt like an alien in his own house.

The late breakfast had been good but after this conversation he could use a drink. Besides, he needed to catch up with Mark. Hopefully *he* was still the same. Normal right

now would be good. After a quick text exchange they decided to meet at the Muddy River Inn.

With Carter on duty behind the bar and Quinn and Mark perched on matching ripped vinyl barstools it did seem normal—if he ignored the pot shop that had indeed opened next door.

Putting his father's new gummy habit out of his mind, he turned to Mark.

“So it's been eventful around here,” Quinn began.

Mark let out a snort. “You can say that again.”

“When Josie emailed that you had a night patrol stationed outside our house I came home intent on asking you why.” The internet had crapped out before he'd had a chance to email Mark and ask. Then things got crazy over there and Bailey's tour started... At least he was here now.

“Then you got home and saw why?” Mark suggested.

Quinn bobbed his head. “Pretty much.”

“She's a star, man.” Mark laughed.

“So I've heard.”

“I'll admit I was wondering why they were still hanging around the house when Bailey was across the country. Then I did a little digging into the old internet archives and figured it out. They were waiting around for you, the mysterious bodyguard. You'd gone MIA.” Mark shot him a knowing glance.

He certainly had. He guessed leaving the house at zero dark thirty to make the first flight of the day out of Albany had been good for something. No surprise they couldn't find him. The team had gone wheels up just days after he'd landed in California.

His being out of the country must have driven the reporters nuts. There was a certain satisfaction in knowing that.

“So they figured out where Bailey was staying and just descended?” Quinn asked. “Because it seemed pretty calm around here when I left.”

“It was, until that next song released.”

He hated to admit his lack of information but he had no choice. “I’m a little out of the loop. Comms were...limited.”

“No doubt. And I won’t ask where because you won’t tell me but can I say, man, you have the coolest job.”

“Thank you. I agree. So the song...” Quinn prompted his friend.

“So it all started when she released the next song,” Mark began.

“Wasn’t just the song,” Carter said, emerging from the kitchen with a basket of fries he delivered to the guy seated at the end of the bar. “They’d already spotted Bailey in the city without you so the questions and the theories were flying. Where were you? Did you break up? What had happened? Why did she have this old dude as a bodyguard now?”

He pushed down the satisfaction he’d felt when he’d seen that picture of the *old dude* and tried to concentrate on Carter’s explanation.

“Then the song hit and the internet went wild,” Carter continued.

“Because it’s so good?” Quinn asked.

The first one had been amazing. He couldn’t imagine the second one could be any better.

“Because it was about you,” Mark supplied.

Quinn’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I daresay except for her first song, the whole damn album is about you. She named the single and the album *Unrequited*,” Mark added.

Well, shit. That title gave him a clue of what the new songs might be about.

“You haven’t heard it?” Mark asked as Carter whipped out his cell from beneath the bar.

Carter tapped the screen and suddenly Bailey's voice came over the sound system.

Quinn swallowed hard, surprised at the visceral reaction hearing her voice caused within him. He felt the blood drain from his face as he listened.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and say he hasn't heard it before," Carter said.

"Yup," Mark agreed. "He always was a little clueless when it came to women."

"True that," Carter said before moving to pour another beer for the lone patron seated at the end.

When he returned, Quinn was still trying to digest what he'd just heard.

Carter hooked a thumb in his direction. "This guy. I swear. Women are writing songs about him and look at him. He looks miserable."

"Why is that, Baldwin?" Mark asked. "Do you not like her in that way?"

Quinn shook his head and admitted for the first time aloud what he was feeling. "I do like her. A lot."

"Then what's wrong?" Carter asked.

"What's wrong is I can't give my best to both my career and my personal life. And if I try I'll just fuck up both and end up hurting Bailey, just like I consistently upset my mom by not being around more."

Mark shook his head. "You haven't changed one bit."

"What do you mean?" Quinn frowned.

"You've always been like this. You broke up with Cassie after high school for the same reason."

"Yeah. I remember." Carter nodded. "You spilled your guts to us about why you dumped her when we were trying to kill that keg at that party at the dam."

"Did I?" Quinn let out a snort. "*Great.*"

“Yeah.” Mark nodded. “You know, Cassie was good friends with my sister. That girl went into a deep depression after you left. She wasn’t eating. Dropped out of theater camp that summer.”

“Jeezus.” Quinn ran a hand over his face. This was not what he needed to know right now.

“Quinn, maybe you need to consider that your trying to prevent these girls from being hurt is actually just hurting them more,” Mark suggested.

“And you’re the relationship expert now?” Quinn asked, remembering his old friend’s playboy ways.

“Happily married for going on eleven years. So yes. Why are you so convinced any relationship will fail? What if it works out?”

“How can it? You guys know what I do,” he said, keeping his voice low.

“Yeah, I know. Big bad SEAL. So what? See Mullins down there?” Mark tipped his chin toward the guy at the end of the bar. “He’s a firefighter. He’s out of the house on a minute’s notice in the middle of the night when that siren blows. He could easily die in the line of duty. Never come home again—”

“Uh, thanks.” Mullins’ comment, accompanied by a frown and a glare, was ripe with sarcasm.

“—but it didn’t stop him from getting married and having three little ones. I’m in law enforcement. Same goes for me. I could die today,” Mark continued, undaunted.

“Hell, we could all die at any moment from anything,” Carter added. “The stacked cases of beer in the basement could fall and crush me to death tomorrow, for all I know. Or I could get electrocuted by this outlet under the bar that’s got the frayed wires running to it. Life’s risky.”

Ignoring the list of the bar’s possible code violations, Mark nodded. “Exactly. Which is a reason to live life to the fullest, not stop living it.”

Quinn shook his head. “But the distance—”

“You’ll figure it out,” Carter said.

“The distraction—” he began.

“I’m sure you can handle it,” Mark said.

Quinn glanced between the two. “When the hell did you two get so philosophical?”

These were not the same guys whose biggest debates used to be the best way to illegally obtain alcohol.

Carter lifted one shoulder. “We grew up.”

“And Johnny Dickens helped speed that growing up process quite a bit,” Mark added soberly.

Shit. He’d been in the middle of Hell Week in BUD/S when Johnny had been killed in a car crash. The news and the guilt had hit Quinn hard.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here for the funeral. I couldn’t—”

“It’s all good. We know. We understood. What you were doing was important,” Mark told him.

“That doesn’t mean we’re gonna let you put off living your life because of some misguided sense of honor now though,” Carter said.

Quinn let out a big breath. “All right. I hear you.”

“So you’re heading to the city, right?” Carter prodded.

“You mean now?” Quinn asked.

“Yes, now. She’s at the Garden tonight. You can make it down there in three hours. You’ll be there in plenty of time for show time,” Mark said.

“I don’t even have a ticket.”

“You don’t need a damn ticket. Just tell them you’re half of Bailquinn.” Mark grinned.

“Call her and have her leave one at the door for you.” Carter’s suggestion was a lot more practical.

But Quinn hadn't talked to or texted Bailey since he'd snuck out in the middle of the night. He couldn't call her out of the blue and ask for a ticket to a sold out show at the Garden.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"That means he's not doing it." Carter scowled.

Mark smiled. "I don't know. I think he might."

Quinn stood, done with the conversation. "I'm heading out."

"Oh, he's definitely heading to the Garden," Mullins mumbled from his end of the bar which set Carter and Mark chuckling.

"I'll see you all later," Quinn said loudly, over the laughter at his expense.

"And we'll see you in the morning newspapers." Mark grinned.

"Go get your girl!" Carter called as Quinn turned for the door.

"And tell your Mom thanks again for the hot cocoa and cookies. She was handing them out to me and the paparazzi the night I was on duty outside your house," Mark added.

Good Lord. What had happened to his world? He didn't know, but he did know one thing. He wanted Bailey in it. He just had to figure out how to accomplish that.

A text vibrated his phone as he was about to get into the car. It was from Josie.

JOSIE

Welcome home! B left a tix for me at the Garden box office. Yours if you want it.

His eyes widened. He wanted to jump on the offer, but he couldn't steal Josie's ticket. Bailey was her best friend. And this was the Garden.

Don't you want to use it?

Caught the show with Mom & Dad in Philly. You go for it!

He grinned. It looked like he was heading to the city. More important, in three hours he'd be with Bailey again... if he could drive with the way his hands were shaking from just the thought of seeing her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It had been the most amazing month of Bailey's life.

She'd traveled the country with three of the biggest female singers in her genre.

Crowds of tens of thousands had sung her lyrics along with her. She had chills just remembering it.

She'd loved it all, even the grueling parts of travel, but now she was ready to be home. At least at her temporary home.

Tonight was the end. She'd been living in a dream world and now it was midnight and Cinderella had to go back to reality. Back to living in the Baldwin's house and making influencer videos on TikTok. But also back to her best friend. Back to the family she loved as much as if they had been her own.

But not before one more sold-out show. Even after all the past shows it was still hard to wrap her head around it all.

It was going to be a good night. Madison Square Garden was packed.

She could feel the energy radiating off the crowd. It was intoxicating. Addicting. Now she understood why Axel sought the spotlight.

Funny, before this tour she'd always shunned attention. Except on her TikTok. Though that felt different. Like she was inviting her followers into her safe little corner of the world, not throwing herself out into their big scary one.

Axel. She hadn't thought that name in what felt like a long time.

Unless someone brought him up or she saw his name on social media, she'd been able to put him completely out of her mind and it had been a relief.

Even the song she'd written about him didn't conjure him anymore.

The song itself seemed to have taken on a life of its own. Now it represented all heartache everywhere. Every woman who'd ever loved the wrong man. It was a universal feeling she shared with the world.

The song and the pain belonged to her and her fans. Not to Axel. Not any longer. He might have been the inspiration but his usefulness was over.

Quinn though, now that was another story.

He was on her mind day and night. She didn't know where he was but she'd step in front of the spotlight night after night and imagine he might be there in the crowd watching her at that very moment. Feeling proud of her. Wishing he hadn't ducked away from that kiss. Hadn't flown back to California without a goodbye.

But if she knew anything it was that he'd have moved on with his life. Just like he'd done at eighteen when he'd joined the Navy and barely looked back.

He could be on the other side of the world for all she knew, fighting some evil. There certainly was plenty happening at the moment. She'd never watched the news as intently as she did now as she imagined what dumpster fire around the globe he might have run off to fight.

"Bailey?"

She turned at the sound of the stagehand's voice. "Yeah?"

"You have a visitor. He says he knows you."

He.

Oh my God. Had she manifested Quinn by wishing so hard that he actually appeared?

They were back in New York. Christmas was just around the corner. He could be here finally getting to visit his parents since he hadn't seen them last month.

It was possible. Her dreams could have become reality—

“Hey, baby...”

That was not Quinn's voice. It wasn't his ethereally handsome face or his crooked dimpled smile either.

In front of her, donning a smarmy grin and too many rings, stood the one man she'd hoped to never see again in this lifetime. And she certainly didn't want him calling her *baby*.

“Axel. What are you doing here?”

“Visiting my girl.”

That elicited a short and humorless shocked burst of a laugh from her. “I'm definitely *not* your girl.”

“You were. You can't deny that,” he said in what he probably thought was a smooth, seductive voice. To her he just sounded slimy, like a snake.

Were snakes actually slimy? She didn't know, but Axel certainly was.

“Was I your girl? Because it didn't look like it while your needle dick was buried inside that waif you told me was nobody—” She cut off her own rant.

It didn't matter. It was over. They were over. He was nothing to her now.

He'd just deny it anyway, even if the video proof was all over the internet, along with that picture he'd leaked of her boobs.

Renewed anger had her eyes narrowing.

“Come on, baby. That was a mistake. A misunderstanding.”

Or a blessing. One that had set her free.

“What do you want, Axel?” she asked.

“I’m about to go on tour—”

“Good for you. Have fun.”

No doubt he would. There’d be a fresh crop of fans to fuck in every city. He’d love it.

“My label thought it would be good press if you opened for me.”

Her eyes widened. “Me. Open for you.”

“Think of the publicity. People will eat it up. You and your songs. Then my band as the headliner.”

His band as the headliner? Her as the opener. After she’d just toured the country as an equal with today’s hottest names in music. Was he delusional?

“No.”

Once upon a time—not all that long ago actually—she wouldn’t have had the confidence to say that. She had it now though. Hundreds of thousands of fans chanting her name had finally convinced her that even though it could all go away tomorrow, for today at least she was worthy of everything she had.

“Come on, babe. Just think about it. It’ll be good for you.” Axel’s condescending smile had her cringing.

“I did think about it. The answer is still no.”

“No need for you to deal with the details now. My people will call your people. You’re still with Paragon, right?”

“Don’t bother—”

“It’s no bother, babe. Happy to do it.” He grinned.

She sucked in a breath. It was like talking to a wall. He didn’t listen. Perhaps he never had. That was so clear now. How could she have been so blind before?

“Look. I gotta get ready for the show.”

“Sure. I’m excited to finally see you on stage. Break a leg, baby.” Axel grabbed her by both arms and planted a hard wet

kiss on her closed mouth.

A camera's flash drew her attention.

She shoved him away with both hands and turned in time to see the photographer that Axel was grinning at as the man snapped another photo.

“What the hell? Axel, is this some kind of publicity stunt?” She glared at him.

“No, but it could be good, right? Free publicity for our tour. Can you picture the press? *Axel and Bailey back together,*” he said with the sweep of one hand over the imaginary headline.

That headline was going to remain imaginary as long as she had anything to do with it.

“Axel. We'll *never* be back together.”

“The press doesn't have to know that, baby. We're already selling out the smaller venues. After this news hits the internet we'll be completely sold out.” Axel's eyes widened as he grabbed her by the shoulders. “I just had an idea.”

“I don't really care—”

“We can do a movie of the tour like Taylor did. Think of the money. Think about the fans, Bailey.” He gave her another shake with each of his bargaining points.

What she needed to do was think about herself and get away from Axel.

He still had his hands on her. Tightly enough she wouldn't be surprised if he left bruises. He always had been too rough. Too loud. Too... everything. Like he needed to prove he was a man.

The opposite of Quinn whose soft-spoken strength projected more masculinity than all of Axel's vain efforts.

“Axel. Let me go,” she said in as firm and loud a voice as she could manage while the need to get away from Axel gripped her.

“Baby, just think how good it will be—”

The fist came out of nowhere.

One moment Axel had an iron hold on her. The next he was stumbling backward thanks to the punch that sent him careening and ultimately landed him on his ass.

“The lady said to let go,” Quinn growled as he stood over Axel, who was currently fingering his reddened jaw.

Axel frowned up at Quinn. “Who the fuck are you?”

“The person who is going to make sure you do as Bailey asks from now on,” Quinn answered.

The photographer snapped away, the shutter sounding like the rapid fire of a machine gun. Axel had been correct. These pictures were going to be all over the internet by tomorrow. Just not in the way he’d envisioned.

Quinn didn’t seem to notice the photographer. Or just didn’t care if he had noticed. He hovered over Axel, staring him down in silent domination.

“Fine. You know what. You can have her. She was a lousy lay anyway.” Axel scowled.

Bailey watched Quinn’s chest expand as he slowly shook his head. He reached down and with one fist tangled in the fabric of Axel’s black T-shirt, he hauled the younger man onto unsteady feet.

Once Axel was upright Quinn smoothed the wrinkled fabric with the hard slap of two palms that had Axel taking a single step back to stay balanced and standing.

“If I were you, I’d learn some manners.” Quinn stared and waited. When Axel didn’t move, probably because he was frozen in fear, Quinn said “You should go now.”

Axel glanced at the crew surrounding them and at all the raised phones no doubt broadcasting the event live if not recording it for later.

“Yeah. I’ll go. But only because I’m done with her and I got someplace important I need to be.” Axel turned and swaggered away—that was the only word she could come up with to describe his cocky strut as he left them.

Quinn snorted then turned back to her, his eyes softening. “You all right?”

He was here. She’d never been better.

She nodded in answer to his question then, ignoring the cell phones and the camera, she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for you,” he said.

She couldn’t have asked for a better reason.

“Oh.” Swallowing, she tried to contain both tears and a smile. “Thank you.”

One corner of his oh-so-kissable mouth tipped up. “You’re welcome.”

Their gazes locked. In a Hallmark movie this would be the time at the end of the two hours where the hero and heroine finally kissed for the first time and went off to their happily ever after.

The tour manager popped around the corner. “Bailey, you’re on in five.”

And there it was, proof her life was not a romance movie. There was no happily ever after.

But Quinn was back. At least for now. And for now, that was good enough.

CHAPTER THIRTY

*B*ailey was amazing.

She owned the stage. She owned the crowd. They loved her.

And the songs...

Quinn knew she had talent but he hadn't known how much.

In the short time since he'd seen her last, she'd written so many songs. Each was more powerful than the last.

He hadn't thought she could do better than that first one she'd written about Axel betraying her. But she'd done it. The new ones were even more amazing.

Songs about love lost. Songs about being alone. About loving someone and having them not love you back.

He wasn't cocky enough to easily believe she'd written all of these about him. But if not him, then who? His heart clenched thinking it actually might be him who was her inspiration.

Warring emotions had him torn between hope and dread. He wanted it to be him as much as he didn't because these songs were about how painful it was to be in love.

She hadn't invented these lyrics out of thin air. These songs were personal. Full of raw emotion and pain. Pain he'd caused.

And selfish bastard that he was, he was likely going to cause her more pain because he was done being good. Done being the better man. The one who walked away from his feelings. From his desire.

Mark was right. In an effort to spare her, he'd hurt everyone. Himself and her.

Not anymore. He wanted Bailey and if by some miracle she still wanted him, he was going to take anything she was willing to give.

The ticket Bailey left for Josie had included a backstage pass. It was how he'd gotten back there before the show, just in time to save her from her pissant ex.

That VIP lanyard was also how he was waved past security and into the backstage area now just as the final strains of Bailey's last song echoed off the walls of the arena.

It was how he was in the perfect place to see her as she came off the stage, breathless and pink cheeked. Her eyes glistening with excitement and maybe a few tears as the crowd chanted her name.

She spotted him and their eyes met, just as a stagehand ran up to her with a bottle of water. Over the din Quinn heard the crew member say, "You ready to do the encore?"

With a quick glance back at him she nodded and then was gone again, back to her adoring fans.

"Does this happen every show?" he asked as the stagehand paused next to him.

She grinned. "Yup. They love her. She'll be headlining next tour. No doubt about it."

He let out a short laugh. It was amazing and surprising. Not because he ever doubted her, but because of the speed with which her life had changed so much. And here he was about to throw something else at her.

His feelings.

He couldn't. He shouldn't. She should be concentrating on herself and the rapid rise of her career.

The sound of a lone guitar quieted the cheers of the concert goers. Then he heard Bailey's voice, so familiar to him now, as she said, "This one's for... well, he knows who he is."

The stagehand touched his arm. "You can watch from the wings if you want."

He glanced down at the woman. "Won't the audience be able to see me?"

"That's the point." She grinned.

He hesitated barely a breath before he moved to a place where he could see her.

Lit by a single spot of light she was as beautiful as her music.

The words and the melody were haunting. Like she was pouring her soul out onto the stage. The emotions were as raw and true as that first song she'd ever written, but this one felt different.

She got to the chorus and as the crowd sang along with her he realized it was the title track of her album, *Unrequited*.

He listened more closely than he had when Carter had played it for him at the bar. Hearing it live, an acoustic rather than a studio version, drove home even harder the angst, the sadness, the pain.

But beneath it all was a feeling of hope.

He felt that hope too. Maybe it wasn't too late. He hadn't hurt her so badly she couldn't forgive him. Maybe they did have a chance.

She finished the song and the crowd went wild.

When she set down the guitar and turned to leave the stage, her gaze hit on him standing in the dark. A small tentative smile bowed her lips as she took a step toward him.

He didn't wait for her to come to him. He strode to her. Wrapping her in his arms, he picked her up, holding her tightly against him as his heart raced.

Setting her back down on her feet, he pulled back just enough to bring his palms up to cradle her face.

Leaning close, partially because of the noise of the crowd that had gone completely wild, but mostly because he couldn't seem to get close enough to her, he asked, "Who is that song about?"

"You. Only you." She shook her head like it should be obvious to him. And yeah, he'd been really slow on the uptake but he got it now.

At that revelation he couldn't control himself. He smashed his mouth against hers, finally taking what he'd wanted, what he'd waited for, for too long.

When he pulled back so they both could breathe, common sense took over again. The crew stood nearby waiting to reset the stage for the next act. Not to mention the packed arena of close to twenty-thousand fans who were witnessing this not so private moment and reacting to it with a deafening level of cheers.

"We'd better." He tipped his head toward the wings.

She laughed. "Yeah."

Backstage, she gazed up at him with trepidation in her eyes. As if she were afraid it wasn't real. That his feelings weren't real.

He could correct that. "You're wrong, you know," he said.

"About what?" she asked, sounding breathless.

"It was never unrequited like the song says. I've wanted you since that first day I found you in my parents' house in nothing but a towel. I haven't stopped wanting you since."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because there's a good chance I'm really bad at this."

"Bad at what?"

"Relationships. Love."

She let out a short laugh “Quinn Baldwin, you’ve never been bad at anything in your life.”

“I’m told it was quite bad when I dumped Cassie before leaving for California. And I’m pretty sure my family would argue I can be a shitty son and brother sometimes.”

She shook her head. “To me you’re perfect.”

“No. Not perfect. But I’m going to try my best to be that for you.”

Her hands rested on his chest. The two of them were pressed together from thighs to hips and still it wasn’t close enough for him. And there were still too many people around. Band members. Crew. The ever-present photographers.

He’d tempered his desire and his feelings for too long. He was ready to stop doing that now. But not with an audience.

But this was Bailey’s moment. The final show of a once in a lifetime dream come true concert tour. A sellout crowd at Madison Square Garden had sung her lyrics back to her and chanted her name. He would never ask her to leave early—

“You wanna get out of here?” she asked.

Shocked, but more than pleasantly surprised he laughed. “Yes. So badly.”

Grabbing his hand she said, “Come on!”

“Where are we going?” he asked after they dodged equipment and people and finally made their way to a door with an exit sign above it.

“I have a hotel room nearby. But there are probably going to be photographers right outside that door.”

“I think I can handle that. I do have some experience with security—” He frowned. “Hey, wait. Where is your security?”

“I sent him home when I saw you here. Is that okay? I just...didn’t want him when I could have you.”

She gazed up and his heart swelled.

He couldn't keep the smile off his face as he nodded.
"Yeah. It's more than okay."

He could only hope she was okay with what he intended to do to her the moment they were alone inside that hotel room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The door of the hotel room crashed against the wall.

Bailey blindly hit the switch to turn on the lights while Quinn shoved the door closed and somehow managed to flip the lock all while they were joined at the mouth.

Once they were safely locked inside together, he pushed her up against the door and groaned against her mouth.

His display of unbridled passion worked worlds to soothe the heartbreak she'd felt since waking up that morning and finding him gone with nothing but a note about security left behind him.

While sad, she'd missed him. While angry, she railed silently against him. All while pretending to everyone else she was fine. In private she'd cried. Screamed. And written an entire album.

But that whole time she'd been wrong. *It wasn't unrequited*, he'd said backstage.

He was proving that now.

“Want you,” he growled.

“You can have me,” she said, smothering the *please* as she fought the urge to beg him to get naked already. She'd waited half her life for this.

“Bed,” he said as his lips brushed her throat.

The suite wasn't quite as large as the one they'd had for the GMA interview but it still had a separate bedroom. More

importantly, it had a king-sized bed.

They were going to make use of every inch of that mattress if Quinn's enthusiasm in kissing her while they were upright and pressed against the door was any indication.

Her cell phone vibrated and as distracting as Quinn sliding his hands from her hips to her ass was she still—shamefully—glanced at the screen.

Xander was calling her on FaceTime.

Quinn stopped kissing her to eye the screen. His brows rose then he took the cell from her and hit to connect the call. "Little busy here, Xander," Quinn said as her cheeks began to burn.

"Yes, so I see. I also saw you put Axel on his ass on video. You have a good lawyer for when he sues you?" Xander asked.

"You got a lawyer to countersue for him roughing up Bailey and refusing to let her go after she requested he do so multiple times, which forced me to have to take action in the line of duty as her bodyguard?" Quinn countered.

He spoke surprisingly well for a man with a raging hard-on straining the zipper of his jeans.

"So you're back on the job as her security?" Xander asked.

"Right now, I am."

Xander nodded. "Good to hear. Bailey..."

Quinn faced the phone at her and she got a look at herself in the little window next to Xander's larger image. Her lips were swollen. Her eyes bright. Her cheeks flushed. And she was well on her way to having sex hair.

Ignoring how she looked, she said, "Yes?"

"*Unrequited* just hit number one."

Quinn snorted. "Wait until she writes her new song."

"There's a new song?" Xander asked, looking excited.

“There will be after I give her the inspiration. Goodnight, Xander. Don’t call again until late tomorrow. We plan to be busy.” Quinn hit to disconnect the call then tossed the cell on the table by the door.

“That okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“Good. Oh, and you can get that worried frown off your face. Axel’s not gonna sue. He was humiliated both by your rejection—which I loved, by the way—and by me knocking him on his ass with barely a punch.”

“*That* was barely a punch?”

“I didn’t even throw my body weight into it. More like a jab really. And—because I know you’re a worrier I’ll say this—if for some reason he gets the wild idea to try and come at me I’ve got some military friends who can probably convince him otherwise. If that doesn’t work JAG will provide me with legal advice. So no worries. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Perfect. Now let’s get to work on that song.”

She dug her feet into the carpet. “Is that what we’re doing in the bedroom? Writing a song?”

He tipped his head to one side. “We’ll be making some beautiful music together. You can write it down tomorrow. You’ll be too busy tonight.” He grinned.

This was a different side of Quinn than she’d seen before. She liked it.

She liked it even more as he backed her toward the bed, undressing her one piece at a time until her stage clothes were tossed on the floor in a trail leading to the bed.

He drew in a deep nostril flaring breath as he looked her up and down. His eyes swept every naked inch of her. She crossed her arms over her chest while also trying to hide her stomach and press her thighs together so they looked thinner.

He pushed her arms aside. “Don’t,” he said shaking his head.

“Can we turn off the light?” she asked.

“No fucking way. I’ve waited too long for this to not be able to see you.”

“I don’t look good naked.”

His eyes widened. “You look fucking amazing naked.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t—”

“Yes. You do.” He planted his leg between hers and pressed closer.

His clothes were rough against her bare skin, but while they were this close at least he couldn’t look at her. His words couldn’t combat a lifetime of feeling self-conscious about her body.

Her discomfort must have shown on her face because Quinn took her hand and pressed it against his crotch.

“Look what you do to me. Feel that?”

She nodded.

“Want that?” he asked, looking devilish.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good. Because I’m not sure I could resist you any longer.”

She didn’t tell him that he never needed to resist her. That she was head over heels in love with him. Instead she tugged at the button on his jeans. “Too many clothes.”

“I agree.”

He made short work of his clothes then he was back, every naked inch of him pressed against her.

“You don’t have anything important to do tomorrow, do you?” he asked while his hands roamed her body.

“No. Why?”

“Because I think we’re going to be too tired and sore to do much of anything after tonight.”

Her eyes widened as he gently pushed her onto the mattress. His hard length, pointing right at her, led the way as he followed her down.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*B*raced on shaking arms over Bailey beneath him, Quinn knew he wasn't going to last long.

He'd just have to do his best and then do it again. He didn't think Bailey would object to that.

But first—he needed to distract her from herself. She kept glancing at the lamp as if she was trying to figure out how to turn it off without him noticing.

“Bailey.”

Her gaze cut from the lamp to him. “Yes.”

“You really want that light off, don't you?”

“Yes, please,” she answered on an exhale.

“I'll make you a deal.”

Her brows rose. “What kind of deal?”

“We can shut off that lamp, but then I get to do anything and everything I want to you. And I'm warning you, I want a lot.” He was only half joking.

Her eyes widened. He could see the debate play across her features. She was tempted, but finally she said, “The light can stay on.”

“Chicken,” he accused.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Her shyness had lost out to her fear of giving him sexual *carte blanche* over her body.

Silly because he'd never hurt her. And he was still planning to push them to the edge anyway, sexually speaking. They'd both waited too long for this to be calm or routine.

There was no doubt that at least the first time was going to be explosive. The second and the third time—and the fourth and the fifth—he could get creative.

They'd have to call the front desk for a late checkout.

He was happy she'd chosen to leave the lights on as he slid down her body. He'd be able to enjoy her reaction to every touch.

As he spread her thighs, her eyes flicked wide. And her expression of shock mingled with anticipation was priceless.

She sucked in a breath as he spread her with his thumbs and he couldn't help his smile.

When his mouth hit her core she drew in a breath on a gasp as her hips bucked up. All that and he'd barely started touching her. Wait until he really got down to business. This was going to be fun.

He gazed up and saw her eyes squeezed tightly closed.

Pulling back, he said, "Bailey. Open your eyes." When she did, he said, "Watch."

Then he gave her something to watch.

His eyes on her, he leaned low and used his mouth to pull on her core with a suction that had her lips parting as she drew in a stuttering breath.

Adding two fingers to work her G-spot had her eyes popping wide as her head came up off the pillow.

And one finger slick with her own juices and pressed against her tight hole had her going silent for a moment, before she nodded and gave him permission to push deeper.

The combination all worked together until her breaths turned into rhythmic cries.

Then she was gripping his hair as her hips bucked under his mouth.

Her muscles squeezed his fingers inside. But even without that to tell him she was coming he'd have known by her cries echoing off the walls of the bedroom.

There was less and less blood flowing to his brain and his control was at an all time low.

Tiny quakes from the aftershocks of her orgasm still pulsed through her when he slid up her body and positioned his length at her entrance, then hung his head when realization hit.

“Fuck.” With a sigh, he said, “Condoms are in my bag in the car parked at the Garden.”

“I have an IUD. And I went to the doctor and got checked after Axel. And I'm not having sex with anyone else,” she rushed to add.

“I'm not having sex with anyone else either,” he confirmed. In fact, now that he had Bailey, he couldn't imagine wanting anyone else ever.

“So then do we really need a condom?” she asked.

The sight of her teeth biting her lower lip had his cock jumping. “Not on my account.”

“Okay, then,” she said shyly.

“Okay, then.” He swallowed hard and plunged inside.

Now it was his eyes that slammed shut from the sensation of being surrounded by Bailey. Her body gripped him like a fist that held his cock tight in its warm grasp.

“You can move. It's okay,” she said.

He realized he'd frozen, sunken deep, afraid to move.

“I really can't.” He let out a short laugh. “If I move, I'll come. You feel too good.”

“So come. Then maybe we can do it again?” she suggested shyly.

“Yeah, we can.”

He set a fast, hard pace. It rocked the bed. It rocked Bailey on the bed. It had the headboard hitting the wall and worked

the covers up until they were all at the head and none were by the foot.

It didn't last as long as he would have wanted but longer than he'd anticipated.

Bottoming out inside Bailey as she gripped his butt and held him deep, he came so hard he saw stars behind his closed eyelids. And when he felt her body pulsing around him and heard her breath kicking up as she held him tightly against her he about lost it.

She came again while he was inside her, which had him getting hard and round two was on.

This time he made love to her. Slow and deep, gazing into her eyes as he enjoyed every stroke of his body into hers.

The bed was going to be a mess. They were getting pretty messy themselves. But he'd bet there was a big ass shower in this suite, if not a big jacuzzi bathtub. Perfect for some water sex.

And with his plans for round three set, he lifted Bailey's legs onto his shoulders and attained another level of depth and pleasure.

Her eyes widened and he knew she was getting inside her own head again. She moved her hands to her stomach as if to hide it from his view.

He'd get her over this self-consciousness one way or another. For now... he gathered their combined slickness on one finger and slid back between her cheeks. When he slipped it inside her tight hole she gasped and forgot all about trying to hide her stomach from him as she gripped the bedding on either side of her.

Pleased with his creativity, and all the potential it opened up, he smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked.

"Because I love you," he said.

Her eyes flew wide. "Quinn Baldwin, you did not just tell me you loved me for the first time while we're having sex and

your *finger is in my ass.*” She’d whispered the last part, as if anyone else was there to hear.

“I do believe I did. Is that a problem?” He smiled wider.

His love for her felt like it was expanding and overflowing his heart. Like he’d dammed it up for so long, now that he’d opened the floodgates it all came spilling out.

“No, it’s not a problem,” Bailey began. “Because I... love you too.”

He knew. Or at least had suspected, even as he’d tried to deny it. But hearing the words made it very real.

Overloading on the reality, he needed to lighten the mood. He tipped his hips forward and resumed a slow, lazy pace. “Too bad you can’t put it in a song about the first time we said *I love you*. Because, you know, of the sex.”

Her lips twitched. “Just watch me.”

He laughed. “Oh, really? Okay. I see how it’s going to be. Fine. Then let me give you something to write about.”

Surprising her, surprising even himself a little bit, he did exactly that.

EPILOGUE

“*J*osie. Why did you pack such a huge carry-on?” Quinn was starting to regret offering to carry his sister’s shoulder bag for her in addition to Bailey’s small, wheeled carry-on.

At least his girlfriend hadn’t overpacked. Bailey always had been the sensible one of the two.

“We’re going to be home for almost a month,” Josie defended.

“You left half of your stuff and *all* of your winter clothes at Mom and Dad’s when you moved to California, so what exactly is in here?” Quinn asked.

“Christmas presents and if you don’t be quiet, you won’t be getting yours.” Josie shot him a glare.

“Now, now, children. Be nice.” Bailey held up both hands when both he and Josie shot her a glare. “Kidding. Sorry. I should know better than to get in the middle of you two.”

“Yes, you should.” Josie nodded. “The three of us have been living together for a year now.”

“Feel free to get your own place at any time, Josie,” Quinn offered.

“And give up that beach view? No way. Sorry, bro. You’re stuck with me.”

A year ago after he’d come up for air from the *I love you* sex marathon after the concert and finally gotten back upstate, he found out that Bailey and Josie had already been talking

about moving to the west coast together. That's where Bailey's record label was. And apparently his sister was some hot shot freelance web designer and could work from anywhere.

It didn't take much to convince them to move to the San Diego area instead of closer to LA. And with three salaries splitting the rent, they could afford a pretty sweet house right on the water.

But there was the downside that he was back sharing a bathroom with his sister. The upside was Josie was there as company for Bailey when he was away.

His annoying sister aside, it was really pretty perfect except that still left his parents on the other coast.

But he'd been making more of an effort to visit—just no more surprise trips for any of them.

He'd been pretty good about keeping his promise. This would be the second trip to New York this year. He was racking up those frequent flier miles. They all were. Bailey and Josie had been back east like five times this year.

Josie groaned. "Great. The song my best friend wrote about having sex with my brother is playing. Again. Fabulous."

Quinn shot Bailey a raised brow as her song streamed out of the restaurant they were standing in front of.

She shook her head. "Don't look at me like that. I never told her that's what *Worth the Wait* is about."

"Nobody had to tell me. Jeez. I have ears. I can hear the lyrics. I have had sex before, you know." Josie scowled.

Quinn ran a hand over his face. "Oh my God. Can we please change this subject to anything else? I beg you."

"Get the bickering out of your system now, you two. Barring any delays, we'll be at your parents' house in like four hours," Bailey warned.

Quinn's eyes widened. "Don't say that word *delay*. You'll jinx us."

They were flying the week of Thanksgiving. Quinn had braced himself for a travel nightmare and so far—knock wood—they'd been lucky. But he couldn't walk through Atlanta Airport without remembering last year when he'd been stuck in the USO overnight.

"I checked the app. We're still on time, but we do have almost an hour layover," Josie said, cell in hand.

"Would you mind if I ran to say hello to someone quick?" Quinn asked.

Both women frowned at him.

"Who do you know at the Atlanta Airport?" Bailey asked.

"It sounds crazy, but it's this volunteer at the USO. She's...odd. But really nice."

"Oh, really?" Bailey crossed her arms.

"*She?*" Josie echoed his word.

Quinn let out a short laugh. "She's like fifty."

Josie cocked up a brow. "Fifty is the new thirty."

"Who says?" he asked.

"The cosmetic company I just designed a site for. Hey, why don't we all go say hello?" Josie suggested. "I've never seen the USO. Maybe there'll be some hot military guys inside."

"Well, it's by the entrance so we'd have to go out and then come back through security."

If they all went they'd have to take the bags and then come back through with the carry-on that the TSA had already opened in San Diego because something Josie had packed set off the machine. If he went alone it would be faster and easier.

He got a look at Bailey. Her body language screamed what she wouldn't voice aloud.

She was jealous. He could see it in her face. In the slump of her shoulders. In the stiffness of her spine and the downcast

of her eyes. He never wanted her to feel insecure because of him. Especially since he knew her history with Axel.

He put one hand on her shoulder. “First of all, I love you. I only have eyes for you, so stop. You’ll never have reason to be jealous of anyone but especially not of Blessing.”

“Her name is Blessing?” Bailey narrowed her eyes.

“Remember we graduated with a girl named Precious,” Josie pointed out. “People name kids all kinds of stuff. Isn’t one celebrity kid named Apple?”

“Anyway, Blessing might not even be there but I just thought I’d say hello because—” He shook his head. “Never mind. This is going to sound too weird.”

“I love weird. Weird is my favorite color,” Josie declared. “Please proceed.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Quinn said, “Well, she’s kind of psychic, I guess. I was there for hours with these four other guys. We all had delays from the storm. So she made some kind of woo-woo weird ass prediction for each one of us. And damned if mine didn’t come true.”

“What was yours?” Bailey asked.

“I think it was about you. She told me it was good I was going home even though Mom and Dad wouldn’t be there, because there was someone there who really needed me.”

“Aww. That is you,” Josie said.

“It was.” Bailey wiped at her eyes.

Quinn shook his head. “Aw, jeez. Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” Bailey denied.

“Okay, never mind. Let’s grab a snack and head to the gate.”

“Quinn Baldwin?”

At the sound of his name he turned and there she was. “Blessing? What are you doing here?”

“I came to say hello.”

“You knew I was here?”

“Just a hunch. It’s the time of year for travel. And I can’t live without my daily fix of Starbucks so I sneak away through security every shift to grab my guilty pleasure.” She winked then turned to Josie. “You must be Quinn’s sister.”

“Guilty.” Josie lifted one hand. “How did you know?”

“The resemblance, of course.” Blessing pivoted to face Bailey. “That would make you his girlfriend. Bailey.”

“Yes. How did you guess that?” Bailey asked.

“Oh, I’m a big fan.”

This was turning into a typical Blessing conversation and he loved it.

“Traveling home to see your parents?” she said as more of a statement than a question.

“Yes. If our luck holds, I’ll get to be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas before we fly back on December twenty-six.”

She smiled. “Your luck will hold.”

He didn’t even question it this time. Just gratefully took her declaration as a given and smiled. “Thank you. Happy holidays.”

“Happy holidays to you all.” She toasted them with a raise of her Starbucks cup and disappeared into the crowd.

“Love her!” Josie declared. “Let’s visit her at the USO every time we fly through here.”

“When we’re with Quinn. We can’t get in without him. It’s only for service members and their spouses and dependents,” Bailey reminded.

Josie pouted as Quinn bit his lip to not tell them that wouldn’t be a problem for much longer. His grandmother’s diamond ring was safe in his mother’s care waiting for him to get home and propose to Bailey on Christmas.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close for a quick kiss. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

So was he. More than ready. He leaned in and kissed her again.

“Ugh! Too much PDA. I’m going inside this restaurant and ordering us onion rings and Quinn is paying,” Josie declared before heading into the nearest doorway.

“Order French fries too,” he called after her knowing Bailey loved them and would never order them for herself.

She looked up at him. “I love you.”

“I know.” He grinned and it earned him a slap, then he got serious. “And I love you with every fiber of my being until the day I die and a million years after.”

She wiped at her eyes again.

He let out a breath. “I’m going to write these tears off to the fact you’re a creative genius and feel things more deeply than us mere mortals and leave it at that. Good?”

“Good.” She nodded, glassy eyed.

“Fries?” he asked.

“Fries,” she smiled through the tears.

Maybe relationships weren’t that hard after all. He was killing it. He could only hope their marriage would be as easy. He should have asked Blessing if she had any predictions for them about that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A top 10 New York Times and nine-time USA Today bestselling author, Cat Johnson writes contemporary romance featuring sexy alpha heroes, who sometimes wear cowboy or combat boots, and the sassy heroines brave enough to love them. Known for her creative marketing, Cat has sponsored bull-riding cowboys and used bologna to promote her romance novels. She writes full time from a Queen Anne Victorian in a small town in upstate New York.

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